

The Science of Loyalty

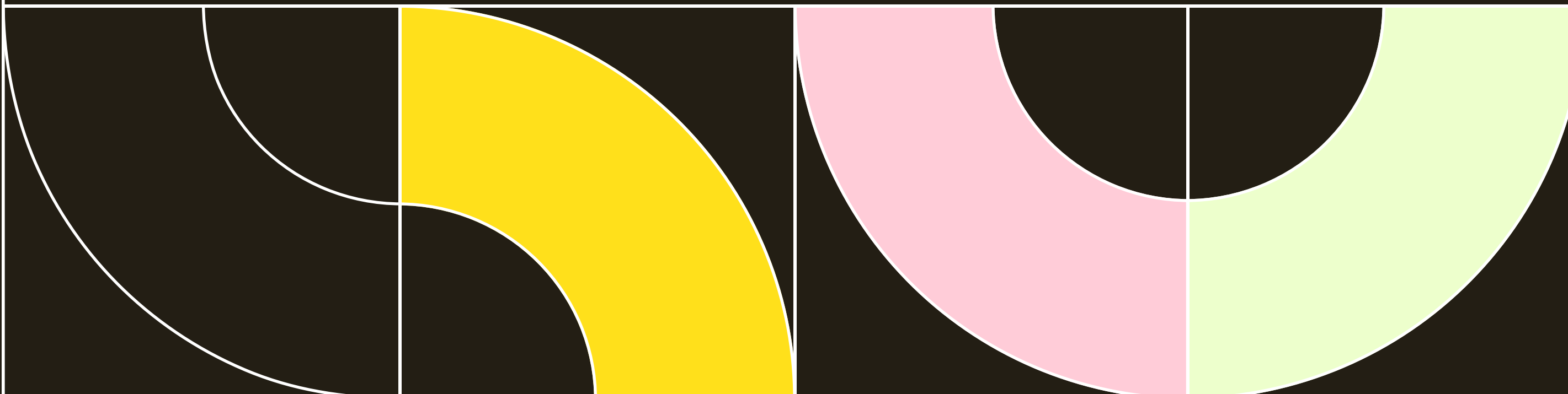


This report is based on a commissioned survey and was written in partnership with



A marketer's guide to the behavioral drivers of customer loyalty

A Mailchimp Report
A Mailchimp Report



INTUIT
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Loyalty has long been a strategic imperative for brands.

Loyal customers help brands grow; they spend more, offer resilience against competition, and can be a powerful source of word-of-mouth recommendations. In a world of unlimited information and ever-expanding choices, loyalty is more important than ever.

What brands view as loyalty takes many different shapes: it could be as simple as a customer always buying the same toothpaste, or as extreme as a super-fan getting a brand's logo tattooed on their leg. Naturally, not all brands can hope to inspire undying devotion. But all brands can seek to understand the psychological underpinnings of loyal behavior—how aspects such as a person's sense of self or their social context influence their brand choices.

Much has been written about customer loyalty, yet many brands continue to define the concept in narrow terms, cultivating transactional relationships via generic rewards programs.

Effective loyalty strategies take a more holistic view; they understand that loyalty is less about the brand itself and more about how the brand engages with the myriad behavioral drivers that shape customer preference.

If you've ever wondered how to increase the stickiness of your brand beyond focusing on price and quality, this report is for you.

Leveraging insights from behavioral economics, social psychology, and neuroscience, this report digs into the Science of Loyalty. Tracing the concept back to its evolutionary roots, it distills consumer loyalty into 10 foundational elements. The aim? To help marketers develop science-backed loyalty strategies that will set their brand apart from the competition.

— Mailchimp x Canvas8

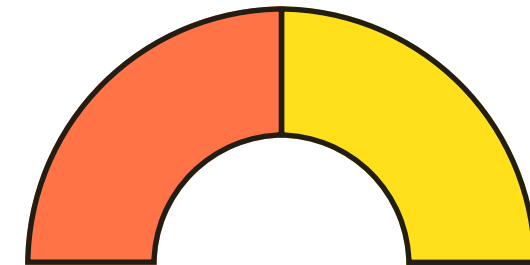
Looking for a guide packed with actionable tactics built off the Science of Loyalty?

