

The Impact of Echo-Chamber Exposure Intensity on Gen Z's Brand Identification in the Post-Truth Era

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Abstract. In the post-truth era, the intensity of echo-chamber exposure on social media has become a key factor shaping Gen Z's brand identification. This study adopts a mixed-methods research approach, taking echo-chamber exposure intensity as the independent variable and brand identification as the dependent variable, to explore the mediating role of Self-Regulated Learning (SRL), the moderating role of post-truth perception, and to examine the potential impact of gender differences on these relationships. Based on Social Identity Theory and Cognitive Dissonance Theory, we surveyed 238 Chinese Gen Z consumers and conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 representative individuals. The results show that echo-chamber exposure intensity has a significant positive impact on Gen Z's brand identification; SRL plays a partial mediating role and negatively affects the relationship between echo-chamber exposure intensity and Gen Z's brand identification; post-truth perception strengthens the impact of echo-chamber exposure intensity on brand identification. Interviews reveal that Gen Z pursues authenticity but is vulnerable to echo-chamber biases, with females paying more attention to emotional connections. This study extends Social Identity Theory to a consumer behavior model in the post-truth context, providing certain theoretical support and practical implications for brands to develop targeted marketing strategies in the digital age.

Keywords: Post-Truth Era; Echo-Chamber Exposure Intensity; Gen Z; Brand Identification; Self-Regulated Learning.

1. Introduction

Since the term "post-truth" was selected as the Word of the Year by Oxford Dictionaries in 2016, it has become a core concept describing the contemporary information environment. It is defined as "appealing to emotions and personal beliefs rather than stating objective facts to influence public opinion (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016)[17]". Traditional concepts of truth are based on the recognition of facts, but in the post-truth era, people are more inclined to believe in certain ideologies or dogmas regardless of facts themselves. Even if facts indicate that some information is incorrect, people may still continue to believe in the ideas they identify with based on emotions, intuition, or long-term beliefs (Ding, L., & Chen, M., 2025)[5]. Especially in today's society where social media is popular and algorithmic recommendation dominates information distribution, this phenomenon has exerted a profound impact on public cognition, social trust, and even political ecology. From false propaganda in the UK Brexit referendum to the proliferation of rumors during the COVID-19 pandemic, "post-truth" not only reflects the disorder of information dissemination but also reflects the complex interweaving of technological changes and social psychology. In February 2024, Zong Qinghou, the founder of Wahaha, passed away. Zhong Shanshan, the founder of Nongfu Spring, went to pay his condolences and sent a wreath. Subsequently, a series of remarks such as "praising Wahaha and belittling Nongfu Spring" emerged online, triggering a boycott by Gen Z on multiple platforms including Douyin and Kuaishou, highlighting the brand trust crisis in the post-truth era. In today's society, social media echo chambers strengthen consistent views through algorithms and exclude dissenting opinions (Sunstein, 2001)[21], making people actively approach and engage with information they can accept, while ignoring or even staying away from information that contradicts their views. A survey shows that 70.2% of respondents stated that they would not click to read articles pushed by WeChat official accounts they subscribed to if they were not interested or had obviously different views (Wu, 2018)[24], which significantly affects Gen Z's brand identification. As digital

natives, Gen Z accounts for 30% of global consumers (McKinsey, 2023)[16], highly relying on social media such as Douyin and Kuaishou, valuing authenticity and social responsibility, but being vulnerable to biased identification induced by echo chambers. Existing studies have explored the impact of echo chambers on political loyalty (Colleoni et al., 2014)[3] and brand communication (Hewett, Rand, Rust, & van Heerde, 2016) [11], but there are few cross studies on "post-truth and brand identification", and insufficient research on the mechanism of Gen Z's brand identification, especially the lack of comprehensive investigation on the mediating role of Self-Regulated Learning (SRL, Zimmerman, 2011)[25], the moderating role of post-truth perception (Suiter, 2016)[20], and gender differences. Therefore, this study attempts to integrate SRL mediation, post-truth perception moderation, and gender differences, extend Social Identity Theory to post-truth marketing, aiming to provide strategies for brands to cope with false information and explore the development ideas and trends of future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Post-Truth Era and Consumer Behavior

The post-truth era began in the 2010s. During this period known as the post-truth era, personal opinions, emotions, and identity surpass objective reality, and knowledge-based discussions are gradually replaced by belief-based preferences (McIntyre, 2018)[15]. Similarly, in marketing, consumers favor brand narratives consistent with their biases. For example, a brand lost Gen Z's trust due to false environmental propaganda (McKinsey, 2023)[16]. Gen Z has low trust in brands (42% do not trust companies, Forrester, 2021) [9] and demands authenticity and social responsibility (Edelman, 2023)[7]. The high penetration rate of social media among Chinese Gen Z makes them vulnerable to the influence of echo chambers.

2.2. Echo-Chamber Exposure Intensity

Echo chambers are driven by algorithms to strengthen homogeneous content, easily leading to polarization of views (Bakshy et al., 2015)[1]. In the consumption context, echo chambers amplify brand-related content through social interaction, leading consumers to form exaggerated brand associations and perceived consensus (Hewett, Rand, Rust, & van Heerde, 2016)[11]. For Gen Z, echo chambers enhance brand identification, but loyalty is fragile and vulnerable to the impact of negative information (Zhang, 2022)[26]. For example, repeated positive brand content may strengthen identification, but the exposure of false claims can trigger a trust crisis.

2.3. Gen Z's Brand Identification

Gen Z refers to people born between 1995 and 2009. Since this generation is naturally equipped with network genes, they are also called "net-born generation" and "Internet generation". Gen Z values authenticity, sustainability, and inclusiveness (Francis & Hoefel, 2018)[10]. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) [22]holds that brand identification originates from the mirror image of self-concept. Gen Z expresses their identity through social media and tends to choose brands that reflect their values (Zhang & Liu, 2023)[27].

2.4. Self-Regulated Learning as a Mediator

SRL involves planning, monitoring, and evaluating learning (Pintrich, 2000)[18]. Echo chambers limit the diversity of information, reduce SRL, and lead Gen Z to accept information uncritically. High SRL promotes fact-checking and weakens biased identification (Masotina, Musi, & Yates, 2024).[13] For example, Gen Z with high SRL is more likely to question false brand claims.

