

## HOW TO BUILD AND MAINTAIN EMOTIONAL CONNECTION WITH COSTUMER TO INCREASE BRAND AWARENESS A STUDY CASE OF COOKIEGOM

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### Abstract

The Indonesian soft cookie market is highly competitive, making emotional connection a key driver of customer loyalty. This study examines how customers form emotional connections with cookie brands and how Cookiegom, a small business, can strengthen these connections to enhance brand awareness and repeat purchase. A qualitative approach was applied through in-depth interviews with ten consumers who had purchased both Cookiegom and Doughlab, supported by digital observation of social media and customer reviews. Thematic analysis reveals that Cookiegom is perceived as a “comfort brand,” offering warmth, comfort, and freshness, while Doughlab is viewed as a premium, highly visible brand. These emotional differences influence attachment, repeat purchases, and word-of-mouth behavior. The study proposes the Emotional Comfort Connection Loop Model to explain how emotional bonds develop through repeated experiential cycles. Strengthening emotional storytelling, improving digital consistency, and integrating comfort-oriented touchpoints are recommended strategies for Cookiegom.

**Keywords:** *Emotional Branding, Emotional Connection, Customer Experience, Brand Loyalty, Qualitative Research, Cookiegom.*

### INTRODUCTION

The cookies industry in Indonesia has experienced significant growth in recent years. According to the 2020 Food Consumption Statistics, cookie consumption increased by an average of 4.25% per year between 2016 and 2020. Data from Badan Pusat Statistik (BPS) indicate that in 2020, national cookie consumption reached 2.28 kilograms per capita per year, representing a 17% increase from 2016 (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2020). The market is characterized by the existence of top brands and a large number of small businesses that operate from home. Soft cookies are one of the most popular sweet treats, but because they are not considered a necessity, competition among sellers is intense. This creates a big challenge for entrepreneurs, who not only have to attract but also retain customers in a crowded market. This growth trend is captured in online sales. Between December 2020 and January 2021, online sales of cookies in Indonesia reached IDR 2.4 billion, with 78,000 units sold (Fatmarani, 2022). However, despite the increased demand, competition is getting fiercer, with many businesses offering similar products. As a consequence, the cookie industry is now heavily saturated. Soft cookies, in particular, are considered optional purchases; consumers can easily switch to competing brands or reduce spending on non-essential items. The intensity of competition increases during peak seasons such as holidays or special events and when viral product trends can quickly distract consumers and disrupt purchasing behavior.

From a marketing perspective, this dynamic shows the importance of value creation. According to Kotler and Keller (2016), the fundamental goal of marketing is to create, communicate, and deliver superior value to customers, resulting in satisfaction, which in turn fosters loyalty. Oliver (1999) further explains that customer satisfaction serves as a critical bridge between perceived value and long-term loyalty. Companies that consistently create value beyond functional benefits, such as emotional value or a unique experience, are more likely to retain their customers over time. This process can also be understood through the PDB Triangle (Product, Distribution, Brand). To survive in the competitive market, companies must provide high-quality products (P), ensure effective and reliable distribution channels (D), and build a strong and distinctive brand (B). While products and distribution form the foundation of customer satisfaction, it is ultimately the brand that builds deeper meaning and emotional connections (Kartajaya, 2010). Without a strong brand identity, even high-quality products with wide distribution

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may fail to create customer loyalty in a saturated market. In this context, brand differentiation becomes a strategic necessity. The Indonesian Language Dictionary (KBBI) defines a brand as a mark placed by a manufacturer on a product for identification purposes (KBBI, 2023). Law No. 15 of 2001 stipulates that a trademark can be a name, logo, color scheme, or a combination of these elements that has a distinctive character in commerce (Republic of Indonesia, 2001). McLaughlin (DeMers, 2013) argues that a brand is not simply a visual symbol, but rather the perception that people have of a product or organization. Therefore, brand building is essentially the management of customer perceptions. However, a strong business does not depend only on providing quality products and establishing a well-known brand. Long-term survival requires building loyalty, creating emotional connections, and making a positive impression that keeps customers coming back. In the food and beverage industry, emotional branding has proven to have a significant impact. Lestari et al. (2024) found that emotional branding has a positive influence on consumer loyalty. Similarly, Hilmah and Tatiyani (2022) revealed that emotional branding contributes 25.8% to overall customer loyalty.

