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The impact of brand authenticity of local mascots on purchase intention: A case study of Jinju City's Hamo character

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Abstract: Local governments increasingly use mascot characters as branding tools to strengthen regional identity and promote local consumption. This study examines how brand authenticity influences purchase intention in the context of Jinju City's Hamo character, focusing on the mediating roles of brand trust, brand attachment, and brand loyalty. Survey data were collected from 189 consumers familiar with Hamo and analyzed using structural equation modeling. The results show that brand authenticity significantly increases brand trust, brand attachment, and brand loyalty. However, brand trust does not significantly affect brand loyalty, whereas brand attachment strongly enhances brand loyalty, which in turn leads to purchase intention. The mediation results confirm that brand authenticity influences purchase intention mainly through the sequential pathway of brand attachment and brand loyalty. The novelty of this study lies in extending brand authenticity research to the underexplored context of local public mascot branding and showing that emotional attachment is more important than cognitive trust in converting authenticity into purchase intention. However, because the analysis is based on a relatively small sample from a single local mascot case, the findings should be interpreted with caution and verified through larger and more diverse samples.

Keywords: brand attachment; brand authenticity; brand loyalty; brand trust; local mascot; purchase intention; regional economic revitalization

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the global consumer market has become increasingly standardized owing to intensified globalization. Consequently, consumers have become fatigued by homogenized brand experiences and now seek value beyond functional utility. Rather than focusing solely on utilitarian attributes, contemporary consumers emphasize emotional and experiential values in their consumption decisions [1,2]. Purchasing behavior is no longer exclusively determined by functional quality; instead, brands are evaluated based on their ability to deliver meaningful experiences and symbolic resonance [3,4]. In this context, local brands that embody regional identity and distinctive narratives have gained prominence, particularly among younger generations, such as Millennials and Generation Z [5,6].

A local brand can be defined as a brand rooted in a specific geographic area that builds emotional bonds with consumers through locally embedded resources and identities. YASA et al. [7] described local brand products as locally produced goods whose consumption supports SME growth, employment, and income generation, while also functioning as reminders and differentiators of a nation's products. Ardian et al. [8] further suggested that local brands build competitiveness through product quality, authentic design, and a strong identity in consumers' minds, allowing them to create long-term value and self-expressive meaning for consumers. Kavaratzis [9]

defined local brands as symbolic vehicles that communicate the unique identity of a city or region. Collectively, these perspectives highlight that local brands function not merely as economic entities but as symbolic representations of place-based meanings.

This trend extends beyond the traditional food and beverage (F&B) and retail sectors to encompass public branding initiatives and character-based branding associated with local governments. In the city branding literature, cities are no longer viewed simply as administrative units or tourism destinations; rather, they are regarded as strategic brands that must articulate distinctive identities and values Kavaratzis [9]. Visual symbols play crucial roles in this process. Local mascot characters function as strategic branding assets that visualize a region's intrinsic values, foster emotional connections with residents and visitors, and potentially stimulate regional economic activities [10]. As public brand entities, mascots operate at the intersection of symbolism, emotional engagement, and policy-driven place marketing [11].

One central attribute that underpins the effectiveness of such brands is brand authenticity. Napoli et al. [12] conceptualized brand authenticity as a multidimensional construct comprising continuity, credibility, integrity, and symbolism. For local mascots and other place-based brands, authenticity is often constructed through narratives grounded in regional histories, cultural traditions, and symbolic figures. Storytelling imbues brands with meaning, thereby fostering consumer empathy and engagement [13,14]. Therefore, authenticity becomes particularly salient for local mascots, whose legitimacy depends on their perceived rootedness in the local culture rather than purely commercial performance.

Despite the growing importance of authenticity in branding research, previous studies have predominantly focused on global luxury brands or large commercial corporations [15,16]. These studies primarily examine how product attributes, heritage cues, or corporate social responsibility initiatives influence perceptions of authenticity. However, relatively little attention has been paid to non-commercial or semi-public brands such as local government mascots. Such entities fundamentally differ from traditional commercial brands in terms of public accountability, symbolic representation, and sociocultural embeddedness. Consequently, the existing findings may not be directly generalizable to the context of public mascot branding.

