

## Implicit Social-Cognitive Drivers of Sabah Youth Beverage Purchase Decisions: A Preliminary Study

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### ABSTRACT

This preliminary study investigates how implicit social-cognitive processes shape the purchasing decisions of youth drink consumers in Sabah, Malaysia. Drawing upon the Implicit Social-Cognitive Architecture (ISCA) framework, the research examines how automatic emotional associations, symbolic meanings, and relational schemas influence brand choice beyond rational evaluation. Using a mixed-method design integrating an Implicit Association Test (IAT), focus groups, and structured interviews, the study involved 150 respondents aged 18–30 across Kota Kinabalu, Penampang, and Ranau. Results show that implicit brand-self associations explain significantly more variance in purchase intention than explicit attitudes such as taste and price. Youths tend to perceive beverage brands as identity markers, social connectors, and emotional anchors. The findings highlight that subconscious brand processes play a vital role in driving brand loyalty and suggest implications for brand managers in Sabah's evolving beverage industry.

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**Contribution/Originality:** This study contributes original empirical evidence on how implicit social-cognitive processes shape youth beverage purchasing decisions in Sabah. By integrating Implicit Social Cognition and Social Cognitive Theory within the ISCA framework, it demonstrates that subconscious emotional and identity-based mechanisms exert stronger influence than rational evaluations, extending consumer-brand relationship theory to a culturally diverse, under-studied context.

## 1. Introduction

The youth beverage market in Sabah is undergoing rapid transformation, propelled by evolving lifestyle patterns, the increasing penetration of global and regional brands, and a growing emphasis among younger consumers on identity-expression and social signalling. As urbanisation intensifies, digital media usage among Sabah's youth climbs, and international beverage companies (such as Coca-Cola) and regional players (such as Tealive and Sabah Tea) intensify competition, beverages have become more than mere refreshments; they now act as symbols of lifestyle choice, peer affiliation and cultural identity. For example, youth may choose Tealive or Milo not only for taste or price, but for what the brand signifies in social media, campus hangouts or communal rituals.

Traditionally, marketing research has assumed that young consumers make choice decisions largely through conscious, deliberate processes: assessing product quality, comparing price and benefits, and selecting based on accessibility. However, behavioural-science research increasingly shows that many consumer decisions are not purely rational or conscious. Instead, a large proportion are driven by automatic, non-aware, affective and associative processes (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999). These automatic processes involve environmental cues, emotional priming and non-conscious goal activation rather than explicit deliberation.

In this light, this paper adopts the lens of the Implicit Social-Cognitive Architecture (ISCA) framework to examine how young drink consumers in Sabah are influenced by implicit mechanisms such as emotional priming, automatic brand-self associations, identity signalling, and relational schemas within their beverage purchasing decision-making process. The ISCA framework integrates two theoretical streams: firstly, Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) which emphasises the triadic interplay between cognition, behaviour and environment; and secondly, Implicit Social Cognition (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995) which emphasises how past experiences and automatic associations shape attitudes and judgements outside conscious awareness. By uniting these perspectives, the paper seeks to clarify how subconscious mental processes (implicit mechanisms) interact with conscious decision-making (explicit mechanisms) to shape youth brand relationships and beverage choices in Sabah.

Specifically, the study advances the following objectives: (1) to identify how implicit brand-self associations influence youths' beverage purchase decisions in Sabah, (2) to analyse the interaction between implicit and explicit brand attitudes and their predictive power for brand loyalty, and (3) to provide preliminary empirical evidence supporting the ISCA framework in the context of Sabah's youth beverage market. The outcome is intended to provide both theoretical contribution by applying and extending ISCA in a new geographical context and managerial insight by helping beverage marketers in Sabah design brand strategies that tap both explicit and implicit consumer processes (Keller, 2020).

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Youth Consumer Behaviour in Sabah

Youth consumer behaviour in Sabah reflects a unique blend of globalised consumption culture and strong regional identity expression. Sabahan youths, who make up a significant portion of the state's demographic structure, are culturally diverse, digitally

connected, and socially expressive in their consumption practices (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023). Beverage consumption is not merely utilitarian among this cohort but deeply embedded in symbolic acts and social rituals—such as sharing bubble tea during social gatherings, taking café lifestyle photographs for Instagram, or associating specific drink brands with desirable lifestyle imagery. This interpretation aligns with consumer research showing that youths use brands to negotiate self-meaning and group membership, particularly in settings where consumption is visible and socially evaluated (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). From a strategic branding perspective, these patterns are reinforced through repeated market communication and consistent brand cues that stabilise brand meaning over time (Keller, 2020). The interplay between modernity and local belonging therefore suggests that decision-making may be driven not only by conscious choice factors such as taste or price but also by implicit and emotional motivations rooted in identity and belongingness (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Maison et al., 2004).