Check out our Strategic Loyalty Playbook.

[Get the playbook](#)

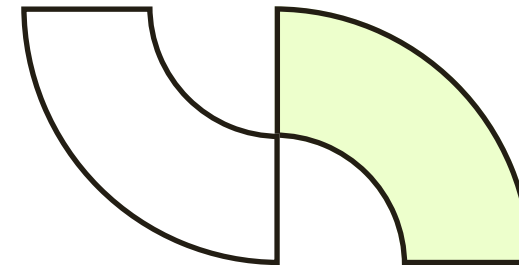
To understand the underlying science behind loyal decision-making, we interviewed experts in neuroscience, behavioral science, psychology, and anthropology.

Interviews took place between January and March 2024



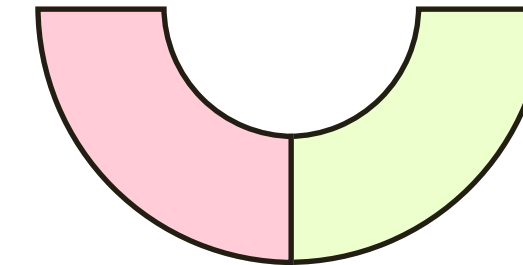
Line-Ariel (L.A) Bretous

Behavioral scientist, customer experience expert, and founder of 1 LAB Consulting



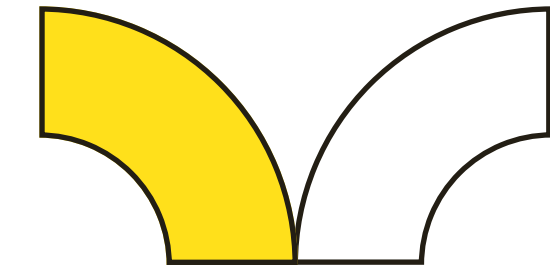
Dr. Cyrus McCandless

Neuroethologist studying goal-directed behavior and decision-making



Richard Shotton

Author of *The Illusion of Choice*



Bri Williams

Behavioral expert and founder of People Patterns

Methodology

Goal of the research

It is Intuit Mailchimp's goal to help businesses nurture loyalty through personalized, helpful, and inspiring marketing solutions. In pursuit of this ambition, we collaborated with our research partner, Canvas8, on a range of expert interviews and a quantitative survey to better understand the science behind loyal behavior and the ways marketers can use this insight to improve loyalty strategies.

We'd like to thank all of our experts and research participants who contributed their valued time and insights to this report.

Quantitative survey methodology

We surveyed people in the UK, US, Canada, and Australia to ask them how they shop across 10 categories: apparel/fashion, beauty products, financial products, office equipment and supplies, health and pharmaceutical goods, jewelry and accessories, manufacturing/raw materials, books and literature, food and beverage, and home goods and furniture.

To better understand loyal customers, we honed in on one category that saw the respondent always or usually buying from the same brand and focused the survey on their most recent purchase from this brand.

Our survey then uncovered

- Brand affinity (e.g. familiarity, brand associations, satisfaction)
- Brand retention (e.g. frequency and length of purchase, barriers to purchase, likelihood of purchasing again)
- Brand advocacy (e.g. brand interactions, likelihood of recommending it to a friend)
- The purchase journey (e.g. touchpoints, types of content, spend)

For all Canvas8 statistics/figures: Canvas8 conducted a panel-sample online survey on behalf of Mailchimp Feb 17-27, 2024. The survey consisted of 4,000 respondents (1000 from each of the US, UK, AU, CN). The margin of error is +/- 5.5 percent, as reported at a 95 percent confidence level.

Is Loyalty a Science?

Loyalty isn't rational, it's primal

Consumer loyalty, a phenomenon seemingly born in the corridors of modern marketplaces, actually traces its roots back to our primordial past. Long before we were labeled “consumers,” we were survival-driven hunters, hardwired by millennia of evolution to rely on cooperation and trust in the face of external threats. The essence of loyalty, then, emerged as a cornerstone of our communal existence, binding us together in familial and tribal units and fortifying our collective resilience against adversity.



Loyal behavior is not the result of any recent cultural evolution. It's the result of hundreds of thousands of years of neurobiological evolution. A basic understanding of the fundamental drivers of behavior and decision-making will outlast any cultural trend.