To address this gap, the present study investigates the impact of brand authenticity on purchase intention in the context of a local mascot character, Jinju City's "Hamo," in South Korea. Specifically, this study examines (1) the direct effect of perceived brand authenticity on purchase intention, (2) the parallel mediating roles of brand trust and brand attachment, and (3) the sequential mediating effect of brand loyalty within an integrated structural framework. By incorporating both the cognitive (trust-based) and affective (attachment-based) pathways, this study compares the relative strengths of these mechanisms in explaining consumers' behavioral intentions toward public mascot brands.

The novelty of this study lies in extending brand authenticity research from commercial and luxury brand contexts to the underexplored domain of local public mascot branding. Although prior studies have shown that brand authenticity contributes to brand trust, brand attachment, and brand loyalty [12,17,18], relatively little is known about whether these mechanisms operate in the same way for public mascot brands that represent regional identity, civic symbolism, and place-based

storytelling rather than purely commercial value. Building on place branding research that emphasizes the symbolic role of local identity in city branding [9], this study addresses the following research questions: First, does perceived brand authenticity enhance brand trust, brand attachment, and brand loyalty in the context of a local public mascot brand? Second, do brand trust and brand attachment mediate the relationship between brand authenticity and brand loyalty? Third, does brand loyalty sequentially mediate the relationship between brand authenticity, psychological responses, and purchase intention? Finally, which mechanism—cognitive trust or affective attachment—plays a stronger role in translating authenticity into purchase intention?

The regional context of Jinju City makes Hamo an appropriate and important case for this study. Hamo is not merely a promotional character but an official tourism character rooted in Jinju's local identity. According to Jinju City, Hamo was designed based on the otters inhabiting Jinyangho Lake and the Namgang River, while its name derives from the Jinju dialect meaning agreement and positivity. The character also incorporates symbolic elements associated with Jinju, such as pearls, water, and a positive civic image. Therefore, Hamo provides a meaningful empirical setting for examining how place-based authenticity is perceived by consumers and how such perceptions can be transformed into attachment, loyalty, and purchase-related behavior. This is particularly important for regional cities that seek to use cultural symbols, tourism characters, and local storytelling as strategic tools for city branding and regional economic revitalization.

This study contributes to the literature in two ways. First, it extends brand authenticity research beyond commercial and luxury contexts to the underexplored domains of public and place-based mascot branding. Second, it offers practical implications for local governments seeking to leverage mascot characteristics as strategic assets for regional branding and economic revitalization.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Brand authenticity as an antecedent of brand trust, brand attachment, and brand loyalty

Brand authenticity refers to the extent to which consumers perceive a brand as genuine, credible, consistent, and faithful to its core values. Napoli et al. [12] and Morhart et al. [17] conceptualized brand authenticity as a multidimensional construct that reflects consumers' perceptions of continuity, credibility, integrity, and symbolism. Sun et al. [19] further demonstrated that brand authenticity positively influences brand attachment and brand loyalty, supporting the view that authenticity strengthens consumers' positive relational responses to a brand. Chen et al. [20] also found that brand authenticity positively affects brand attachment and brand loyalty, indicating that authenticity-based consumer responses can emerge across diverse consumer-brand contexts. These studies provide the theoretical basis for understanding brand authenticity as a key antecedent of trust, attachment, and loyalty.

Brand trust refers to consumers' confidence that a brand is reliable and capable of fulfilling its promises. When consumers perceive a brand as authentic, they are more

likely to regard it as honest, consistent, and dependable. This relationship is especially relevant to local public mascot brands because their legitimacy depends not only on promotional effectiveness but also on the perception that they genuinely represent regional identity and public values. Therefore, perceived brand authenticity is expected to enhance brand trust.

Brand loyalty refers to consumers' sustained preference for, and commitment to, a brand. Oliver [21] conceptualized loyalty as a sequential process that develops from cognitive evaluation to affective and behavioral commitment, while Dick and Basu [22] emphasized the combined role of favorable attitudes and repeated behavioral tendencies. In the context of local mascot branding, authenticity can strengthen loyalty by reinforcing the perception that the mascot is a meaningful and legitimate symbol of the region. Therefore, perceived brand authenticity is expected to enhance brand loyalty.