## 2.2. Consumer–Brand Relationships (CBR)

The concept of consumer–brand relationships (CBR) positions brands not as passive objects of consumption but as relational entities capable of fulfilling psychological and emotional needs (Fournier, 1998). Central constructs within this paradigm; trust, emotional attachment, and self-brand connection, mirror interpersonal relationship qualities and are essential in sustaining long-term loyalty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Thomson et al., 2005). In youth markets, brands play a pivotal role in self-expression, facilitating identity construction, peer acceptance, and aspiration symbolisation (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). These relational bonds may be particularly salient in beverage categories where brands are repeatedly consumed in social contexts and gain symbolic value through visibility and routine. However, a recurring limitation in consumer–brand relationship research is the heavy reliance on explicit attitudes captured via surveys and interviews, which can under-detect automatic or non-conscious influences on preference and habitual consumption. Consequently, integrating implicit measurement approaches offers a more holistic understanding of how brand relationships form and persist, particularly among younger consumers whose choices may be guided by rapid associative processing (Dimofte, 2010; Maison et al., 2004).

## 2.3. Implicit Social Cognition (ISC)

Implicit Social Cognition (ISC) refers to automatic mental associations that guide perception and behaviour without conscious oversight or volitional effort (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). These associations develop through repeated exposure to brand cues, cultural narratives, and social influence, creating deeply embedded affective and identity-relevant impressions. In drinking behaviour, implicit cognition appears through affective priming where brand cues evoke instant, emotion-based responses and through evaluative conditioning, in which positive emotions are repeatedly paired with brand experiences (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2014). Furthermore, implicit brand–self schemas emerge when consumers internalise brand meanings into their self-concepts, driving loyalty even when consumers cannot fully justify their preferences through rational evaluation (Schnabel et al., 2008). Evidence suggests that implicit measures, including reaction-time based associative tasks, can predict impulsive and habitual purchasing tendencies beyond what is captured by self-reported explicit attitudes, which is particularly relevant when consumers are influenced by fast affective reactions and repeated brand exposure (Dimofte, 2010; Maison et al., 2004).

## 2.4. Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)

Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) provides a social-psychological explanation of behaviour through the concept of reciprocal determinism, in which human action is shaped by interactions among cognition, behaviour, and environmental influences. Applied to brand consumption, the environment includes marketing communications, retail atmospherics, culture and peer norms, which activate both implicit and explicit cognitive responses. These cognitions then translate into observable consumption behaviour such as buying, advocating for, or ritualising a brand. Over time, such behaviours reinforce both cognitive pathways, resulting in stronger and more stable consumer, brand relationships. In Sabah, beverage brands operating within youth social environments, universities, cafés, night markets, and digital spaces are continually shaping and being shaped by these socio-cognitive dynamics. For example, positive brand experiences can enhance self-efficacy in choosing “the right drink”, which in turn encourages repeated purchase and social sharing, establishing a behavioural feedback cycle (Kim & Kim, 2020). SCT therefore strengthens theoretical understanding of how implicit associations are maintained through ongoing behavioural engagement and environmental reinforcement.