2.5. Post-Truth Perception as a Moderator

Post-truth perception refers to the idea that an individual's emotional truth is superior to objective facts (Suiter, 2016)[20]. In the post-truth era, information and emotions form a symbiotic relationship, and this mixed structure profoundly affects people's brand tendencies. Those with high perception are more affected by echo chambers and thus more inclined to resonate with narratives (Edelman, 2023)[7].

2.6. Gender Differences

Studies have shown that female Gen Z has higher social media engagement (3 hours per day, Twenge, 2017)[23], and female Gen Z shows higher emotional attachment and social comparison (DC Journal, 2024)[4], which may lead to stronger echo-chamber exposure intensity and brand identification.

3. Research Model and Hypotheses

Based on Social Identity Theory and Cognitive Dissonance Theory[8], this paper proposes a research model. In the social media environment, Echo-Chamber Exposure (ECE) may significantly affect the level of brand identification by shaping an individual's cognitive framework and emotional tendency. At the same time, an individual's Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) plays an important role in it. A high level of SRL can weaken the bias effect brought by homogeneous information, thereby inhibiting the enhancement effect of ECE on brand identification. In addition, an individual's Post-Truth Mindset (PTM) may further strengthen the relationship between ECE and brand identification. In terms of situational variables, gender, as an important social grouping characteristic, may have a differential impact on the strength of this relationship. This forms a comprehensive model including main effect, mediating effect, moderating effect, and gender situational difference. Based on this, the study puts forward the following hypotheses:

H1 (Main Effect): The intensity of social media echo-chamber exposure (ECE) has a significant positive impact on brand identification (BI).

H2 (Mediating Role): Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) plays a suppressing partial mediating role in the relationship between ECE and BI. Specifically:

H2a: ECE has a significant negative impact on SRL;

H2b: SRL has a significant negative impact on BI;

H2c: The indirect effect of ECE on BI through SRL is significant, showing a suppressing mediating effect.

H3 (Moderating Role): Post-Truth Mindset (PTM) positively moderates the relationship between ECE and BI. When an individual's PTM level is high, the promoting effect of ECE on BI is stronger.

H4 (Situational Difference): There is a significant difference in gender in the relationship between ECE and BI. Compared with males, female individuals are more susceptible to ECE, and their brand identification level increases more significantly with the enhancement of ECE.

4. Research Design and Measurement

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, using a questionnaire survey to collect data in the early stage and qualitative interviews to verify and supplement the explanation of relevant phenomena in the later stage, in an attempt to comprehensively reveal the impact of echo-chamber exposure intensity on Gen Z's brand identification. Quantitative methods verify hypotheses, and qualitative methods provide background explanations and in-depth insights.

4.1. Design Type and Process (QUAN→QUAL)

This study adopts an Explanatory Sequential Mixed-Methods Design. In terms of the research process, first, a quantitative study is carried out to collect data on the independent variable (echo-

chamber exposure intensity, ECE), dependent variable (brand identification, BI), mediating variable (self-regulated learning, SRL), moderating variable (post-truth mindset, PTM), and control variables of Gen Z individuals through a questionnaire survey, and empirically test the theoretical hypotheses through statistical modeling. Second, based on the quantitative results, representative respondents are selected for qualitative interviews to explain and deepen the mechanism and situational differences of the quantitative findings. For example, in the quantitative part, it is found that the path coefficient between ECE and BI is stronger in the female group, and the qualitative interview focuses on exploring the underlying emotional attachment, social usage habits, and value differences, thereby revealing the internal logic of the formation of variable relationships.

It should be emphasized that the qualitative part is not an independent causal test, but a supplementary explanation and contextual understanding of the quantitative conclusions. This sequential design helps to combine case experience to reveal more subtle psychological and behavioral processes while maintaining statistical validity, thereby enhancing the credibility and explanatory power of the research conclusions.

4.2. Sample and Data

The quantitative data of this study comes from the "Questionnaire on the Impact of Echo-Chamber Exposure Intensity on Gen Z's Brand Identification in the Post-Truth Era". The questionnaires were mainly distributed through convenience sampling on social media platforms such as WeChat, QQ, Douyin, and Kuaishou, and a total of 238 valid questionnaires were recovered, with an effective rate of 80.41%. During the data cleaning process, the researchers set up distractor items (such as "Please choose 'disagree' in the seventh row") and eliminated invalid samples with too short answering time (less than 1 minute) to ensure sample quality. The final 238 valid questionnaires can well represent the Chinese Gen Z group, especially young people aged 18-22, who are the core user group of social media. The specific distribution of the sample in terms of gender, age, place of residence, education level, major type, monthly living expenses, and social media usage time is shown in Table 2 (using the original data and table).

In the qualitative part, this study set up an open option at the end of the questionnaire to invite respondents to voluntarily participate in follow-up interviews, and a total of 34 individuals expressed their willingness. The researchers selected 10 respondents (5 males and 5 females) for semi-structured interviews after screening and balancing based on dimensions such as gender, professional background, place of residence, and social media usage time. The interview duration ranged from 19 minutes to 1 hour, with an average of about 30 minutes. The interview content focused on the respondents' echo-chamber experience, brand identification feelings, judgment methods of false information, and self-regulated learning behaviors, to further explain the mechanism relationship and gender differences found in the quantitative model. The basic information of the respondents is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Basic Information of Interviewers.

Interviewer No.	Gender	Major Category	Social Media Usage Time
01-M-SS	Male	Social Sciences	More than 6 hours
02-F-SS	Female	Social Sciences	Less than 2 hours
03-M-SS	Male	Social Sciences	More than 6 hours
04-F-H	Female	Humanities	More than 6 hours
05-M-H	Male	Humanities	2-4 hours
06-F-H	Female	Humanities	More than 6 hours
07-M-SAE	Male	Science & Engineering	More than 6 hours
08-F-SAE	Female	Science & Engineering	More than 6 hours
09-M-AM	Male	Agriculture & Medicine	More than 6 hours
10-F-AM	Female	Agriculture & Medicine	4-6 hours

4.3. Variable Definition and Scale

4.3.1. Independent Variable: Social Media Echo-Chamber Exposure Intensity (ECE)

Conceptual Definition: Echo-chamber exposure intensity refers to the degree to which individuals are exposed to information consistent with their own views for a long time and avoid heterogeneous information in the process of using social media due to mechanisms such as algorithm recommendation, selective exposure, and network homogeneity. This study takes it as an independent variable, emphasizing its antecedent role in consumer cognition and brand attitude in the post-truth context.