Brand attachment refers to the emotional bond and psychological connection between consumers and a brand. Thomson et al. [23] and Park et al. [24] emphasized that attachment captures a deeper emotional relationship than simple brand evaluation. For local mascot brands, authenticity may encourage attachment when consumers perceive the mascot as embodying local culture, civic identity, and positive memories associated with the region. Therefore, perceived brand authenticity is expected to increase emotional attachment to the mascot brand.

H1: Brand authenticity will have a positive effect on brand trust.

H2: Brand authenticity will have a positive effect on brand loyalty.

H3: Brand authenticity will have a positive effect on brand attachment.

2.2. Brand trust, brand attachment, and brand loyalty as drivers of purchase intention

Brand trust and brand attachment are both important antecedents of brand loyalty, but they represent different psychological mechanisms. Morgan and Hunt [25] identified trust as a central element in relationship marketing because it reduces perceived risk and supports long-term relational commitment. Chaudhuri and Holbrook [26] also showed that brand trust contributes to purchase loyalty by strengthening consumers' confidence in the brand. In the context of a local public mascot, consumers who trust the mascot brand may be more willing to support it as a credible and legitimate representation of the region. Thus, brand trust is expected to enhance brand loyalty.

While trust reflects a cognitive evaluation, brand attachment reflects an affective relationship with the brand. Thomson et al. [23] argued that emotional attachment can lead to stronger consumer commitment, and Park et al. [24] further distinguished brand attachment from general brand attitude and emphasized its role in predicting stronger behavioral intentions. A recent review of brand attachment research also emphasizes that attachment is a central construct in consumer-brand relationships and remains important for explaining consumers' emotional bonds, loyalty, and behavioral intentions [27]. Since local mascot brands rely heavily on symbolic meaning, familiarity, and emotional identification, consumers who feel attached to the mascot are more likely to develop brand loyalty.

Brand loyalty is a direct antecedent of purchase intention. Oliver [21] explained that loyalty develops toward behavioral commitment, while Zeithaml et al. [28] demonstrated that favorable brand-related evaluations can lead to behavioral intentions such as repurchase, recommendation, and continued engagement. Goyal and Verma [29] further demonstrated that brand loyalty plays a significant role in shaping consumers' purchase intention within consumer-brand relationship contexts. Brand mascots have found that character-based branding can strengthen brand-consumer relationships and positively influence purchase intentions [30]. In this study, purchase intention refers to consumers' willingness to purchase mascot-related products, participate in related events, or engage with mascot-related content. Therefore, brand loyalty is expected to increase purchase intention.

H4: Brand trust will have a positive effect on brand loyalty.

H5: Brand attachment will have a positive effect on brand loyalty.

H6: Brand loyalty will have a positive effect on purchase intention.

2.3. The mediating effects of brand trust, brand attachment, and brand loyalty

This study further proposes that brand trust and brand attachment mediate the relationship between brand authenticity and brand loyalty. Napoli et al. [12] and Morhart et al. [17] suggested that authenticity can influence consumer responses through psychological mechanisms such as trust and attachment. Fritz et al. [31] also showed that brand authenticity can generate brand-related outcomes through intermediate relational variables. In this study, brand trust represents the cognitive pathway through which authenticity enhances confidence in the brand, whereas brand attachment represents the affective pathway through which authenticity creates emotional bonds with the brand. Therefore, authenticity is expected to strengthen brand loyalty through both trust and attachment.

H7: Brand trust will mediate the relationship between brand authenticity and brand loyalty.

H8: Brand attachment will mediate the relationship between brand authenticity and brand loyalty.

In addition to these parallel mediating effects, this study proposes sequential mediation effects leading to purchase intention. Since loyalty is a proximal antecedent of behavioral intention [21,28], authenticity may first enhance trust or attachment, which then strengthens loyalty and ultimately increases purchase intention. This sequential logic is consistent with prior research suggesting that brand-related psychological responses can be converted into behavioral outcomes through loyalty [26,31]. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H9: Brand trust and brand loyalty will sequentially mediate the relationship between brand authenticity and purchase intention.