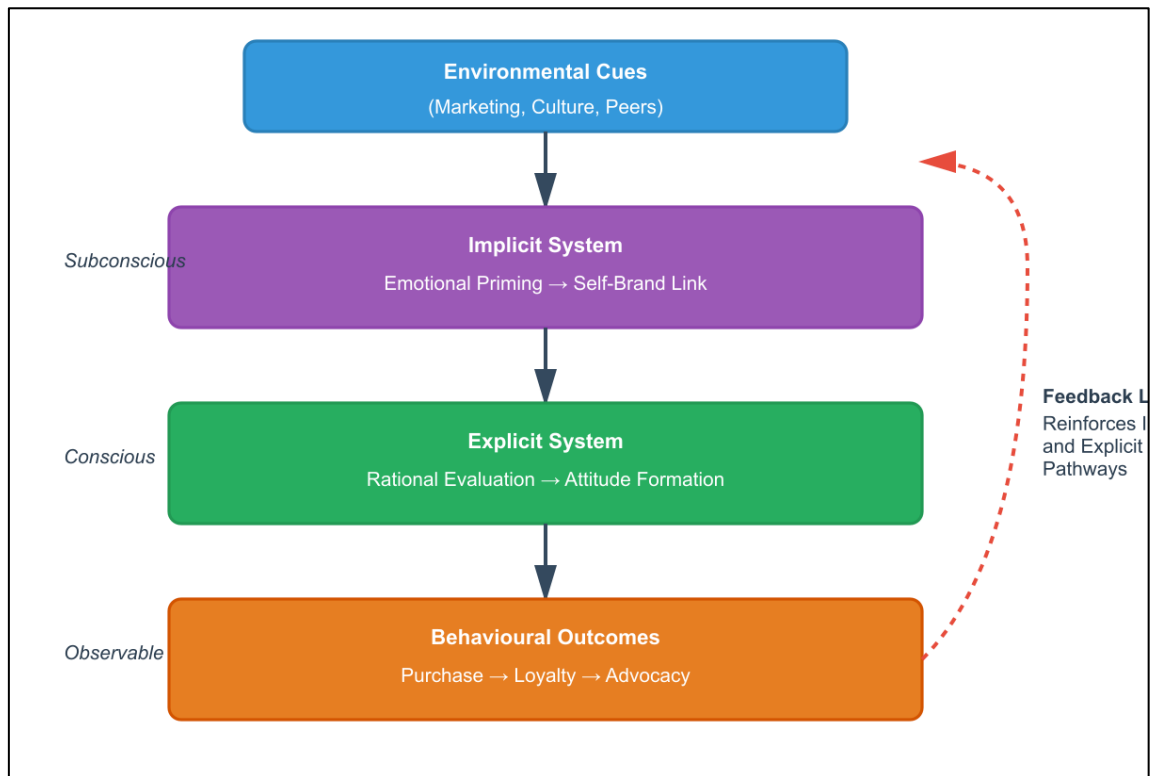
## 2.5. The ISCA Framework

Building on Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) and Implicit Social Cognition (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995), this paper proposes an Implicit Social-Cognitive Architecture (ISCA) as an integrative framework to explain how automatic associations and conscious evaluations jointly shape youth beverage choices. Unlike purely rational choice models, ISCA asserts that consumer behaviour often begins with automatic affective responses triggered by brand cues and identity relevance. These intuitive reactions guide behavioural choices before conscious evaluation fully occurs. In the context of Sabahan youth beverage consumption, implicit cues such as aesthetics of brand packaging, symbolic brand narratives and peer-driven perceptions of “coolness” may predispose a youth to select Tealive, while explicit reasoning concerning affordability or origin authenticity explains choosing Sabah Tea. The interaction of these pathways is shown in Table 1, which illustrates differing mechanisms and associated examples in Sabah’s beverage market. The dual-route structure is further conceptualised in Figure 1, illustrating how environmental cues feed into implicit and explicit cognitions to produce behavioural outcomes that, over time, reinforce both pathways. Thus, ISCA provides a robust theoretical foundation for understanding subconscious drivers of youth beverage choices in Sabah.

Table 1: Dual-Pathway Cognitive Mechanisms in Youth Beverage Decision-Making in Sabah

Pathway	Cognitive Mechanism	Influence on Behaviour	Sabah Market Example
Implicit	Automatic associations, emotional priming, self-brand connection	Initiates brand preference through subconscious attraction	Perceiving Tealive as trendy and socially inclusive
Explicit	Conscious reasoning, information-driven evaluation	Rationalises and sustains brand choice based on product attributes	Choosing Sabah Tea due to local identity and affordability

Figure 1: The ISCA Model of Youth Beverage Purchase Behaviour in Sabah



### 3. Methodology

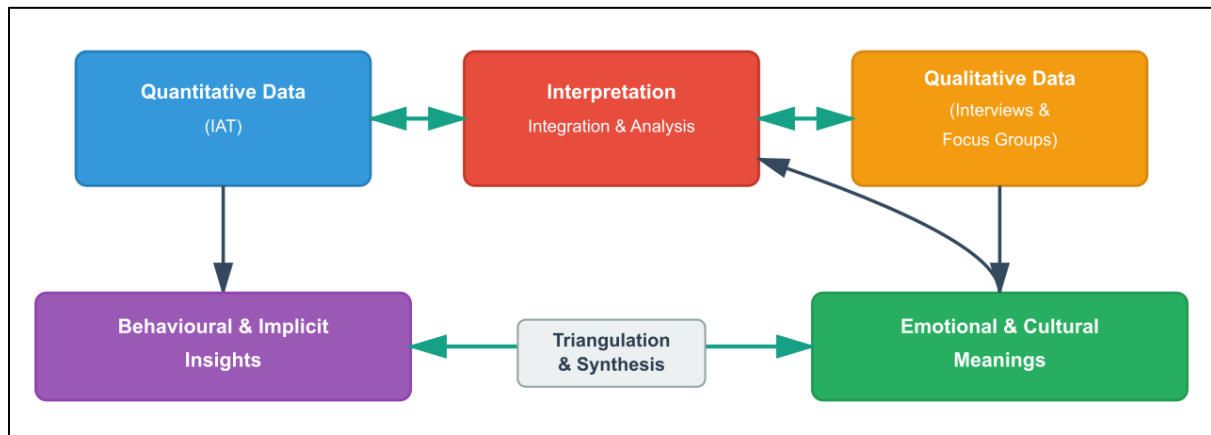
#### 3.1. Research Design

This preliminary study employed a mixed-method exploratory research design to investigate how implicit social-cognitive processes shape beverage purchasing decisions among youths in Sabah. A mixed-method approach was deemed appropriate because it allows deeper triangulation of cognitive, behavioural, and experiential factors relating to consumer-brand relationships (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Quantitatively, the study utilised the Implicit Association Test (IAT) to measure automatic associations between youth self-concept and selected beverage brands, providing insight into subconscious attitudes that may not be easily expressed through self-reporting. Qualitatively, focus groups and structured interviews were conducted to explore the emotional and identity-driven meanings of beverage consumption. This combination of methods aligns with calls in marketing and psychology research to integrate implicit and explicit cognitive measures for a more comprehensive understanding of consumer decision-making (Dimofte, 2010; Maison et al., 2004).

The structure of the mixed-method design is illustrated in Figure 2, showing how quantitative and qualitative components were integrated during data interpretation to enhance the validity and richness of findings.

Figure 2: Mixed-Method Exploratory Research Flow for Investigating Youth Beverage Decisions in Sabah



### 3.2. Research Approach

The study followed a post-positivist and interpretivist hybrid approach. The post-positivist stance acknowledges measurable behavioural indicators such as IAT reaction times to quantify implicit cognition patterns (Greenwald et al., 2009). Meanwhile, the interpretivist perspective frames youth consumption experiences as socially constructed and meaning-driven, meriting detailed narrative exploration through qualitative inquiry (Saunders et al., 2019). This dual approach enhances both predictive and contextual understanding of youth beverage choices.