Dimensional Structure: Combining existing research and local context, ECE is divided into three dimensions:

1) **Algorithmic Curation (AC):** The degree of personalized push by the platform based on user browsing, likes, and stay behaviors;

2) **Selective Exposure (SE):** The tendency of individuals to actively prefer, subscribe to, and stay in information content consistent with their views;

3) **Network Closure (NC):** The phenomenon of opinion convergence and exclusion of heterogeneous views in social circles.

Operational Measurement: In the actual survey, this study adopted and adapted the cross-platform echo-chamber scale by Dubois et al. (2018)[6], including 5 core items. Considering the limited number of items, the total score of ECE was used to represent the overall intensity in the quantitative analysis; in the robustness analysis, the 5 items were mapped to the above three-dimensional structure according to theoretical attribution, and regression tests were conducted respectively to verify the rationality of the three-dimensional construct.

4.3.2. Dependent Variable: Brand Identification (BI)

Conceptual Definition: Brand identification refers to the degree to which consumers incorporate a brand into their self-concept and social group identity. In this study, brand identification is not only regarded as a projection of emotions and values on the brand but also emphasizes its susceptibility and amplification in the post-truth context, that is, the degree to which an individual's brand identification feeling is strengthened under the condition of homogeneous information exposure.

Dimensional Structure and Measurement: Referring to the research of Jin Liyin (2006) [12] and others, BI includes two dimensions:

Individual Identification: The fit between the brand image and the individual's self-image;

Social Identification: The sense of group belonging and social identity confirmation brought by brand use.

This study uses 6 items for measurement, using a 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree), and a higher score indicates a stronger degree of brand identification.

4.3.3. Mediating Variable: Self-Regulated Learning (SRL)

Conceptual Definition: Self-regulated learning refers to an individual's ability to actively plan, monitor, and regulate their own cognition, motivation, and behavior in the process of information exposure and processing. In the post-truth information environment, a high level of SRL helps individuals actively verify information and avoid being misled by false narratives.

Dimensional Structure and Measurement: SRL includes two dimensions:

Cognitive Strategy: The behavior of individuals to actively verify, compare, and analyze in information processing;

Motivational Regulation: The patience and persistence of individuals when facing uncomfortable information.

This study adopts the scale adapted from Pintrich (2000) [18] and Su Dan et al. (2011)[19], with a total of 6 items, scored on a 5-point Likert scale.

4.3.4. Moderating Variable: Post-Truth Mindset (PTM)

Conceptual Definition: Post-truth mindset refers to the tendency of individuals to show "emotion first, fact doubt" in information judgment. In the social media environment, individuals with high PTM are more likely to be attracted by emotional narratives and resonant information.

Dimensional Structure and Measurement: PTM includes two dimensions:

Emotional Primacy: More willing to believe information that brings emotional resonance;

Fact Skepticism: Tendency to think that news or content cannot be completely objective.

This study adopts the scale adapted from Martel et al. (2020) [14] and Chao Naipeng (2012)[2], with a total of 6 items, scored on a 5-point Likert scale.

4.3.5. Control Variables

To exclude the impact of sample background differences on the dependent variable, this study includes variables such as gender, age, education level, and average daily social media usage time into the control scope to improve the robustness of the results.

4.4. Reliability and Validity Test

To ensure the quality of the analysis results, it is necessary to test the reliability and validity of the questionnaire data. Using the SPSSAU analysis tool, the reliability and validity of post-truth perception (W), post-truth perception-emotional primacy (WA), post-truth perception-fact skepticism (WB), echo-chamber exposure intensity (X), self-regulated learning (M), self-regulated learning-cognitive strategy (MA), self-regulated learning-motivational regulation (MB), brand identification (Y), brand identification-individual identification (YA), and brand identification-social identification (YB) in the questionnaire scale were tested. Reliability test generally adopts Cronbach's α coefficient, also known as internal consistency test. Generally, it is believed that Cronbach's α coefficient below 0.6 is unreliable, and the questionnaire needs to be redesigned; between 0.6 and 0.7, the reliability is general, the scale is barely acceptable, and items need to be added or sentences modified; between 0.7 and 0.8, it is relatively reliable, and the scale can be accepted; above 0.8, the questionnaire is considered to have high reliability; above 0.9, the questionnaire is considered to have extremely high reliability. The Cronbach's α values of each scale in this survey are all higher than 0.9, indicating that the internal consistency of the scale is very good, meaning that each item in the scale has a very high correlation and can effectively reflect the measured dimension.

Table 2 Cronbach's α

Scale	Dimension	α	Number of Items
W	WA	0.920	3
	WB	0.926	3
X	—	0.939	5
M	MA	0.929	3
	MB	0.957	3
Y	YA	0.965	3
	YB	0.973	3

After passing the reliability test, it is necessary to consider the extent to which the questionnaire can correctly measure the items to be measured, that is, content and construct validity analysis of the scale items is needed to verify the rationality of variable dimensionality reduction and factor extraction in subsequent modeling. Construct validity refers to the common elements and correlations of variables set in the questionnaire, generally using KMO measurement and Bartlett's sphericity test. The questionnaire in this experiment passed the KOM and Bartlett test, and at the same time met the requirements that KMO is greater than or equal to 0.8 and Bartlett test value is less than 0.01, indicating that the research data is very suitable for information extraction, which reflects good validity from the side.

Table 3. KMO and Bartlett Inspection.

KMO and Bartlett's Test	
KMO Value	0.884
Bartlett's Sphericity Test	Approximate Chi-Square: 5786.858 df: 253 p Value: 0.000

Using the SPSSAU analysis tool, the principal component analysis method was used to extract factors from the questionnaire items, and factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 were selected (see Table 6). The eigenvalues of the first 7 factors are all greater than 1, indicating that they are meaningful potential dimensions, which is consistent with the preset dimensions of the questionnaire, indicating that the design of each scale of the questionnaire is very excellent. The cumulative variance explanation rate is 88.481%, indicating that the extracted factors can explain 88.481% of the variation of the questionnaire, and the questionnaire has good construct validity.