H10: Brand attachment and brand loyalty will sequentially mediate the relationship between brand authenticity and purchase intention.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research model

This study examines the effect of local brand authenticity on purchase intention and empirically tests the mediating roles of brand trust, attachment, and loyalty within this relationship. The proposed research model positions brand authenticity as an independent variable and purchase intention as a dependent variable. Brand trust and attachment were specified as first-stage mediators, whereas brand loyalty functioned as a second-stage mediator.

This structural configuration was designed to capture the process through which consumers' cognitive evaluations and affective responses sequentially translate into behavioral intentions. Specifically, the model simultaneously tests both parallel and sequential mediation effects, as illustrated in **Figure 1**. The parallel mediation effect refers to the independent pathways through which brand authenticity influences brand loyalty through brand trust or attachment. By contrast, the sequential mediation effect reflects a double mediation process in which brand authenticity influences brand trust or attachment, which subsequently enhances brand loyalty and ultimately leads to purchase intention. By integrating both cognitive and affective mechanisms within a unified structural framework, the model provides a comprehensive explanation of how authenticity perceptions are converted into behavioral outcomes in the context of a local mascot brand.

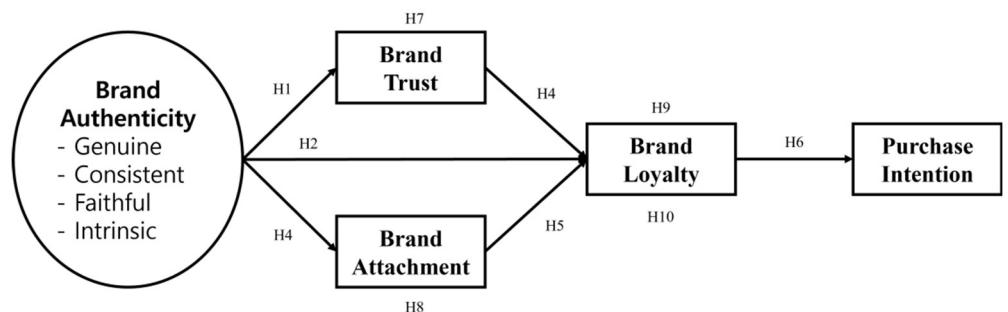


Figure 1. Research model.

3.2. Operational definitions and measurement

The operational definitions of the constructs employed in this study are as follows: Brand authenticity is the degree to which consumers perceive a brand as genuine, consistent, and faithful to its intrinsic value. The measurement items were adapted from the perceived brand authenticity scale developed by Morhart et al. [17] and supplemented with the consumer-based brand authenticity framework of Napoli et al. [12]. The items were modified to reflect the characteristics of the local public mascot brands.

Brand trust is the extent to which consumers believe that a brand will fulfill its promises and feel confident in its reliability. Six items were adapted from the scales developed by Chaudhuri and Holbrook [26] and Delgado-Ballester and Luis Munuera-Alemán [32] and revised to fit the local character brand context.

Brand attachment is the strength of the emotional bond and psychological

connection between a consumer and a brand. Six items were adapted based on Thomson et al. [23], incorporating the brand–self connection concept proposed by Park et al. [24] and the elements of brand love suggested by Carroll and Ahuvia [33]. The items were modified to align with the characteristics of local mascot brands.

Brand loyalty is the degree to which consumers prefer, repeatedly choose, and actively advocate a particular brand. Six measurement items were developed based on four-stage loyalty framework [21], integrated loyalty model [22], and brand equity scale [34] adapted for the local character brand context.

Purchase intention is the extent to which consumers intend to purchase brand-related products or services, or participate in brand-related activities. Six items were adapted from Theory of Planned Behavior [35], conceptualization of purchase intention [36], and behavioral intention scale [28] and revised to reflect the characteristics of a local public mascot brand. All items are measured using a 5-point Likert scale. The measurement items and their sources are summarized in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Summary of measurement.