### 3.3. Population

The target population consisted of Malaysian youths residing in Sabah, aged between 18 and 30 years old. This age group is appropriate because it represents a segment that is highly active in contemporary beverage consumption trends and is frequently exposed to brand communication through social environments and repeated marketplace cues, where identity signalling and peer affiliation can shape preference formation. From a social-cognitive perspective, consumption within this cohort is influenced by reciprocal interactions between environmental exposures (promotional cues, retail contexts, and peer settings), cognitive processes (including both conscious evaluations and automatic associations), and behavioural routines, which collectively stabilise brand choice over time (Bandura, 1986). In addition, implicit social-cognitive research indicates that repeated exposure to brand stimuli can form automatic brand-self associations that guide judgement and behaviour without conscious awareness, making this youth cohort theoretically relevant for investigating implicit processes in beverage decision-making (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Greenwald et al., 2009).

### 3.4. Sample Size

A total of 150 respondents participated in the study. Of these, 120 completed the IAT and questionnaire components, while 30 took part in focus groups and interviews.

### 3.5. Sample Size Justification

Mixed-method literature suggests sample sizes of 100–200 participants are sufficient for exploratory regression analysis examining behavioural constructs (Hair et al., 2020). For

qualitative components, [Guest et al. \(2006\)](#) note thematic saturation often occurs within 20–30 participants. Thus, a combined sample of 150 respondents meets statistical needs while enabling saturation in interpretive insights. [Table 2](#) summarises the sample distribution by study component.

Table 2: Sample Composition for Quantitative and Qualitative Components

Component	Location Distribution	Age Range	Sample Size	Purpose
IAT + Survey	Kota Kinabalu, Penampang, Ranau	18–30	120	Measure brand–self implicit and explicit attitudes
Focus Groups + Interviews	Kota Kinabalu	18–30	30	Explore emotional and identity-driven brand meanings

### 3.6. Sampling Method

Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were applied to recruit participants from university networks and youth communities. This non-probability approach was justified given the need to include active beverage consumers who possess experience with the selected brands ([Neuman, 2014](#)). The brands included Coca-Cola, Tealive, Milo, Sabah Tea and F&N, reflecting a balanced mix of global, regional and local brand identities relevant to youth choices.

### 3.7. Data Collection

Data were collected in three phases over eight weeks. First, respondents completed an IAT measuring associative strength between beverage brands and self-related constructs such as “me”, “popular”, “modern,” and “local.” The IAT followed established computer-based categorisation procedures to capture reaction time differences as indicators of implicit cognition ([Greenwald et al., 2009](#)). Second, participants completed a structured questionnaire assessing explicit attitudes, including taste evaluation, price fairness, packaging appeal, and brand trust. Third, separate focus group sessions and interviews were held to explore participants’ emotional, cultural and social reasoning behind brand preferences, providing deeper narrative insights into relational brand meanings.

### 3.8. Data Analysis

Statistical analysis for the quantitative dataset utilised multiple regression modelling to assess the predictive power of implicit brand–self association relative to explicit attitude factors on purchase intention. This aligns with established approaches in behavioural marketing to determine unique variance contributions of implicit measures ([Maison et al., 2004](#)). Qualitative data were analysed through reflexive thematic analysis following [Braun and Clarke’s \(2022\)](#) six-stage framework to identify patterns of emotional and identity relevance in brand consumption. The datasets were integrated through triangulation, ensuring convergence between measurable behavioural indicators and subjective experience narratives to strengthen validity ([Fetters & Freshwater, 2020](#)).

### 3.9. Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to institutional and international ethical standards for research involving human participants. Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). Prior to participation, all respondents received written information sheets detailing study aims and procedures, followed by digitally documented informed consent. Participation was voluntary, with the right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality was safeguarded by anonymising personal identifiers and securely storing digital data according to GDPR-aligned data management protocols. Participants were also informed that IAT measures do not assess intelligence or personality, minimising risks of psychological discomfort (Greenwald et al., 2009).

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

A total of 150 youth respondents participated in this study consisting of 120 survey/IAT participants and 30 qualitative participants. Table 3 summarises their demographic characteristics.