Table 4. Principal Component Analysis for Factor Extraction.

Name	Factor Loading Coefficient	Factor Loading Coefficient	Factor Loading Coefficient	Factor Loading Coefficient	Factor Loading Coefficient	Factor Loading Coefficient	Factor Loading Coefficient	Communality (Common Factor Variance)
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6	Factor 7	
X1	0.821	-0.131	0.177	0.174	-0.042	-0.180	-0.037	0.789
X2	0.837	-0.132	0.186	0.205	0.027	-0.182	0.016	0.828
X3	0.779	-0.193	0.226	0.178	-0.032	-0.214	-0.056	0.776
X4	0.813	-0.184	0.143	0.257	-0.019	-0.209	-0.063	0.829
X5	0.815	-0.162	0.222	0.182	-0.022	-0.231	-0.045	0.829
MB1	-0.188	0.896	-0.172	-0.172	-0.004	0.109	0.041	0.911
MB2	-0.188	0.915	-0.147	-0.137	-0.015	0.130	0.010	0.929
MB3	-0.221	0.912	-0.144	-0.117	0.014	0.109	0.062	0.931
YA1	0.269	-0.161	0.886	0.204	0.028	-0.132	-0.017	0.942
YA2	0.253	-0.181	0.886	0.174	0.004	-0.170	0.013	0.942
YA3	0.298	-0.179	0.852	0.211	-0.021	-0.179	-0.001	0.923
YB1	0.335	-0.188	0.212	0.839	0.071	-0.179	0.077	0.939
YB2	0.313	-0.159	0.192	0.879	0.046	-0.167	0.019	0.962
YB3	0.282	-0.166	0.227	0.867	0.051	-0.197	0.017	0.952
WB1	-0.050	0.000	-0.008	0.055	0.931	0.016	0.019	0.872
WB2	-0.015	-0.018	0.054	0.060	0.931	0.035	0.044	0.877
WB3	0.010	0.014	-0.037	-0.003	0.931	0.073	0.042	0.875
MA1	-0.265	0.147	-0.129	-0.168	0.036	0.880	-0.094	0.921
MA2	-0.286	0.083	-0.188	-0.171	0.085	0.809	-0.047	0.818
MA3	-0.289	0.143	-0.143	-0.146	0.042	0.867	-0.007	0.900
WA1	-0.059	0.024	-0.027	0.072	0.027	-0.007	0.936	0.887
WA2	-0.033	0.039	0.011	0.031	0.046	-0.008	0.913	0.839
WA3	-0.022	0.029	0.011	-0.031	0.031	-0.095	0.930	0.877
Eigenvalue (Before Rotation) Variance	9.089	2.897	2.546	1.822	1.480	1.306	1.210	-
Explanation Rate% (Before Rotation)	39.518%	12.597%	11.070%	7.922%	6.436%	5.678%	5.259%	-
Cumulative Variance Explanation Rate% (Before Rotation)	39.518%	52.116%	63.186%	71.108%				

5. Analysis Strategy and Presentation Sequence

To comprehensively test the research hypotheses and ensure the logic and robustness of the conclusions, this study adopts a strategy of multi-step regression and process analysis, combined with the Bootstrap resampling method and interaction effect test. The overall analysis follows the sequence of "first main effect, then mechanism effect" to ensure the progressiveness and clarity of the hypothesis testing logic.

The specific analysis steps are as follows:

5.1. Main Effect Test (Model 0)

First, a basic regression model is constructed to test the direct impact of the independent variable Echo Chamber Exposure intensity (ECE) on the dependent variable Brand Identification (BI). In this model, only ECE and control variables (gender, age, education level, daily social media usage duration, etc.) are included to verify H1 and confirm the significance of the main effect.

5.2. Mediation Effect Test (Models 1–2)

On the basis of verifying the establishment of the main effect, the path of Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) between ECE and BI is further examined. The analysis steps include:

Regressing to test the impact of ECE on SRL (Path a);

Regressing to test the impact of SRL on BI (Path b);

Simultaneously including ECE and SRL to test their joint effect on BI, and using the Bootstrap 5000 resampling method to estimate the indirect effect and its confidence interval to verify H2.

5.3. Moderation Effect Test (Model 3)

On the basis of the basic regression model, Post-Truth Mentality (PTM) and its interaction term with ECE are introduced to test whether PTM plays a positive moderating role in the relationship between ECE and BI. If the interaction term is significant, simple slope analysis will be further conducted to compare the differences in the ECE→BI path under high and low PTM conditions, thereby testing H3.

5.4. Gender Context Difference Test (Model 4)

To examine the role of gender in the relationship between ECE and BI, this study uses two methods: interaction effect test and multi-group analysis for verification. On the one hand, the ECE×Gender interaction term is added to the regression model to observe its significance; on the other hand, models are established for male and female groups respectively to compare the differences in path coefficients, so as to confirm H4.

5.5. Robustness Analysis

In addition to the core models, this study also conducts robustness tests: first, re-run the models with the two dimensions of brand identification (individual identification and social identification) as dependent variables respectively to verify the consistency of conclusions; second, regress the three dimensions of ECE (AC, SE, NC) respectively to test whether their relationship with BI is consistent, so as to enhance the persuasiveness of the research conclusions.

6. Research Results

6.1. Descriptive Analysis

From the descriptive statistical situation of the respondents, the proportion of male and female respondents is relatively balanced (48.739% and 51.261% respectively). The age distribution is mainly concentrated in 18-22 years old (45.51%), which can well represent Gen Z and conform to

the younger characteristics of social media audiences. In terms of long-term residence, most are "fourth-tier cities and below" (45.38%), followed by "third-tier cities" (28.571%), and the number of people in "second-tier cities" and "first-tier cities" is small (13.866% and 12.185% respectively), which has representativeness in the geographical dimension. In terms of education level, almost all respondents have received higher education (98.739%). In terms of major distribution, most samples are "Science and Engineering" with a proportion of 36.13%, followed by Humanities samples with 30.67%, Social Science samples with 24.370%, and Agriculture and Medicine samples are the least, accounting for only 8.824%. From the perspective of average monthly living consumption, the sample with "1000-1999 yuan" is relatively large (55.46%), followed by "below 1000 yuan" (17.647%), and "2000-3000 yuan" and "3000 yuan and above" are relatively few (15.126% and 11.765% respectively), which is in line with mainstream cognition. In terms of daily social media usage duration, nearly half of the respondents use it for "more than 6 hours" (50.42%), followed by "4-6 hours" (31.51%), which conforms to the social media usage habits of Gen Z. Therefore, it can be considered that the survey sample in this paper well represents the target population required by the research. Descriptive information of relevant variables is shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Questionnaire Source and Distribution (N=238).