Cookiegom, a small business specializing in soft cookies, was directly impacted by these challenges. Although its products are fresh, warm, and affordably priced, they belong to a non-essential category, making customer retention difficult. To better understand the real conditions faced by the brand, a preliminary study was conducted using Cookiegom's internal data and exploratory interviews. The analysis of digital interactions shows that Cookiegom's Instagram content successfully gains visibility but struggles to convert interest into deeper engagement. While reels and posts accumulated 500 views in June and 499 in July, the numbers sharply increased to 3,800 in August and 5,900 in September. However, the majority of viewers—87% in June, 83% in July, 79% in August, and 64% in September—came from non-followers. This indicates that Cookiegom's content is able to attract attention but fails to convert viewers into followers, let alone loyal customers. The lack of conversion implies that the content does not yet create emotional resonance strong enough to motivate continued engagement.

Sales data further reveals inconsistency. Between May and September 2025, monthly sales fluctuated between 210 and 240 units with no clear upward trend. Even though August showed a slight increase to around 240 units, the momentum did not continue in September. This indicates that Cookiegom's sales remain stagnant, despite increasing visibility online. Repeat customers also show mixed results. The percentage of repeat buyers was 20% in 2021, decreased to 15% in 2022, and increased to around 30% in 2023–2025. Although the recent increase is positive, it suggests that Cookiegom's repeat purchase behavior is driven mostly by older customers who have known the brand for a long time, rather than new customers transitioning into loyal users. Exploratory interviews reinforce these findings. Many respondents indicate that they tend to remain loyal to one brand, especially when they believe the brand fits their identity, offers consistent quality, or provides a reliable experience. Several respondents admitted hesitation to try Cookiegom despite knowing about it, because they already trust other established brands. Some note fear of disappointment when trying new dessert brands, while others emphasize the importance of authentic reviews from friends or trusted sources. This pattern demonstrates the difficulty for Cookiegom to penetrate consumer loyalty without offering stronger emotional value.

Interestingly, interviews with Cookiegom's existing repeat customers reveal that emotional connection does emerge when certain experience-based triggers occur—such as enjoying warm cookies upon delivery, feeling comforted by the taste, or experiencing friendly communication through WhatsApp. These experiences pushed some customers to purchase Cookiegom consistently, even without relying on promotions. Nonetheless, these cases represent only a small portion of the customer base. These findings illustrate that while Cookiegom possesses strong product qualities and potential emotional appeal, it lacks a structured emotional branding approach capable of generating consistent customer loyalty. Most emotional branding frameworks are designed for large corporations with extensive resources, leaving small businesses like Cookiegom with limited guidance on how to build emotional connections effectively. Therefore, this study focuses on exploring how small businesses—specifically Cookiegom—can establish and maintain emotional connections with customers to enhance brand awareness, increase engagement, and foster long-term loyalty in a highly competitive market.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach with an exploratory-interpretive-comparative design to understand the formation, perception, and sustainability of emotional relationships between consumers and soft cookie brands. This approach was chosen because the focus of the study emphasized subjective meanings, personal experiences, and consumer interpretations of the two brands being compared: Cookiegom and Doughlab. The study population included young consumers living in urban areas with experience purchasing soft cookie products through online platforms. The sample was determined using a purposive sampling technique with certain criteria: residing in

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Greater Jakarta (Jabodetabek), aged 18–30, having purchased both brands, and actively engaging in online food purchasing. Ten participants were interviewed semi-structured to explore emotional narratives, brand perceptions, sensory experiences, and factors driving loyalty or brand switching. Additionally, additional data was obtained through digital observations on social media and food ordering apps, including comments, reviews, user posts, and brand responses. Data were analyzed through a processing and coding process that included open coding to identify initial codes, axial coding to develop subthemes, and selective coding to formulate main themes based on the conceptual framework. Thematic analysis was used to identify consistent patterns of consumer emotions, perceptions, and relationships across multiple data sources. To enhance credibility, the study employed source triangulation by comparing interview findings, social media interactions, and customer reviews on food ordering platforms. This triangulation ensured that the identified emotional themes emerged not only from a single type of data but were also supported by consumer behavior and emotional expressions in everyday digital contexts. Thus, the analysis process provided a robust and comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms by which emotional connections were formed across the two cookie brands studied.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION



Figure 1. Research Design

The research design of this study is illustrated in Figure 1, which outlines the sequential methodological flow adopted to explore how emotional connections are formed, perceived, and sustained between customers and soft cookie brands. The structure reflects the logic of qualitative inquiry and demonstrates how the study progresses from identifying the core business issue to the development of an emotional branding model tailored for Cookiegom. The process begins with the Business Issue, which identifies the central challenge faced by Cookiegom—specifically, the difficulty of converting high brand awareness into repeat purchases and emotional loyalty. This issue forms the foundation upon which the rest of the research is built. From the business issue, the study moves to defining the Research Objective, which focuses on understanding emotional mechanisms, evaluating customer perceptions of Cookiegom versus Doughlab, and formulating an emotional branding strategy for Cookiegom. These objectives guide the direction and scope of the research. The next stage is the Literature Review & Theoretical Foundation, where concepts related to emotional branding, customer experience, brand relationship quality (BRQ), emotional attachment, brand love, trust, and emotional loyalty are examined. These theories form the conceptual basis used to understand and interpret consumer emotional responses.

Using this theoretical grounding, the Conceptual Framework is developed. The framework maps the relationships between customer experience, relationship quality, emotional meaning, and emotional outcomes. It serves as the analytical lens for examining how emotional connection develops and identifies key dimensions that guide the later stages of analysis. This is followed by the Qualitative Research Design, which adopts an exploratory–interpretive–comparative approach. This approach is chosen because the formation of emotional connection is a subjective and meaning-heavy process, best understood through personal narratives and interpretive analysis. The comparative element is essential, as it highlights the differences between Cookiegom and Doughlab, enabling the identification of actionable gaps. After data collection, the process continues with Data Processing & Initial Coding, where interview transcripts are cleaned, coded, and categorized through open, axial, and selective coding. This stage transforms raw narratives into structured analytical units.

The coded data is then analyzed through Thematic Analysis, where patterns and themes related to emotional triggers, brand perception, trust, brand meaning, and loyalty formation are identified. Themes are reviewed and aligned with the conceptual framework to ensure analytical coherence. Following this, Key Findings & Insights are derived, highlighting emotional strengths and weaknesses across Cookiegom and Doughlab. These findings reveal the emotional factors that shape customer loyalty, identity alignment, and brand preference. The final stage of the research design is the Emotional Branding Model Development, where the insights obtained from thematic analysis are translated into a practical, strategic model tailored for Cookiegom. This model provides actionable guidance for strengthening emotional connection and improving long-term customer loyalty. Overall, this structured research design ensures methodological rigor while allowing flexibility for deep emotional exploration. It connects theory, empirical data, and strategic output in a coherent workflow that supports the central aim of the study.

## Analysis

### Customer Experience

Customer experience surfaced as the most immediate and influential dimension shaping emotional impressions of both brands. Participants constructed experiential meaning not only from taste and texture, but from their sensory expectations, platform interactions, purchasing context, and digital brand presence. The experience was not merely a moment of consumption; rather, it became an early emotional filter that colored their perception of each brand's personality, reliability, and emotional resonance.

### Sensory Experience

Across participants, Cookiegom was consistently described as fresh, warm, soft, and slightly crunchy, producing a distinctive “homemade freshness.” The warmth and texture were frequently interpreted as signs of care, intimacy, and closeness—attributes typically associated with home baking rather than commercial production. One participant noted:

*“Kalau Cookiegom itu pas dateng tuh masih anget... kayak ada crunchy-nya dikit. Jadi rasanya lebih kayak binaan rumahan.”*

Meanwhile, Doughlab evoked a different sensory world. Participants described Doughlab's cookies as melting, rich, gooey, and decadent, creating an indulgent sensory experience akin to premium dessert shops. As one put it:

*“Doughlab tuh pas digigit langsung melt, coklatnya tuh meleleh lama. Feels more premium aja.”*

These sensory qualities produced two contrasting emotional reactions:

1. Cookiegom → warm, calm, emotionally soothing
2. Doughlab → happy, excited, deeply satisfied

This contrast echoes Schmitt's (1999) experiential theory, where sensory cues trigger affective reactions that become the foundation of brand meaning. Cookiegom's warmth triggered *low-arousal positive emotions* (comfort, calmness), while Doughlab triggered *high-arousal positive emotions* (excitement, delight).

### **Digital Touchpoint**

Doughlab's digital presence was perceived as professional, consistent, and visually polished. Participants frequently mentioned seeing Doughlab on Instagram Reels, explore pages, or even TikTok, reinforcing brand salience and familiarity. Cookiegom, by comparison, had less frequent posting, fewer visual cues, and lower social reach.