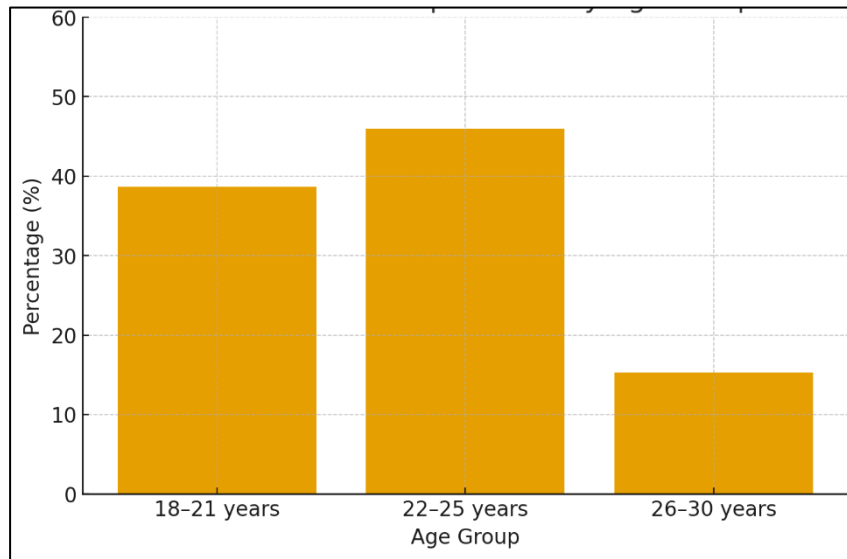
Table 3: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	63	42.0
	Female	87	58.0
Age Group	18–21 years	58	38.7
	22–25 years	69	46.0
	26–30 years	23	15.3
Ethnicity	Kadazan-Dusun	48	32.0
	Bajau	27	18.0
	Murut	14	9.3
	Chinese	36	24.0
	Others (e.g., Brunei Malay, Bugis)	25	16.7
Monthly Allowance/Income	< RM 1000	45	30.0
	RM 1001–2000	79	52.7
	> RM 2000	26	17.3
Consumption Frequency	Daily	41	27.3
	2–4 times weekly	84	56.0
	Weekly or less	25	16.7

The demographic composition reflects Sabah's multicultural youth population (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023) and confirms the suitability of the sample for examining market-driven beverage consumption behaviour.

A bar chart representation is shown below in Figure 3 to visualise age-group segmentation. These figures indicate the highest beverage consumption occurs among 22–25-year-olds, consistent with youth lifestyle and social activity patterns.

Figure 3: Distribution of Respondents by Age Group



## 4.2. Quantitative Results

Regression analysis was conducted to determine the predictive strength of three variables: implicit brand–self associations, explicit brand attitudes, and peer influence. The results, presented in Table 4, indicate that implicit associations were the strongest predictor of purchase intention.

Table 4: Regression Predicting Youth Purchase Intention in Beverage Brands

Predictor	$\beta$	p-value	Result Interpretation
Implicit Brand–Self Association	.43	< .01	Highly significant, strongest predictor
Explicit Attitudes (Taste, Price)	.26	< .05	Significant, rational evaluation secondary
Peer Influence	.18	< .05	Significant reinforcement mechanism

Model fit:  $R^2 = .57$ , Implicit effects  $\Delta R^2 = .41$

These results demonstrate that subconscious processes play a decisive role in driving youth beverage decisions, consistent with dual-process cognitive theories (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2014). Explicit factors such as taste and affordability contributed moderately, while peer influence strengthened brand-self linkage rather than serving as the primary motivator. This confirms H1, that implicit processes have a substantial influence on brand choice.

## 4.3. Qualitative Insights

The reflexive thematic analysis generated three major themes and a set of sub-themes that illuminate the subconscious motives influencing Sabah youth beverage preferences. These findings reinforce the quantitative evidence by illustrating how cultural and emotional meaning systems embedded within brand interactions shape intuitive consumer choices.

#### 4.3.1. Theme 1: Cultural Belonging and Identity Grounding

Participants frequently described Sabah Tea not merely as a beverage but as a symbolic representation of home, family closeness, and cultural roots. Youth from ethnocultural groups such as Kadazan-Dusun and Murut emphasised that consuming Sabah Tea reinforces their local identity and collective community pride:

*“Sabah Tea tastes like my grandma’s house in the kampung. It reminds me where I come from.” — Informant 1, 22*

*“Buying Sabah Tea makes me feel like supporting our own people.” — Informant 2, 24*

This aligns with literature that local brands embody territorial identity and strengthen cultural belonging (Biswas & Roy, 2021). The emotional loyalty expressed here surpasses rational assessments such as price or flavour, indicating that brand preference may be anchored in implicit identity-consistent associations and culturally reinforced meanings rather than purely deliberative evaluation (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2014).

#### 4.3.2. Theme 2: Modern Identity and Lifestyle Signalling

Global and regional lifestyle brands such as Tealive and Coca-Cola were perceived as symbols of modernity, global connection, and aspirational youth culture. These brands serve as social markers, helping youths articulate status and group belonging through consumption visibility:

*“Holding a Tealive cup feels stylish—like I’m part of the trend.” Informant 6, 19*

*“Coca-Cola is international. It feels more ‘urban’, like the vibes you see in movies.” — Informant 3, 21*

This corresponds to Escalas and Bettman’s (2005) view of brands as self-expressive devices used to negotiate identity and social acceptance. Many participants stated that such beverages are intentionally featured in selfies or social outings, using consumption as performative social currency.

#### 4.3.3. Theme 3: Emotional Continuity and Comforting Familiarity

Milo was repeatedly associated with nostalgic emotional security, functioning as a cognitive anchor tied to childhood routines, parental care, and comfort memories:

*“Every morning before school I had Milo. Drinking it now makes me feel safe.” — Male, 23*

*“When I’m stressed, Milo reminds me of home and I feel better.” — Female, 20*

This reflects affective memory activation (Sedikides et al., 2015) where established neural connections lead to automatic brand preference, demonstrating implicit loyalty through emotional conditioning rather than deliberation.