Name	Option	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative Percentage (%)
Q1	Male	116	48.739	48.739
	Female	122	51.261	100.000
Q2	Under 18	6	2.521	2.521
	18-22	218	91.597	94.118
	23-27	4	1.681	95.798
	28 and above	10	4.202	100.000
Q3	First-tier or New First-tier Cities	29	12.185	12.185
	Second-tier Cities	33	13.866	26.050
	Third-tier Cities	68	28.571	54.622
	Fourth-tier Cities and Below	108	45.378	100.000
Q4	Senior High School and Below	12	5.042	5.042
	Junior College	3	1.261	6.303
	Bachelor's Degree	219	92.017	98.319
	Master's Degree and Above	4	1.681	100.000
Q5	Science and Engineering	86	36.134	36.134
	Agriculture and Medicine	21	8.824	44.958
	Humanities	73	30.672	75.630
	Social Sciences	58	24.370	100.000
Q6	Below 1000 yuan	42	17.647	17.647
	1000-1999 yuan	132	55.462	73.109
	2000-2999 yuan	36	15.126	88.235
	3000 yuan and above	28	11.765	100.000
Q7	Below 2 hours	6	2.521	2.521
	2-4 hours	37	15.546	18.067
	4-6 hours	75	31.513	49.580
	More than 6 hours	120	50.420	100.000
Total	Total	238	100.0	100.0

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics of Variables.

	Mean	SD	W	X	M	Y	WA	WB	MA	MB	YA	YB
W	3.648	0.496	-									
X	3.789	0.676	-0.075	-								
M	3.850	0.409	0.041	-0.624***	-							
Y	3.891	0.485	0.050	0.665***	-0.613***	-						
WA	3.713	0.660	0.718***	-0.071	-0.000	0.025	-					
WB	3.584	0.693	0.748***	-0.040	0.058	0.048	0.075	-				
MA	3.857	0.493	0.017	-0.572***	0.816***	-0.525***	-0.073	0.094	-			
MB	3.843	0.504	0.049	-0.452***	0.825***	-0.481***	0.071	0.002	0.347***	-		
YA	3.885	0.550	-0.004	0.563***	-0.528***	0.871***	-0.009	0.002	-0.442***	-0.424***	-	
YB	3.896	0.559	0.090	0.599***	-0.543***	0.876***	0.051	0.081	-0.474***	-0.417***	0.526***	-

Note: * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001. The lower triangle shows Pearson correlation coefficients.

6.2. Hypothesis Testing

6.2.1. Main Effect Test

In the benchmark model (Model 0) that only includes the independent variable ECE and control variables, the main effect of ECE on BI is significantly positive ($\beta=0.665$, $p<0.001$), and the model explanatory power $R^2=0.443$. This indicates that the higher the intensity of an individual's echo chamber exposure, the higher their brand identification level, and Hypothesis H1 is verified. The direction of the regression coefficient in this result is consistent with that in the subsequent models (see Table 7).

Table 7. Main Effect Regression Results.

Variable	B	SE	t	p	β
Constant	3.891	0.024	165.548	0.000***	-
Echo Chamber Exposure (ECE)	0.322	0.024	13.687	0.000***	0.665
Control Variables (Gender, Age, Education, Daily Social Media Duration)	—	—	—	—	Controlled

Model Statistics: N = 238; $R^2 = 0.443$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.440$; $F(1,236) = 187.346$, $p < 0.001$. Note: B is the unstandardized regression coefficient, β is the standardized coefficient; SE is the standard error. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

6.2.2. Mediation Effect Test

This study uses the SPSSAU analysis tool and selects Model 4 to test the mediating effect of self-regulated learning through bias-corrected percentile Bootstrap repeated sampling 5000 times. The results show (see Tables 8 and 9) that self-regulated learning plays a partial mediating role between echo chamber exposure intensity and Gen Z's brand identification, and the effect is negative, so Hypothesis H2 is established.

Table 8. Mediation Effect Model Test.

	Y	Y	Y	Y	M	M	M	M	Y	Y	Y	Y
Constant	2.083*** (15.524)	2.083*** (15.524)	2.083*** (15.524)	2.083*** (15.524)	5.282*** (44.550)	5.282*** (44.550)	5.282*** (44.550)	5.282*** (44.550)	4.115*** (10.608)	4.115*** (10.608)	4.115*** (10.608)	4.115*** (10.608)
X	0.477*** (13.687)	0.477*** (13.687)	0.477*** (13.687)	0.477*** (13.687)	- 0.378*** (-12.263)	- 0.378*** (-12.263)	- 0.378*** (-12.263)	- 0.378*** (-12.263)	0.332*** (7.893)	0.332*** (7.893)	0.332*** (7.893)	0.332*** (7.893)
M									0.385*** (-5.541)	0.385*** (-5.541)	0.385*** (-5.541)	0.385*** (-5.541)
Sample Size	238	238	238	238	238	238	238	238	238	238	238	238
Adjusted R ²	0.443	0.443	0.443	0.443	0.389	0.389	0.389	0.389	0.507	0.507	0.507	0.507
Adjusted R ²	0.440	0.440	0.440	0.440	0.387	0.387	0.387	0.387	0.503	0.503	0.503	0.503
F Value	F(1,236)	F(1,236)	F(1,236)	F(1,236)	F(1,236)	F(1,236)	F(1,236)	F(1,236)	F(2,235)	F(2,235)	F(2,235)	F(2,235)
Value	187.346	187.346	187.346	187.346	150.391	150.391	150.391	150.391	120.818	120.818	120.818	120.818
Significance (p)	p=0.000	p=0.000	p=0.000	p=0.000	p=0.000	p=0.000	p=0.000	p=0.000	p=0.000	p=0.000	p=0.000	p=0.000

* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001. Values in parentheses are t values.