Variable		Number of items	Sources
Brand authenticity	Genuine	6	[12,17]
	Consistent	6	
	Faithful	6	
	Intrinsic	6	
Brand trust		6	[26,37]
Brand attachment		6	[23,24,33]
Brand loyalty		6	[21,22,34]
Purchase intention		6	[28,35,36]

3.3. Sample and data collection

To empirically investigate the mechanism through which brand authenticity influences purchase intention, this study selected “Hamo,” the official mascot character of Jinju City in South Korea, as the research context. Hamo represents the historical, cultural, and natural identity of Jinju, operating as a public symbol while simultaneously stimulating consumer-related purchasing behavior. Therefore, this study provides an appropriate empirical setting for examining the psychological mechanisms linking authenticity perceptions to trust, attachment, loyalty, and purchase intention in a local mascot brand context.

The target population consisted of adult consumers who were aware of the Hamo character. Convenience sampling was employed, and data were collected through an online survey conducted over a 20-day period from November 11 to November 30, 2025. The respondents were screened to ensure they were familiar with Hamo and had prior exposure to related products or content. In total, 189 valid responses were used in the analysis. Since the study examines consumers’ perceptions of brand authenticity, trust, attachment, loyalty, and purchase intention, survey data were considered appropriate for testing the proposed research model. Before responding to the questionnaire, participants were clearly informed of the academic purpose of the study and were assured that their responses would be used only for research purposes. The

survey also emphasized that there were no right or wrong answers and encouraged respondents to answer honestly based on their own perceptions and experiences. In addition, the questionnaire items were presented in clear and simple language to reduce ambiguity and respondent misunderstanding.

The final sample size of 189 exceeded the minimum threshold of 100, as suggested by BOOMSMA [38], and satisfied the recommended minimum of 150 cases for structural equation modeling (SEM) proposed by Anderson and Gerbing [39]. Furthermore, BENTLER and CHOU [40] suggested that at least five observations per estimated parameter are adequate for structural equation modeling. Given that the present study included six latent constructs and secured an average of 31.5 observations per construct, the sample size was considered sufficient for the SEM analysis.

Data were analyzed using AMOS 21.0. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was first conducted to evaluate the reliability and validity of the measurement model, and SEM was then used to test the hypothesized relationships among the latent constructs. SEM was selected because the research model includes multiple latent variables and examines direct effects, indirect effects, and sequential mediation effects. This analytical procedure follows the two-step approach recommended by Anderson and Gerbing [39]. Model reliability and validity were assessed using Cronbach's alpha, construct reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE), following commonly used SEM criteria [41,42]. Model fit was evaluated using multiple indices, including χ^2 , χ^2/df , GFI, AGFI, CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and RMR [43]. The hypotheses were tested by examining standardized path coefficients, critical ratios, and *p*-values at the 0.05 significance level. Bootstrapping procedures with 5000 resamples were applied to test the mediating effects, following Preacher and Hayes [44].

4. Results

4.1. Reliability and confirmatory factor analysis

Cronbach's alpha was used to assess internal consistency, and CFA was conducted to examine construct validity. The results are presented in **Table 2**. All constructs showed acceptable reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.60 [45]. In addition, CR ranged from 0.878 to 0.967, and AVE ranged from 0.550 to 0.831, satisfying the recommended criteria of $CR > 0.70$ and $AVE > 0.50$ [41,42]. Most standardized factor loadings exceeded 0.70 and were statistically significant. These results indicate that the measurement model has acceptable reliability and convergent validity.

4.2. Model fit and hypothesis testing

SEM was conducted to test the hypothesized relationships among brand authenticity, brand trust, brand attachment, brand loyalty, and purchase intention. The structural model showed an acceptable overall fit: $\chi^2 = 38.308$, $df = 16$, $\chi^2/df = 2.394$, $GFI = 0.956$, $AGFI = 0.900$, $RMR = 0.012$, $RMSEA = 0.086$, and $CFI = 0.985$. Although RMSEA slightly exceeded the conservative threshold of 0.08, the other indices, including χ^2/df , GFI, AGFI, RMR, and CFI, met the recommended criteria

[41,43,46]. Therefore, the model was considered acceptable for hypothesis testing, although the RMSEA value should be interpreted with caution.