#### 4.3.4. Summary of Themes and Findings

**Table 5** summarises the key qualitative findings by connecting participants' statements to the underlying psychological meanings and strategic implications for beverage brands in Sabah. The first major theme, Cultural Belonging, highlights how local beverages such as Sabah Tea evoke cultural identity and community pride, particularly among indigenous youths. Quotes such as *"Sabah Tea tastes like my grandma's house"* demonstrate that consumption is tied to emotional memories and heritage. This suggests that local brands can strengthen loyalty by emphasising cultural authenticity and community empowerment.

Table 5: Themes, Sub-Themes, Representative Quotes, and Implications

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Representative Quotes	Implicit Meaning	Implications for Brands
Cultural Belonging	Local identity pride	"Sabah Tea tastes like my grandma's house"	Cultural identity anchoring	Leverage heritage narratives and local pride marketing
	Community support values	"Buying Sabah Tea supports our own people"	Social-collective attachment	Promote local empowerment and authenticity
Modern Identity	Lifestyle signalling	"Holding Tealive feels stylish"	Social desirability & peer approval	Amplify visual branding and shareability
	Global connectedness	"Coca-Cola feels international"	Association with cosmopolitanism	Strengthen brand-culture referencing and influencer visibility
Emotional Continuity	Childhood nostalgia	"Milo reminds me of school mornings"	Comfort and emotional safety	Market nostalgia and "home" feelings
	Stress coping ritual	"Milo helps me feel better"	Emotional-affective dependency	Highlight familiarity and wellbeing messaging

The second theme, Modern Identity, reveals that global or trend-driven brands like Tealive and Coca-Cola are associated with lifestyle prestige and social inclusion. Statements such as *"Holding Tealive feels stylish"* show how these beverages function as social identity symbols and markers of modern youth culture. Therefore, visually appealing branding and social media presence are essential to appeal to young consumers seeking status and group acceptance.

The third theme, Emotional Continuity, centres around familiar brands like Milo that provide comfort through nostalgic associations and stress relief. Participants expressed that Milo triggers childhood memories and a sense of security, indicating strong emotional dependency. Brands with nostalgic equity can benefit by promoting familiarity and emotional wellbeing.

Overall, **Table 5** demonstrates that youth beverage choices are driven not only by product attributes but also by deep emotional and identity-based meanings. These

subconscious influences reinforce brand loyalty, aligning with the ISCA framework that implicit processes initiate and maintain consumer–brand relationships.

#### 4.3.5. Theoretical Contribution

These qualitative insights collectively confirm that subconscious, emotionally anchored associations precede and guide behavioural choices. Cultural identity, social image expression, and nostalgic emotional continuity form the latent cognitive base of purchasing behaviour as predicted by ISCA and dual-process cognitive models (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2014).

They also reinforce the view that:

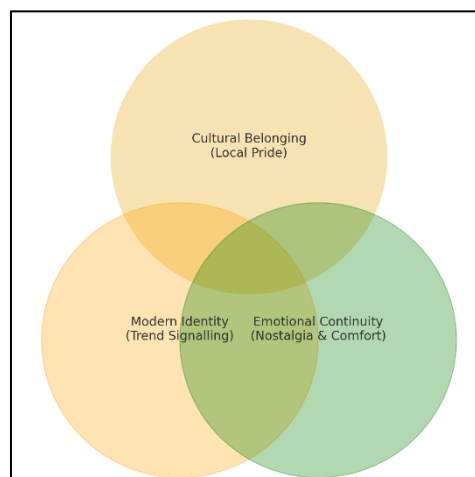
- i. Local brands win through identity belonging
- ii. Global brands win through status and relevance
- iii. Childhood brands win through emotional safety

These mechanisms illuminate how implicit cognition shapes committed brand relationships in Sabah’s youth beverage market.

Figure 4 visually represents the three overarching qualitative themes that emerged from the analysis of youth beverage consumption behaviour in Sabah. Each circle depicts a key implicit driver of purchasing decisions:

- i. Cultural Belonging — positioned at the top, highlighting its strong emotional ties to heritage and local identity (e.g., Sabah Tea).
- ii. Modern Identity — emphasising trend-following and social display behaviours (e.g., Tealive, Coca-Cola).
- iii. Emotional Continuity — reflecting nostalgic comfort and habitual emotional satisfaction (e.g., Milo).