Table 9. Intermediary Effect Test.

Item	Item	Symbol	Meaning	Effect Value	Effect Value	95% Lower CI	95% Upper CI	SE	SE	z/t Value	p Value	Conclusion
X=>M=>Y	X=>M=>Y	a*b	Indirect Effect	0.145	0.145	0.134	0.283	0.038	0.038	3.805	0.000	Partial Mediation
X=>M	X=>M	a	X=>M	-0.378	-0.378	-0.438	-0.317	0.031	0.031	-12.263	0.000	
M=>Y	M=>Y	b	M=>Y	-0.385	-0.385	-0.521	-0.248	0.069	0.069	-5.541	0.000	
X=>Y	X=>Y	c'	Direct Effect	0.332	0.332	0.249	0.415	0.042	0.042	7.893	0.000	
X=>Y	X=>Y	c	Total Effect	0.477	0.477	0.408	0.546	0.035	0.035	13.687	0.000	

6.3. Moderation Effect Test

To test Hypothesis H3, this paper uses the SPSSAU analysis tool and adopts hierarchical regression analysis to examine the moderating effect of post-truth perception. To reduce multicollinearity, all variables are standardized here. As shown in Table 9, Model I only adds the echo chamber exposure intensity variable; Model II adds the post-truth perception variable on the basis of the above; Model III further adds the interaction term between post-truth perception and echo chamber exposure intensity. It can be found that the impact coefficient of post-truth perception (PTM) on brand identification (BI) is not significant ($\beta=0.052, p>0.05$), but the interaction term coefficient of ECE×PTM is significantly positive ($\beta=0.189, p<0.01$). This indicates that post-truth perception positively moderates the relationship between echo chamber exposure intensity and Gen Z's brand identification, that is, compared with individuals with low post-truth perception, the positive impact of ECE on BI is stronger for those with high post-truth perception. To further clarify the moderating effect, simple slope analysis is conducted. The results show that when PTM is at a high level (+1 SD), the regression coefficient of ECE on BI is 0.854 ($p<0.001$); when PTM is at a low level (-1 SD), the regression coefficient is 0.476 ($p<0.001$). The difference between the two is significant, which further confirms Hypothesis H3. The moderating effect results are shown in Table 9 and Figure 1.

6.4. Potential Impact of Gender Differences

To test Hypothesis H4, first, the SPSSAU analysis tool was used to classify and summarize the average scores of the four variables by gender (see Table 10 for details). It was found that males scored significantly lower than females in post-truth perception (males: 3.563, females: 3.730), echo chamber exposure intensity (males: 3.712, females: 3.862), and brand identity (males: 3.863, females: 3.917). However, males scored slightly higher than females in self-regulated learning (males: 3.856, females: 3.844, with a difference of only 0.012), indicating that there is no significant gender difference in the self-regulated learning ability of Generation Z in China, which contradicts the research results of foreign scholars. Then, taking gender as a categorical variable, linear regression analysis was conducted. The results of the linear regression analysis between the independent variable X and the dependent variable Y showed that females are more susceptible to the influence of echo chamber exposure intensity (the linear regression equation for males is $Y=2.136 + 0.465*X$, and the linear regression equation for females is: $Y=2.013 + 0.493*X$). Thus, Hypothesis H4 is verified.

Table 10. Results of Gender-Based Aggregate Analysis.

Title	Gender		Summary
	Male	Female	
W	3.563±0.505	3.730±0.476	3.648±0.496
X	3.712±0.690	3.862±0.656	3.789±0.676
M	3.856±0.397	3.844±0.422	3.850±0.409
Y	3.863±0.464	3.917±0.504	3.891±0.485

6.5. Qualitative Result Analysis

The qualitative results verify the quantitative conclusions and further reveal the contradiction between Generation Z's pursuit of brand authenticity and echo chamber bias (e.g., females are more inclined to emotional connection). The qualitative results support the quantitative analysis, as analyzed below:

6.5.1. Post-Truth Perception

Information judgment relies on multiple sources, with authority and user reviews being key. When judging the authenticity of brand information, respondents generally cross-verify official channels with user feedback, giving priority to authoritative sources such as official websites, flagship stores, and official statements, while also valuing user reviews on multiple platforms to avoid being misled by a single source. One respondent mentioned, "I tend to trust authoritative sources more... For example, if I see a brand today, like Clutch (a lipstick brand), I will search for the pros and cons of Clutch on Xiaohongshu and then read their reviews" (08-F-SAE); another respondent stated, "I was quite panicked at the time because I had also bought this brand of (Internet-famous thermos cup), so I first went to the brand's official website to check their material certification report. Then I went to a website of the State Administration for Market Regulation to check, and found that there were no unqualified records in the random inspection results" (10-F-AM); yet another respondent pointed out, "When I see brand-related content on social media, I will mainly query sources from official websites, flagship stores, or official documents released by the brand on Baidu. Regarding product reviews, I pay more attention to user reviews on platforms like Taobao and JD.com" (02-F-SS).

Brand "story marketing" easily triggers emotional resonance and interferes with rational judgment. More than half of the respondents mentioned that brands often attract attention through emotional stories, which easily trigger emotional resonance, leading to temporary neglect of product effectiveness and information authenticity, and even impulsive consumption. However, different respondents have different tolerance levels for emotional marketing. Some can clearly distinguish that "emotional favor does not replace facts," such as "having emotional recognition of Lei Jun's 'personal charm,' but disliking Xiaomi because 'Xiaomi's system is not as easy to use as Huawei and Apple,' and feeling indifferent when facing 'smearing Xiaomi,' but will slightly refute when 'smearing

Lei Jun" (09-M-AM); a few believe that "it is a skill for brands to tell stories," stating, "I think being able to tell stories, be emotional, and gain consumers' recognition is their ability, their skill, and I think this is very normal" (06-F-H); some respondents will resist because their values do not match the brand-related figures, "When I was choosing a mobile phone before, I saw an advertisement for Gree mobile phone. Because Dong Mingzhu's remarks did not conform to my values, I resisted this brand. On the contrary, if I see a brand that works hard, even if its quality is average, I will tend to choose it because of emotional resonance" (01-M-SS); some respondents also mentioned that brands use specific plots to trigger impulsive consumption, "They (brands) will tell stories about how their brand adheres to this old domestic product, how hard they work to become bigger and stronger... and also hire disabled workers to work. These emotional plots attract attention, and sometimes make us impulsively consume, ignoring whether the product is effective and whether the information source is true" (02-F-SS).