**Dr. Cyrus
McCandless**

**Neuroethologist studying goal-directed
behavior and decision-making**

The ancestral roots of modern loyalty

While the survival dynamics of ancient times may have waned in contemporary society, the genetic imprints of loyalty remain within us. Psychologists suggest that our inclinations for loyalty are set by socialization and life experiences. Thus, a sports fan's unwavering allegiance to their team or a consumer's steadfast brand loyalty isn't merely whimsy but the result of a complex interplay of childhood nostalgia, identity formation, and marketing psychology.

Consumer loyalty, far from a modern construct, is an echo of our ancient past and a testament to the enduring legacy of our evolutionary journey. It is a reminder that beneath the veneer of civilization, we remain tethered to our primal instincts, forever driven by the imperatives of survival and kinship.

Therefore, to understand loyalty in its entirety, we must scrutinize the intricate workings of the human brain.

Unlocking the brain to build brand loyalty

When it comes to consumer behavior, loyalty emerges not as a calculated outcome of deliberate choices but as a primal force deeply rooted in the recesses of our evolutionary past. Our choices, often orchestrated by the subconscious, elude precise articulation—a puzzle entrenched in the intricate workings of the brain.

At the heart of this enigma lies the intricate dance between the limbic brain, the seat of our emotions and primal urges, and the rational neocortex, the domain of logic and language. While the limbic brain is responsible for our instincts toward trust and loyalty, it lacks the linguistic finesse to articulate its motivations. Instead, it delegates this task to the neocortex, which dutifully constructs post hoc rationalizations for decisions already made in the depths of our subconscious.



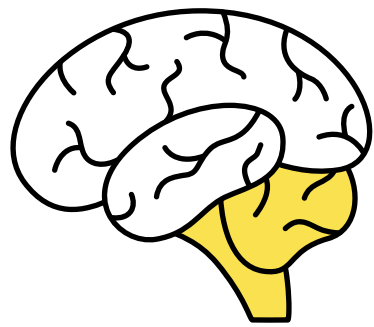
I think a big problem that brands have when trying to understand loyalty is they rely on what people tell them. Claimed data is often misleading, as [consumers] don't know their own motivations. To get to the truth, it's better to take a psychological approach and run a series of experiments.

Richard Shotton

Author of *The Illusion of Choice*

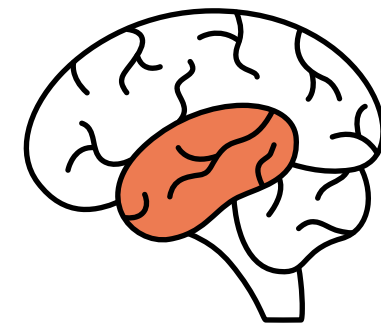
Marketers persist in their pursuit of rational factors like price and purpose in loyalty strategies.

But to unlock the secrets of loyalty, we must traverse the intricate terrain of the human mind, where instinct and rationality converge in a delicate balance. Only then can we hope to unravel the science of loyalty and its profound impact on buying behavior.



Reptilian Brain

The reptilian brain oversees vital functions via the autonomic nervous system. Without language, its impulses are instinctive.