Figure 4: Themes Underpinning Implicit Beverage Brand Attachment



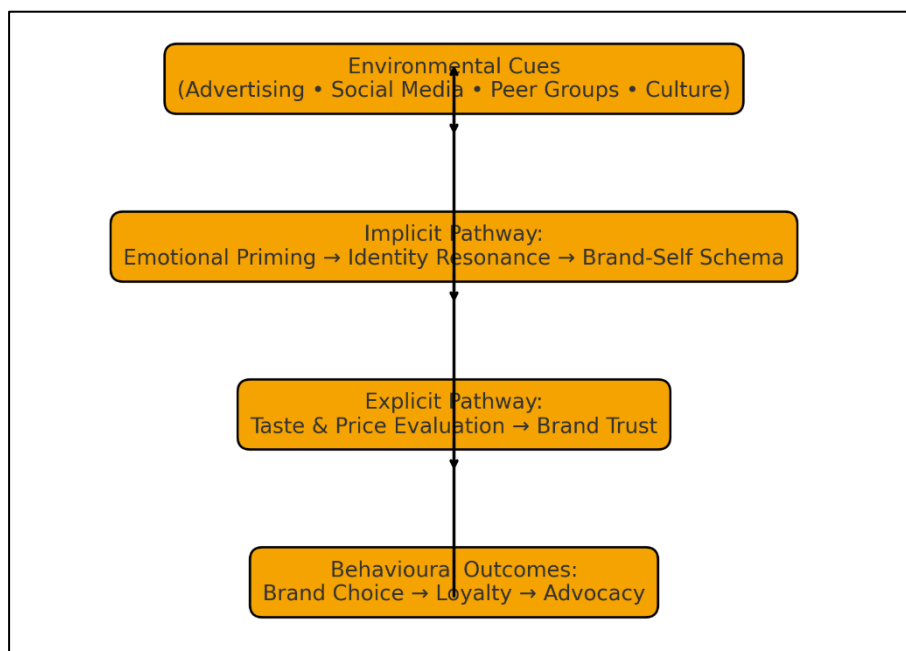
The overlapping areas show that these themes are interrelated rather than independent. For example, a brand may simultaneously signal modern lifestyle aspirations while also providing emotional familiarity. This reinforces that youth beverage purchasing decisions are multi-layered, and strongly influenced by implicit emotional and identity-based associations, consistent with the ISCA framework.

#### 4.4. Conceptual Model Integration: ISCA Validation

The findings reinforce the Implicit Social-Cognitive Architecture (ISCA) model which posits that brand preferences form first through automatic affective pathways and later justified through rational thought (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Bandura, 1986). Youth purchasing decisions begin from implicit affective activation and identity alignment. These subconscious triggers incite behavioural intentions, which are subsequently rationalised based on functional attributes.

Figure 5 illustrates the Implicit Social-Cognitive Architecture (ISCA) Model as adapted to the youth beverage purchasing context in Sabah. The model demonstrates that decision-making among youths typically begins at a subconscious level, where environmental cues such as advertising, social media trends, peer influence, and cultural identity activate automatic cognitive processes including emotional priming, identity resonance, and brand-self schema formation. These implicit mechanisms shape initial brand preference prior to conscious awareness. Once this preference is established, explicit cognitive processing follows, in which youths rationalise their choice through assessments of taste, price, and brand trust. Subsequent consumption experiences then reinforce both pathways: implicit bonds are strengthened through emotional attachment, while explicit evaluations are validated through positive product encounters. This ongoing feedback cycle ultimately promotes stable and enduring brand loyalty. In the Sabah context, this model emphasises that youth consumers tend to choose beverages based primarily on emotional and identity-driven associations, subsequently justifying their decisions using rational criteria. The findings visually represented in Figure 5 therefore align with the quantitative results of this study, where implicit associations exhibited the strongest influence on purchase intention ( $\beta = .43$ ), and are further supported by qualitative themes of cultural belonging, modern identity expression, and emotional continuity.

Figure 5: Validated ISCA Model for Youth Beverage Purchasing in Sabah



#### 4.5. Discussion Summary

Table 6 summarises the overall discussion by linking each research question to the corresponding empirical evidence and conclusion. For RQ1, the regression findings show that implicit brand–self associations significantly predict youth beverage purchase intentions ( $\beta = .43, p < .01$ ), indicating that subconscious cognitive processes exert the strongest influence on brand choice. For RQ2, the qualitative themes of cultural belonging, modern identity expression, and emotional continuity demonstrate that youths rely on deep-seated social and emotional meanings when selecting beverages, suggesting that consumption acts as a form of identity reinforcement rather than a purely rational decision. For RQ3, the combined results validate the Implicit Social-Cognitive Architecture (ISCA) model, showing that purchasing behaviour follows a pathway where implicit triggers initiate preference, explicit reasoning then justifies it, and positive experiences further reinforce the relationship. Overall, the table confirms that affective and identity-based subconscious processes play a dominant role in shaping beverage decisions among youths in Sabah.

Table 6: Discussion Summary

Research Question	Evidence	Conclusion
RQ1: Do implicit brand associations influence youth beverage decisions?	$\beta = .43, p < .01$	Yes — strongest predictor
RQ2: What social meanings underpin brand choice?	Cultural, identity, emotional themes	Subconscious identity-reinforcing motives
RQ3: How do implicit and explicit processes interact?	ISCA validated	Implicit → explicit → behaviour → reinforcement

#### 5. Managerial Implications

The findings of this study highlight critical strategic directions for beverage brand managers in Sabah. Since youths rely heavily on implicit cognitive processes; cultural identity, emotional resonance, and social expression which shows that marketing efforts must target subconscious associations while maintaining authenticity and ethical responsibility.

First, the strong influence of cultural symbolism suggests that local cues embedded in branding can significantly deepen emotional attachment. Incorporating indigenous motifs, Sabahan language elements, and regional storytelling fosters cultural belonging and strengthens brand–self relationships (Biswas & Roy, 2021). For instance, Sabah Tea may reinforce cultural pride through visual packaging featuring Mount Kinabalu or Dusunic motifs, aligning the brand with local heritage.