There are group differences in the perception of the post-truth phenomenon, and the degree of rationality is related to academic background. Respondents majoring in social sciences and humanities are more likely to perceive the post-truth phenomenon. Although respondents majoring in science, engineering, agriculture, and medicine recognize the characteristics of post-truth, they are more inclined to rational verification. One respondent pointed out, "Many brands, especially in the beauty and food categories, like to tell stories to拉近 the distance with users, such as emphasizing that the founder developed products due to family needs, but this may also have 'post-truth' situations" (03-M-SS); another respondent stated, "When I see game-related content, I will verify whether the information is true and search for multiple materials for an overall investigation" (07-M-SAE); yet another respondent believes, "The post-truth era means that emotion is greater than facts. I personally think I am more rational, and will not be particularly loyal to a brand or particularly it. So when I judge the pros and cons of a brand, I will take the initiative to verify" (09-M-AM).

6.5.2. Echo Chamber Exposure Intensity

Dual role of algorithms and personal choices, information cocoons are widespread. All respondents stated that social media algorithms will push preferred content according to user behavior, and at the same time, users will take the initiative to pay attention to consistent views, resulting in long-term exposure to a single evaluation of a brand.

One respondent mentioned, "I have experienced echo chamber exposure intensity. When paying attention to sports brands, most of the content I brush is users sharing wearing experience and product advantages, with few negative reviews; when paying attention to controversial catering brands, there are many complaints about service and taste in the information flow. This is because the platform recommends content that meets preferences according to user behavior, filters opposing views, and users will also take the initiative to choose views consistent with their own" (03-M-SS);

Another respondent stated, "I think the information push on social media is based on my preferences, so most of the brand information I see is consistent with my views. This may cause me to fall into an information cocoon" (01-M-SS); yet another respondent pointed out, "For example, I used to like drinking a certain milk tea brand very much. When brushing Xiaohongshu or Douyin, there were always contents praising its new products for being delicious or cost-effective, and few complaints. I think there may be two reasons. On the one hand, I will take the initiative to follow bloggers who praise it, and I will stay longer when brushing related content. On the other hand, it is the algorithm. If I have liked or commented on similar content, it will always push similar ones to me" (10-F-AM).

Differentiation in initiative to deal with echo chambers; active verification can weaken the effect. Respondents majoring in social sciences and engineering are more active in breaking information cocoons, while some respondents majoring in humanities, agriculture, and medicine passively accept algorithmic pushes but will supplement information through other methods. One respondent mentioned, "When I see brand evaluations that are contrary to my original views, I will check on multiple media, as well as its official website and some user evaluations on platforms like大众点评

(Dianping) to see if there are evaluations with opposite views as everyone says" (02-F-SS); another respondent stated, "Different people have different views, and you can't force others to accept your own views. Understanding different views can avoid stepping on pitfalls. Seeing only positive or negative aspects of a brand for a long time may form a bias effect" (07-M-SAE); yet another respondent pointed out, "Big data algorithms are the core reason for 'view convergence.' If we brush this content for a certain period of time, it will push this to you... When I see brand evaluations that are contrary to my views, I will not change much because of it. If what he says is really reasonable, I will also speak based on facts and take the initiative to understand" (06-F-H).

Brands "guiding the rhythm" intensify echo chambers, and evaluations show cyclical characteristics. Some respondents observed that brand evaluations are easily deliberately guided, showing a cycle of "praise - criticism," and believe that this is the result of merchants guiding the rhythm. One respondent mentioned, "Most of the time, I don't see everyone praising or criticizing at the same time... For example, with JD.com before, at first people said Liu Qiangdong loved his wife very much, but later he got together with Zhang Zetian? Then there was a period of criticism... After Liu Qiangdong had an accident abroad, the whole network started to criticize him again... These two days he started a takeaway war, and people began to praise him as a people's entrepreneur again. It feels like a cycle. I think it's merchants guiding the rhythm, because normal people at most take a look, but won't write long analyses and criticisms online" (08-F-SAE); another respondent stated, "The feeling is very obvious. If I like something more, the software will keep pushing it to me... The Douyin of the elderly is completely different from that of young people. Can the elderly brush videos of sexy beauties? Obviously, the probability is low. Can we young people brush many videos of the elderly? Occasionally, but the comment section is still young people. This kind of video is used by young people to tease and have fun, not because they really like it. So you can't escape" (09-M-AM).

6.5.3. Self-Regulated Learning

Verification methods are stratified; authoritative sources for professional issues, experience for daily issues.

When facing doubts about brand information, respondents will choose verification methods according to the type of problem: authoritative sources for professional issues, and experience or trial for daily issues. One respondent mentioned, "If I have doubts about brand information, I will first search for the brand's official account to see if there is an official statement... If it involves professional aspects such as product ingredients, I may check if there are test reports from authoritative institutions or ask classmates majoring in related fields" (10-F-AM); another respondent stated, "It should be tested by professional testing institutions, because the network environment is complex, and there may be competitors smearing. Once in primary school, I bought jelly. Although my classmates said it was okay, I still went to a professional institution to test it and found that some things exceeded the standard" (07-M-SAE); yet another respondent pointed out, "When I doubt brand information, I first check the brand's official channel statement, then search for authoritative media reports, professional institution evaluations, and browse user reviews on different platforms. Previously, to verify the rumor that a domestic mask contains fluorescent agents, I first checked the ingredient list on the official website, which did not mark fluorescent agents, and then found a blogger's evaluation on Bilibili, and found that it was a fluorescent reaction of plant ingredients, not fluorescent agents" (03-M-SS).