Table 2. Summary of reliability and convergent validity.

Construct	Number of items	Range of factor loadings	Ave	Cr
Genuine	6	0.597–0.832	0.550	0.878
Consistent	6	0.696–0.869	0.715	0.937
Faithful	6	0.712–0.854	0.745	0.946
Intrinsic	6	0.595–0.887	0.675	0.924
Brand trust	6	0.833–0.924	0.831	0.967
Brand attachment	6	0.766–0.886	0.751	0.947
Brand loyalty	6	0.722–0.867	0.644	0.915
Purchase intention	6	0.760–0.894	0.647	0.916

The direct effects are summarized in **Table 3** and **Figure 2**. Brand authenticity had significant positive effects on brand trust ($\beta = 0.894, p < 0.001$), brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.319, p = 0.002$), and brand attachment ($\beta = 0.654, p < 0.001$), supporting H1, H2, and H3. Brand trust did not significantly affect brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.048, p = 0.592$), leading to the rejection of H4. In contrast, brand attachment had a significant positive effect on brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.584, p < 0.001$), supporting H5. Brand loyalty also had a strong positive effect on purchase intention ($\beta = 0.874, p < 0.001$), supporting H6.

Table 3. Results of hypothesis testing.

No.	Path	β	S.E.	C.R.	P
H1	Brand Authenticity → Brand Trust	0.894	0.061	17.774	0.000
H2	Brand Authenticity → Brand Loyalty	0.319	0.136	3.164	0.002
H3	Brand Authenticity → Brand Attachment	0.654	0.068	12.357	0.000
H4	Brand Trust → Brand Loyalty	0.048	0.099	0.536	0.592
H5	Brand Attachment → Brand Loyalty	0.584	0.053	11.720	0.000
H6	Brand Loyalty → Purchase Intention	0.874	0.040	24.620	0.000

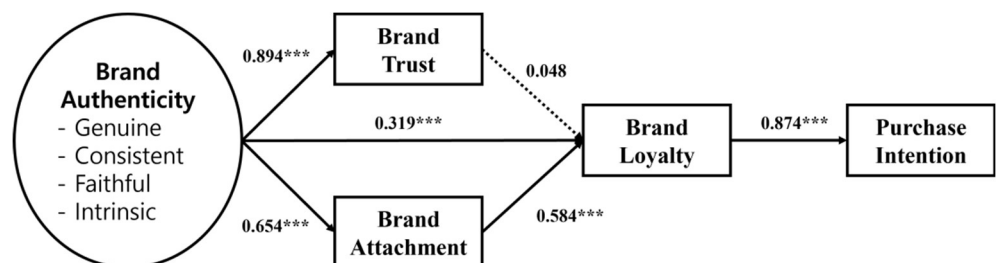


Figure 2. Results of structural equation modeling.

The mediation effects were tested using bootstrapping with 5000 resamples, and the results are presented in **Table 4**. The indirect effect through brand trust was not significant because the path from brand trust to brand loyalty was not significant. Therefore, H7 and H9 were rejected. By contrast, the indirect pathway through brand attachment and brand loyalty was significant. Specifically, brand authenticity

increased brand attachment, which strengthened brand loyalty and ultimately increased purchase intention. Thus, H8 and H10 were supported. These findings indicate that the affective attachment-based pathway is more important than the cognitive trust-based pathway in explaining purchase intention toward the Hamo mascot brand.

Table 4. Bootstrapping results for the mediating effects.

Variable	Brand authenticity	Brand attachment	Brand trust	Brand loyalty
Brand attachment	-	-	-	-
Brand trust	-	-	-	-
Brand loyalty	0.425***	-	-	-
Purchase intention	0.650***	0.510***	0.042	-

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

4.3. Summary of hypothesis testing

To provide a clearer overview of the empirical findings, **Table 5** summarizes the results of all hypotheses. Overall, the results show that brand authenticity is an important antecedent of brand trust, brand attachment, and brand loyalty. However, brand trust does not significantly lead to brand loyalty, indicating that cognitive credibility alone is insufficient to create loyalty in the context of a local public mascot brand. Instead, brand attachment plays a central role in translating authenticity into loyalty and purchase intention. Therefore, the final results support the conclusion that consumers' emotional attachment to the Hamo character is the key mechanism through which perceived authenticity contributes to purchase-related behavioral intentions.