Digital observation supported this:

1. Doughlab maintained a consistent posting schedule, aesthetic cohesion, and strong brand personality.
2. Cookiegom posted less frequently, resulting in lower emotional reinforcement and weaker "digital presence memory."

As one participant reflected:

*"Doughlab tuh kayak selalu muncul. Cookiegom nggak sering update, jadi nggak selalu keingat."*

This aligns with omnichannel emotional experience theory (McLean, 2020), where consistent digital touchpoints strengthen emotional continuity and familiarity across channels.

### **Service Experience**

Participants perceived Cookiegom as more personal and friendly, describing the interaction as warm and almost peer-like:

*"Cookiegom tuh feel-nya kayak chat sama temen sendiri."*

This warmth aligned with its sensory emotional cues, creating a coherent emotional identity.

Doughlab, however, felt professional and structured, giving a sense of competence and dependability:

*"Kalau Doughlab tuh lebih profesional, keliatan kalo big brand."*

Interestingly, some participants found Doughlab more responsive, especially when interacting through platforms like GoFood or GrabFood. This indicates that brand size enables operational reliability, which strengthens trust signals.

### **Platform and Purchase Context Experience**

Doughlab's presence in malls and physical outlets created spontaneous emotional triggers:

*"Kalo ke mall tuh tinggal lewat dan langsung pengen beli Doughlab."*

Participants described Doughlab as a "default" choice when they wanted something premium, indulgent, or reliable. Cookiegom, being fully online, required intentional searching:

*"Cookiegom tuh harus dicari dulu. Kalo niat, baru pesan."*

This difference directly shaped emotional accessibility:

Doughlab exists in the consumer's physical reality, while Cookiegom exists primarily in digital intention.

### **Relationship Quality**

#### **Trust Signals**

Trust toward Doughlab was strongly tied to brand size and familiarity:

*"Brand-nya udah besar dan terkenal, jadi lebih trusted."*

Participants associated Doughlab's physical stores, consistent packaging, and steady content output with reliability. Trust was rooted in *structural competence* rather than emotional closeness. Cookiegom also elicited trust, but through a different pathway: freshness, homemade quality, and direct contact with the owner. This aligns with BRQ theory (Fetscherin, 2020), which distinguishes between competence-based *trust* (Doughlab) and warmth-based trust (Cookiegom).

#### **Warmth and Emotional Closeness**

Cookiegom stood out for its relational warmth. Participants described the brand as intimate, homey, and emotionally approachable:

*"Warmer, more personal. Like I'm not afraid to chat."*

This emotional closeness enhanced customers' perception of care and sincerity—key elements in relationship-building per Fournier (1998). Doughlab's relationship quality felt more distant but more stable. It was "less emotional," but "more predictable."

## Interaction Quality

Some participants felt Doughlab responded faster, especially because of automated or system-based responses on platforms:

*"Kadang Doughlab lebih cepat, mungkin karena sistemnya lebih rapi."*

Cookiegom, despite being friendlier, had inconsistent responsiveness, reinforcing the perception that small brands are more personal but less structured.

## Satisfaction Stability

Participants agreed that both brands were consistently satisfying in taste. However:

1. Doughlab → high consistency
2. Cookiegom → high emotional warmth

This created two relational experiences:  
stable reliability vs emotional relatability.

## Emotional Branding Model

The Emotional Branding Model illustrates how customers build, interpret, and reinforce emotional connections with Cookiegom. The model is structured as a circular process consisting of four interconnected components—Customer Experience, Relationship Quality, Emotional Meaning, and Emotional Outcomes—which together form a continuous emotional cycle. This cycle demonstrates that emotional bonding is not a one-directional sequence, but a self-reinforcing loop that strengthens each time customers interact with the brand. The loop begins with Sensory & Product Experience, which functions as the customer's first emotional entry point. Interview participants consistently described the sensory qualities—freshness, warmth, aroma, texture, and meltiness—as core elements that shaped their early impressions of both Doughlab and Cookiegom. Cookiegom was repeatedly associated with warm, homey, comforting, while Doughlab evoked melting, gooey, premium indulgence. These sensory cues serve as the base trigger for emotional activation and influence customers' immediate satisfaction and memory encoding. Sensory impressions create the "first emotional imprint" that determines whether customers are open to forming a deeper bond.