Verification cost and "usefulness" determine behavior, and relevance affects investment. If verification requires a lot of time, respondents will weigh based on the relevance of the brand to themselves, and if the relevance is low, they may give up verification. One respondent mentioned, "If I have doubts about a brand's information, I will verify it in multiple ways... If verifying the information takes a lot of time, I will weigh whether the information is important to me. If the brand is closely related to me, I will spend time verifying it; if it is irrelevant to me, I may not care much" (01-M-SS); another respondent stated, "When I have doubts about a brand's information, I will first search for official statements, check evaluations on different platforms, and then ask people around me who have used it. If verifying the information takes a lot of time, I will give up verification. This

kind of giving up will definitely affect my trust in the brand" (04-F-H); yet another respondent pointed out, "I will not give up verification, but it also depends on the actual situation. I will not give up at the beginning. It just depends on how useful it is to you. If it is very useful to you, you will spend more energy, but if you don't use it, you will definitely not spend too much energy" (06-F-H).

Experience accumulation improves discrimination ability, and negative experiences promote cognitive change. Some respondents have changed from blindly believing to cautious verification due to past "stepping on pitfalls" or understanding the truth of marketing. One respondent mentioned, "I will verify the authenticity of brand information. I will go to Xiaohongshu to find ordinary people's evaluations of it... I used to believe it very much, but recently I don't believe it anymore. Because many people ask me to write advertisements for them, and then I find that even ordinary people's posts are fake" (08-F-SAE); another respondent pointed out, "I once saw someone say that a certain Internet-famous thermos cup brand had unqualified materials... I was quite panicked at the time, but later confirmed that the rumor was false through verification, and my trust in this brand was even higher than before... If it is particularly time-consuming to verify... I may give up temporarily, but this kind of giving up will more or less affect trust, and later I tend to choose brands that I know better and feel more at ease with" (10-F-AM).

6.5.4. Brand Identity

The core of identity is product experience first, supplemented by emotion and values. Respondents' recognition of brands mostly comes from practical use value. Emotion and values are bonus items but cannot replace the product itself. One respondent mentioned, "Which brand do I have the strongest identity with? I have the strongest identity with the Wahaha brand, mainly because it is not only because the advertisement is well-made, nor only because it is a national domestic old brand, but mainly because I can really feel it in my life, and it is really beneficial to our lives" (02-F-SS); another respondent stated, "I have a relatively strong identity with Gree because the quality is guaranteed and the after-sales service is also improving... I trust Gree mainly because I have used it for a long time and have a certain recognition" (07-M-SAE); yet another respondent pointed out, "I have emotional recognition of Lei Jun's 'personal charm,' but I don't like Xiaomi because 'Xiaomi's system is not as easy to use as Huawei and Apple'... There is no brand that I particularly identify with. I use it if it's easy to use, and criticize it truthfully if it's not, with less emotion involved" (09-M-AM).

Social media and circle culture guide cognition but do not determine choices. Social media and circle culture promote respondents to try brands, but the final recognition depends on their own usage experience. Some respondents mentioned, "I currently have a very high recognition of the Nike brand... My peers around me also like the Nike brand... They can praise it as they like, and they can criticize it as they like. I have my own opinions. I like this brand, and that's it" (04-F-H); some respondents stated, "I have a strong sense of identity with Xiaomi. It's very cheap, and I also like Lei Jun. Their products are not expensive, so you don't feel bad spending money on them... I won't suddenly fall in love with a brand because of social media advertisements, but I may suddenly feel disgusted with a brand because of certain information" (08-F-SAE); other respondents pointed out, "Currently, the brand I have a relatively strong sense of identity with should be Chenguang. After all, it's an old brand. I have been using it since primary school. The core reason is still the product experience... I came across a short video of Chenguang talking about their designers going to rural areas for research, improving the pen holder according to the children's pen-holding habits, and donating a lot of stationery. At that time, I thought this brand is not just selling things, but also has a strong sense of social responsibility, and my favorability increased a lot" (10-F-AM).

Facing unsubstantiated extreme comments: Rationalists rely on experience, while emotionalists show slight bias. When there are unsubstantiated extreme comments on recognized brands, respondents' attitudes are divided into two categories, and some respondents who have no particularly recognized brands remain objective. Rationalist respondents mentioned, "For recognized brands, when encountering extreme comments without factual basis, I will make a rational judgment... If it's an extreme comment from an individual, I won't care much; if many people are talking about the same problem, I will reconsider whether to continue supporting it" (03-M-SS, 10-F-AM);

emotionalist respondents said, "For the brands I identify with, if there are extreme comments without factual basis, I may be slightly partial to them and willing to trust my own choice" (06-F-H); respondents with no particularly recognized brands pointed out, "I don't have particularly recognized brands. If it's easy to use, I'll use it; if it's not easy to use, I'll criticize it. I don't bring too much emotion into it... I recognize the advantages of national-related brands such as DeepSeek, DJI, and Huawei, but I won't buy them blindly out of family and country feelings, nor will I dislike them because of comments accusing them of patriotic kidnapping. When facing brand controversies, I insist on an objective view and don't easily take sides except for national positions" (09-M-AM).

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

7.1. Conclusions

This study extends social identity theory to the field of post-truth marketing, integrating the mediating role of SRL, the moderating role of post-truth perception, and gender differences for the first time. Through mixed methods, it reveals the positive impact of echo chamber exposure intensity on Gen Z's brand identity in the post-truth era. SRL partially mediates and weakens this effect, post-truth perception positively moderates and strengthens the effect, and women show a stronger impact. Interview results further clarify the contradiction between Gen Z's pursuit of brand authenticity and echo chamber bias, with women paying more attention to emotional connection. This study provides a new path for brands to build Gen Z's trust in the post-truth era. Marketers should improve SRL through short video educational content, design emotional marketing strategies for women, and optimize algorithms to increase information diversity, thereby enhancing brand authenticity and trust.

7.2. Recommendations

Brands can educational content (such as "How to Identify False Brand Information") on short video platforms to improve Gen Z's critical thinking ability and reduce the risk of false information dissemination. Female Gen Z are more susceptible to the influence of echo chambers, so brands can design emotional social media activities, such as telling social responsibility stories, similar to how Patagonia won trust through environmental narratives. Brands should cooperate with social media platforms to adjust algorithms to increase information diversity and break the intensity of echo chamber exposure.

This study has certain limitations. The cross-sectional data limits causal inference, and the small size of Chinese samples and interview samples may affect the generalizability of the results. Future research directions should adopt longitudinal design to verify dynamic effects, conduct cross-cultural comparisons (such as Gen Z in Europe and America), and explore other mediating variables such as media literacy.

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