Table 5. Summary of hypothesis testing.

No.	Path	Decision
H1	Brand Authenticity → Brand Trust	Supported
H2	Brand Authenticity → Brand Loyalty	Supported
H3	Brand Authenticity → Brand Attachment	Supported
H4	Brand Trust → Brand Loyalty	Rejected
H5	Brand Attachment → Brand Loyalty	Supported
H6	Brand Loyalty → Purchase Intention	Supported
H7	Brand Authenticity → Brand Trust → Brand Loyalty	Rejected
H8	Brand Authenticity → Brand Attachment → Brand Loyalty	Supported
H9	Brand Authenticity → Brand Trust → Brand Loyalty → Purchase Intention	Rejected
H10	Brand Authenticity → Brand Attachment → Brand Loyalty → Purchase Intention	Supported

5. Discussion and conclusion

This study examined how perceived brand authenticity influences purchase

intention in the context of Jinju City's local public mascot, Hamo. By integrating brand trust, brand attachment, and brand loyalty into a structural framework, this study compared cognitive and affective pathways through which authenticity is translated into consumer behavioral intention.

The findings provide three main insights. First, brand authenticity is an important foundation for consumer responses to local mascot brands. When consumers perceive Hamo as authentic and closely connected to regional identity, they are more likely to evaluate the brand positively. This supports prior brand authenticity research while extending its applicability to the context of public and place-based mascot branding [12,17]. Second, the study shows that emotional attachment plays a more central role than trust in forming loyalty toward a local mascot brand. Unlike commercial brands, public mascots do not primarily function as utilitarian products or transactional service providers. Rather, they symbolize local identity, civic emotion, and cultural familiarity. Therefore, cognitive trust alone may be insufficient to generate loyalty, whereas emotional attachment can more effectively transform authenticity into loyalty and purchase intention. Third, brand loyalty serves as the immediate mechanism through which emotional attachment is converted into purchase-related behavioral intention. This suggests that local mascot branding should not stop at increasing awareness or credibility; it should aim to cultivate sustained emotional bonds and loyal engagement.

These findings contribute to the literature in several ways. Theoretically, this study extends brand authenticity research beyond commercial and luxury brand contexts to the relatively underexplored area of local public mascot branding. It also clarifies the different roles of cognitive and affective mechanisms by showing that attachment-based pathways may be more influential than trust-based pathways in symbolic public branding contexts. Methodologically, the study provides an integrated framework that connects authenticity, trust, attachment, loyalty, and purchase intention in a single model. From a practical perspective, the results suggest that local governments should manage mascot characters not merely as promotional tools but as symbolic regional assets. For Hamo, branding strategies should emphasize storytelling, regional symbolism, citizen participation, and cultural experiences that strengthen emotional attachment. Programs such as local events, tourism-linked merchandise, participatory campaigns, and digital content can help transform perceived authenticity into loyalty and local consumption. In this sense, mascot branding can contribute not only to city promotion but also to regional identity building and local economic revitalization.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. First, it focused on a single case, Jinju City's Hamo character, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research should compare multiple local mascots across different regions and countries to examine whether the proposed mechanism applies to other public mascot brands. Second, the study used a relatively small sample of 189 respondents collected through an online survey. Although the sample size was sufficient for the SEM analysis, future studies should use larger and more diverse samples to improve external validity. Third, the sample was concentrated among consumers familiar with Hamo, and some demographic groups may be overrepresented. Future studies should consider more balanced samples in terms of age, occupation, residence, and level of mascot exposure. Fourth, this study used a

cross-sectional design and measured purchase intention rather than actual purchasing behavior. Longitudinal research or studies using actual behavioral data, such as merchandise purchase records, event participation, or online engagement, would provide stronger evidence of the long-term effects of mascot authenticity. Finally, future research could examine moderating variables such as regional identity, civic pride, local attachment, and frequency of mascot exposure to better understand when and for whom public mascot branding is most effective.

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