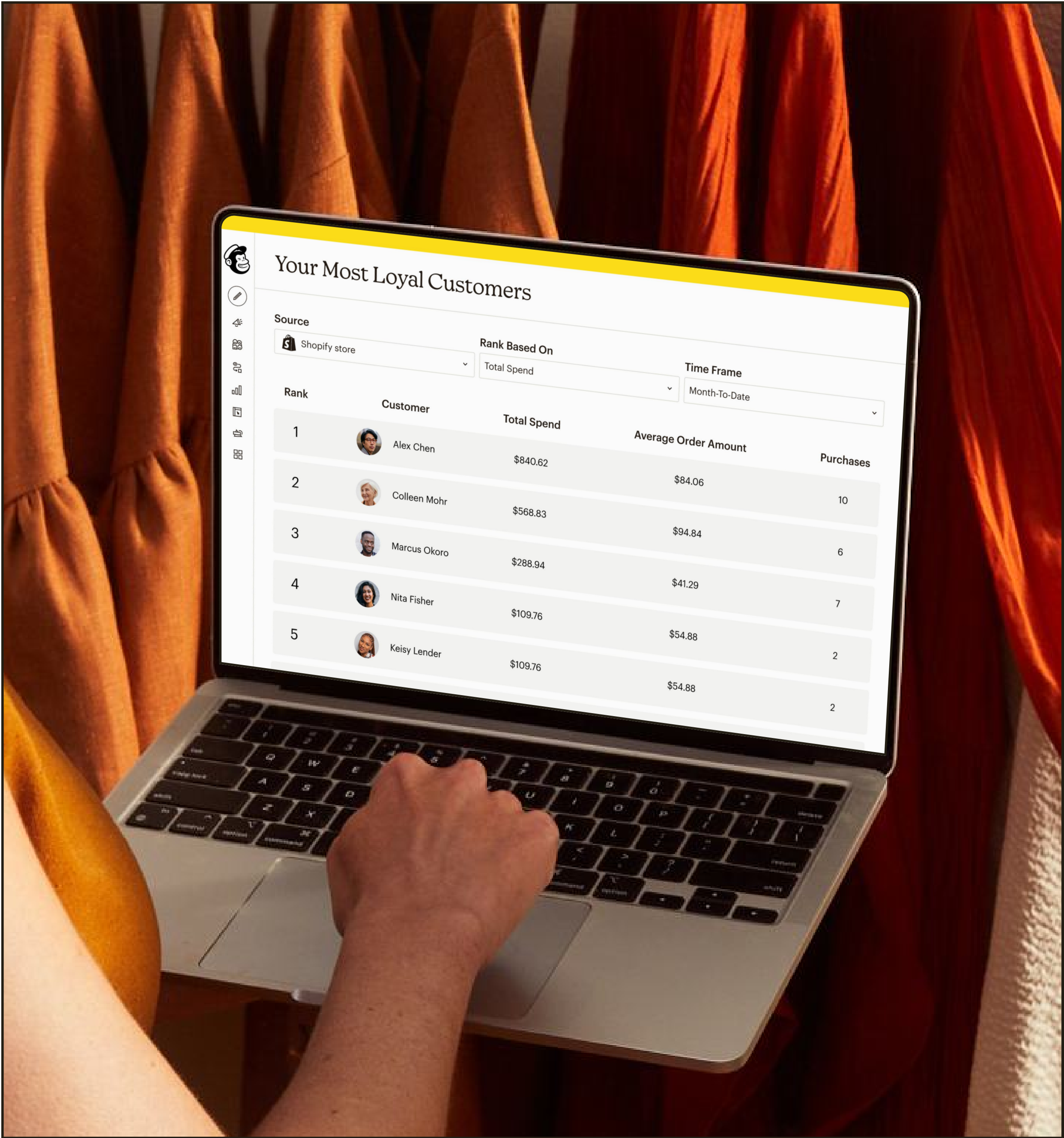
Limbic Brain

The limbic system, known as the emotional brain, plays a central role in memory and is sensitive to external and internal stimuli.



Neocortex

The neocortex is where reasoning and planning occur, governing high-level processes like logic, creativity, and language.



Your Most Loyal Customers

Source: Shopify store
Rank Based On: Total Spend
Time Frame: Month-To-Date

Rank	Customer	Total Spend	Average Order Amount	Purchases
1	Alex Chen	\$840.62	\$84.06	10
2	Colleen Mohr	\$568.83	\$94.84	6
3	Marcus Okoro	\$288.94	\$41.29	7
4	Nita Fisher	\$109.76	\$54.88	2
5	Keisy Lender	\$109.76	\$54.88	2



When it comes to improving the appeal of the product, look beyond rational factors like price and quality and consider cognitive biases which deeply influence how people perceive value.