As customers repeatedly interact with the product, the experience transitions into Emotional Response & Mood Regulation. This stage reflects how customers use cookies not only for taste but also as emotional tools—"buat self-reward," "kalau badmood," or "comfort food." Participants described Cookiegom as the brand they choose in moments of emotional vulnerability (stress, fatigue, comfort-seeking), while Doughlab is chosen in situations associated with outing, leisure, or excitement (mall visits, special menu cravings). These emotional responses help solidify emotional meaning: Cookiegom becomes associated with warmth, calmness, and emotional safety; Doughlab with fun, novelty, and premium satisfaction. This emotional resonance is essential because it transforms a cookie from a functional product into an emotional companion.

These emotional experiences then feed into Brand Perception & Identity Fit, where consumers begin to assign personality traits to the brand. Cookiegom is perceived as friendly, humble, relatable, and home-made, whereas Doughlab is perceived as premium, established, and "sure choice." Customers begin to align themselves with the brand that "feels like them," generating self-congruence. For Cookiegom, identity alignment comes through its warm, non-intimidating image; for Doughlab, the confidence comes from its size, reputation, and availability in malls. This stage reflects how emotional meaning moves beyond momentary feelings into a stable perception of what the brand "represents" in a person's life.

With sustained positive experiences, customers transition into Digital Trust & Social Proof Reinforcement, where external validation strengthens internal emotional impressions. Participants described how reviews, reposts, testimonials, and UGC reinforce their confidence in both brands. Doughlab benefits from stronger visibility and a more active content machine—its reposts make customers feel "proud." Cookiegom's WOM works but remains small-scale. Digital trust becomes crucial for customers deciding whether to stick with a brand or switch. Price sensitivity also becomes relevant: many participants expressed that Cookiegom wins because "lebih murah tapi enaknya sama." Social proof not only reinforces satisfaction but also legitimizes the emotional bond. The loop culminates in Repeat Behavior & Habit Formation, where customers decide whether to repurchase, switch, or remain dual users. Here, the difference between the two brands becomes clearer:

Cookiegom becomes part of a comfort routine (ordered when craving calmness or homeliness).

Doughlab becomes part of a convenience + excitement routine (purchased when passing by a mall or seeking premium indulgence).

Seven out of ten participants stated they lean toward Cookiegom for long-term repeat behavior due to emotional comfort and affordability. However, they acknowledged Doughlab as a dependable fallback due to accessibility and brand prestige. This stage represents the consolidation of emotional connection into behavioral loyalty. Finally, the loop cycles into Brand Relationship Strengthening, where repeated emotional experiences turn into a stable relationship. Customers who repeatedly feel warmth, satisfaction, psychological comfort, and identity alignment with Cookiegom integrate the brand into their lifestyle. This leads to a reciprocal loop: the more emotional value customers receive, the more likely they are to return—and the deeper the emotional bond becomes over time.

## CONCLUSION

This study aimed to understand how emotional connections with cookie brands are formed, how customers perceive Cookiegom's emotional appeal, and how these insights can guide the development of an emotional branding model for the brand. The qualitative findings provide several clear conclusions. First, emotional connections with cookie brands are formed through a combination of sensory experience, emotional comfort, trust signals, and consistent brand interaction. Customers develop attachment when the product delivers warm, familiar, and mood-enhancing experiences, and when the brand provides reliable communication and social validation. These elements shape emotional reassurance that strengthens repeat intention. Second, customers perceive Cookiegom as a brand that evokes warmth, comfort, and a homely feeling. It is associated with emotional reassurance, self-reward, and stress relief. In contrast, Doughlab is perceived as a more premium and exciting brand with stronger brand prestige and mall-based visibility. Although the product quality of both brands is viewed as similarly good, Doughlab benefits from stronger social proof and more consistent digital engagement. Cookiegom's emotional appeal is strong but under-leveraged due to inconsistent storytelling and limited amplification of user-generated trust cues.

Third, the findings indicate that strengthening Cookiegom's emotional value requires integrating its core emotional triggers into a structured branding model. The study results in the Emotional Comfort–Connection Loop, which explains how sensory warmth, emotional meaning, social validation, and relational consistency interact to generate loyalty. The model highlights the specific mechanisms that transform emotional comfort into long-term preference and provides a practical framework for designing Cookiegom's emotional branding strategy. Overall, the study concludes that emotional branding plays a critical role in differentiating Cookiegom within a saturated cookie market. When strategically managed, Cookiegom's emotional strengths—warmth, comfort, authenticity, and familiarity—can be transformed into sustainable customer connection and long-term loyalty.

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