Second, sensory and experiential marketing should be integrated to activate affective priming at key consumer touchpoints. Research indicates that multisensory cues such as colour schemes, music, and aroma enhance automatic recall and emotional preference (Krishna, 2012). Beverage retailers in popular youth venues such as Tealive outlets near universities may evoke brand resonance by designing immersive social spaces that feel “Instagrammable,” thereby strengthening both implicit and explicit brand evaluations.

Third, given the digital-centric lifestyle of Sabah’s youth, digital storytelling plays a crucial role in eliciting identity resonance and peer influence. Social media challenges, user-generated content, and collaborations with credible local influencers can amplify

brand visibility and symbolic value by strengthening self-brand meaning and identity signalling (Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Keller, 2020).

Fourth, brand consistency is essential to reinforce implicit memory pathways and prevent dilution of emotional cues. Repeat exposure to consistent brand imagery, colour, slogan, and experiential elements helps encode stable brand associations that influence spontaneous behaviour (Keller, 2020). Brands that shift their positioning too frequently risk weakening self-brand schemas established among youths.

Finally, these strategies must be underpinned by ethical responsibility. While implicit persuasion is effective, marketers should avoid manipulative influence that exploits youth vulnerabilities, particularly around emotional dependency and social pressure. Ethical branding entails transparency, responsible promotion of sugary beverages, and contribution to youth wellbeing (Nill & Schibrowsky, 2007). This ensures brand equity is built through trust rather than exploitation.

Table 7 summarises how the study's findings can be translated into actionable branding strategies for beverage marketers targeting youths in Sabah. Each strategic area is linked to empirical evidence from the research to ensure practical relevance. Cultural symbolism capitalises on the strong cultural belonging theme by incorporating local motifs and narratives into branding, helping brands like Sabah Tea strengthen emotional and identity-based loyalty. Sensory and experiential branding leverages implicit emotional triggers through enhanced in-store ambience and multisensory engagement, reinforcing positive affective associations. Digital storytelling aligns with youths' preference for brands that support social identity expression; therefore, social media challenges and influencer collaborations can increase popularity and peer endorsement. Brand consistency ensures that repeated exposure to familiar cues reinforces subconscious memory traces, helping brands maintain recognition in a competitive market. Finally, ethical marketing practices safeguard youth wellbeing by ensuring that subconscious persuasion remains aligned with transparency and positive social values. Collectively, these strategies enable beverage brands to build stronger, more sustainable consumer-brand relationships by simultaneously appealing to subconscious emotions and conscious justification processes.

Table 7: Managerial Strategies to Strengthen Youth Beverage Brand Engagement in Sabah

Strategic Area	Evidence from Findings	Recommended Actions	Expected Impact
Cultural Symbolism	Cultural-belonging theme	Use local motifs, regional campaigns	Stronger brand identity anchoring
Sensory & Experiential Branding	Implicit emotional triggers	Enhance in-store ambience, multisensory branding	Heightened affective priming and memory
Digital Storytelling	Social identity signalling	Influencers, TikTok challenges	Increased social visibility and peer-driven adoption
Brand Consistency	Implicit memory reinforcement	Maintain iconic look and message	Stable recognition and long-term loyalty
Ethical Marketing	Youth vulnerability concerns	Promote wellbeing and transparency	Sustainable brand trust and reputation

## 6. Conclusion

This preliminary study provides empirical evidence that the Implicit Social-Cognitive Architecture (ISCA) exerts a significant influence on beverage purchasing decisions among youths in Sabah. The findings demonstrate that implicit emotional bonds, cultural belonging, and identity-based brand meanings play a more dominant role in shaping purchase intention than rational evaluations such as taste, price, and perceived quality. In particular, subconscious associations linked to local pride, lifestyle signalling, and nostalgic comfort form the foundational drivers of brand preference. These findings corroborate dual-process theories which argue that impulsive and associative cognition precede conscious reasoning in consumer decision-making (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2014; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995).

The integration of quantitative and qualitative results strengthens the validity of the ISCA framework by demonstrating how implicit pathways initiate brand attraction while explicit mechanisms subsequently rationalise and reinforce consumption behaviour through loyalty and advocacy. This insight highlights a critical opportunity for beverage companies to design branding strategies that resonate more deeply with youths' emotional and cultural identities while maintaining ethical transparency in their messaging.

Despite its contributions, this study acknowledges certain limitations, including its restricted geographical sampling and a focus on beverage brands familiar primarily to urban youths. Future research should expand the scope to incorporate rural populations and other product categories to improve generalisability. Longitudinal studies are recommended to track how subconscious brand associations evolve over time throughout key life transitions such as university completion or workforce entry. Additionally, neuromarketing technologies—such as eye-tracking, EEG, or fMRI—may offer deeper insights into the neural mechanisms underpinning implicit consumer-brand connections. Comparative studies across ethnic sub-groups in Sabah and Malaysia would further reveal whether cultural identity mechanisms differ across diverse socio-cultural backgrounds.

In conclusion, this study reinforces the importance of understanding and leveraging implicit social-cognitive processes in brand strategy development for the youth market in Sabah. By acknowledging the emotional and identity-laden dimensions of consumer behaviour, marketers can build more meaningful, enduring, and ethically grounded relationships with the next generation of Malaysian consumers.

### Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Putra Malaysia. All participants received written information about the study and provided informed consent prior to participation. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Data were anonymised to ensure confidentiality.

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## Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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