Richard Shotton Author of *The Illusion of Choice*

The Loyalty Wheel



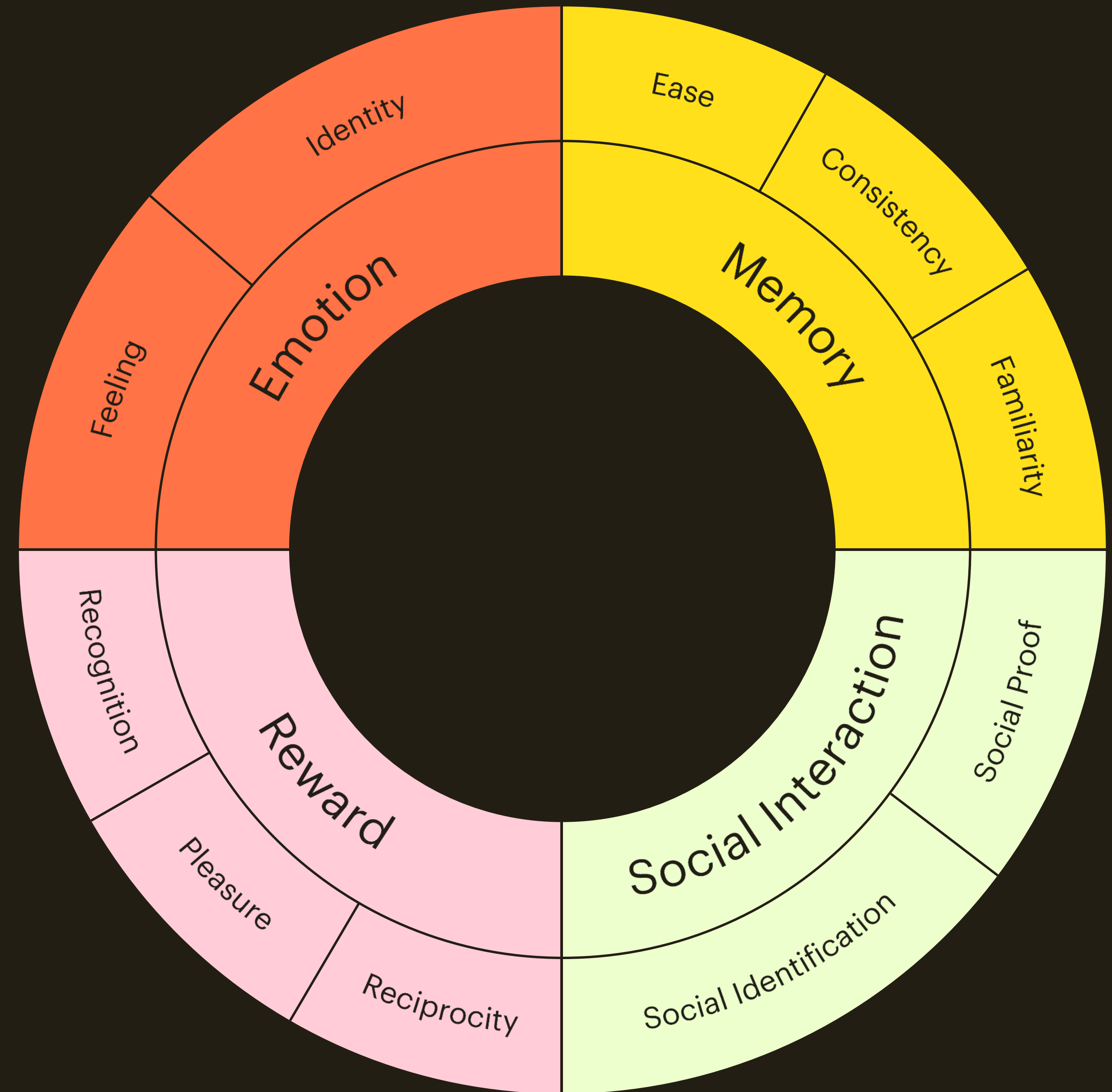
There are very powerful explanations for complex behaviors that proceed from very simple bases.

Dr. Cyrus McCandless

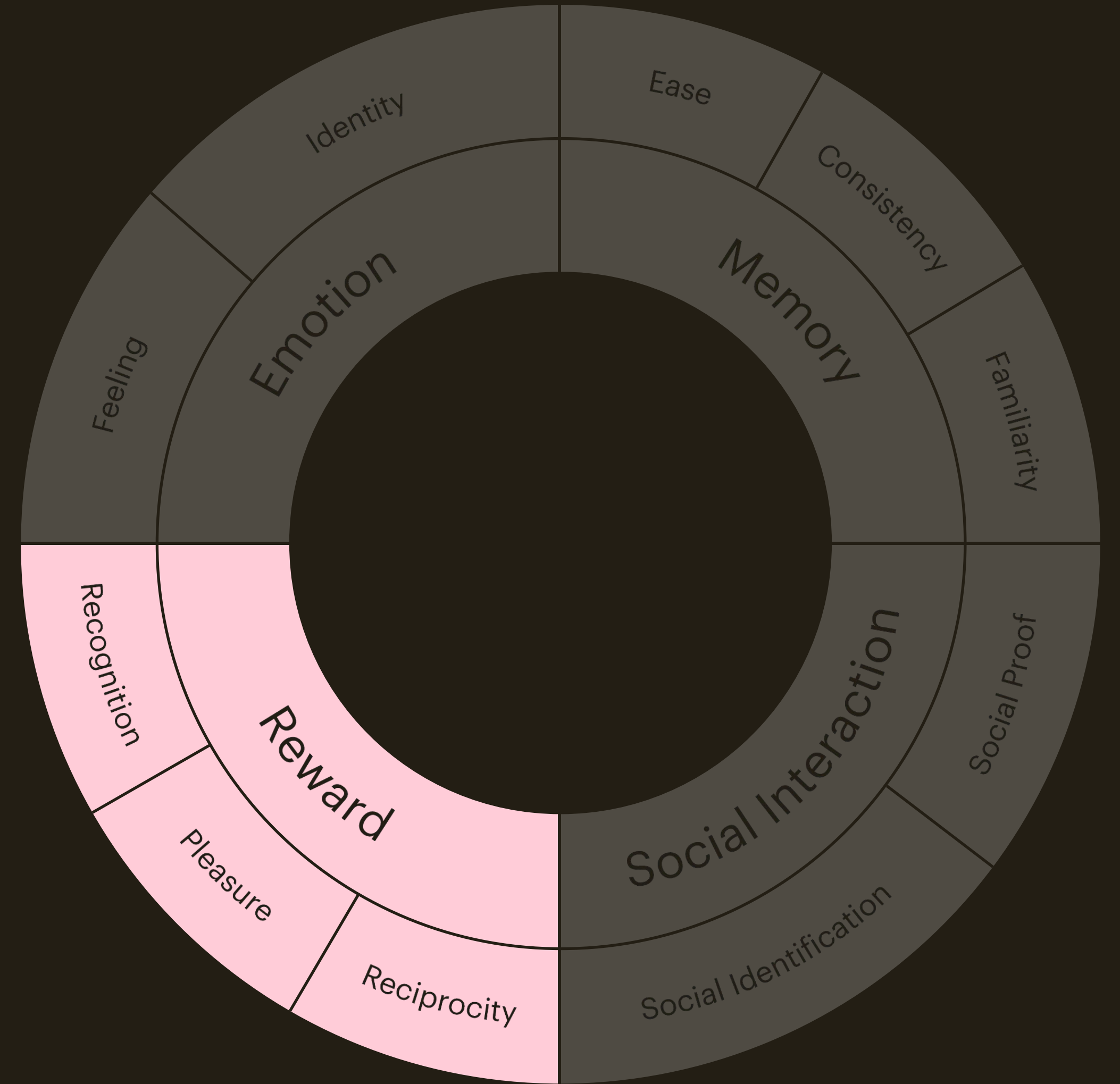
Neuroethologist studying goal-directed behavior and decision-making

Much has already been written about loyalty, so our challenge was to distill expert insight and survey data into a useful framework that can be applied to the world of consumer loyalty.

The Loyalty Wheel is made up of 4 neurobiological principles—reward, memory, emotion, and social interaction. These fundamental pillars of loyalty can be broken down into 10 behavioral elements that help us understand the scientific underpinnings of loyal actions.



Reward

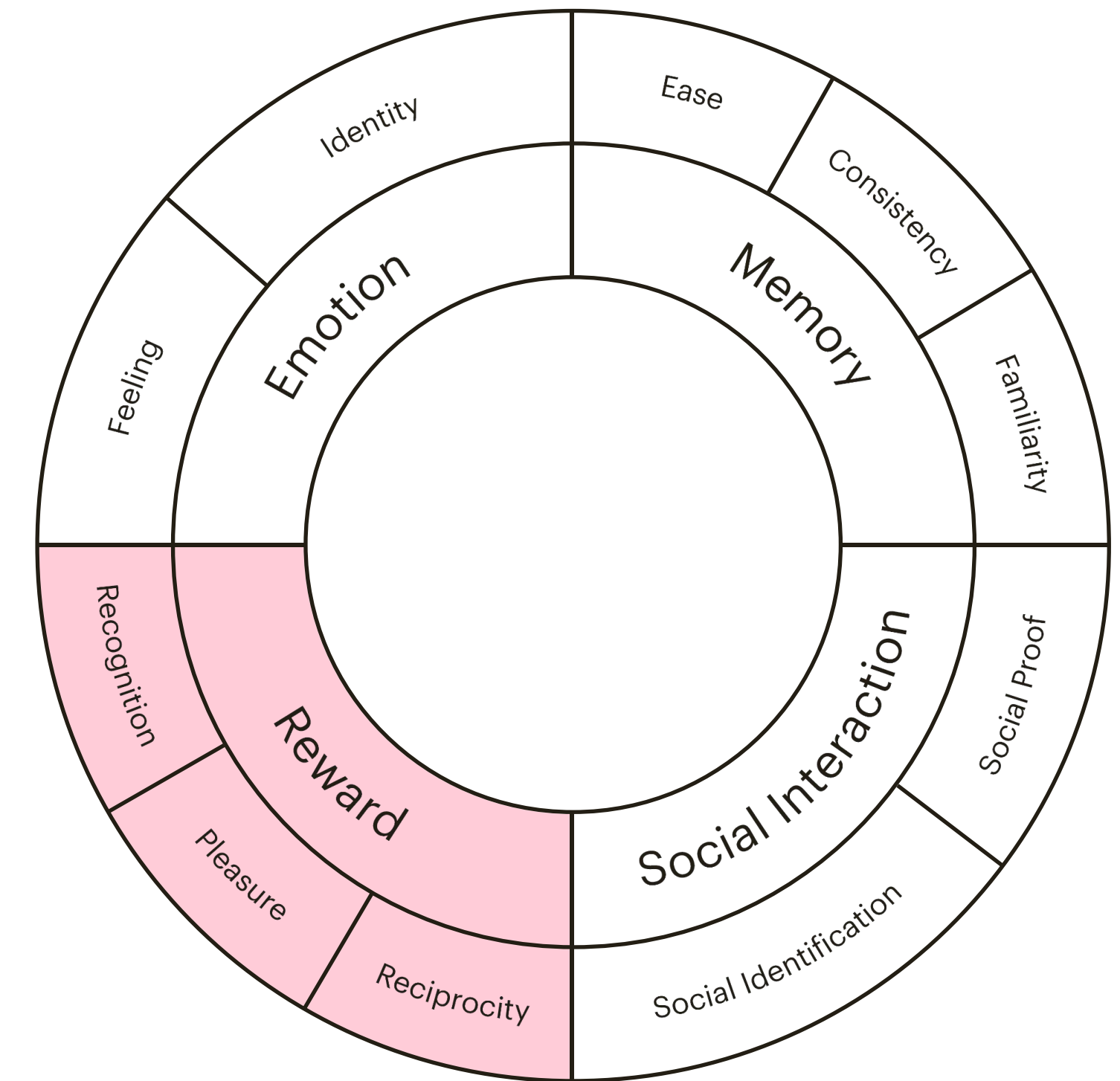


The brain's mesolimbic pathway, fueled by the release of dopamine, lays the groundwork for essential habit formation that's crucial for fostering consumer loyalty.

The brain's reward system—called the mesolimbic pathway—is a central player in shaping our behaviors and motivations. It's where dopamine, also known as the neurotransmitter of pleasure, is released as a reward for performing actions beneficial to the person performing them. This process is the cornerstone of habit formation and crucial for building customer loyalty.

Brands that tap into this system not only trigger pleasurable sensations but can also foster habitual loyalty among consumers. Evolutionarily honed to encourage survival-centric behaviors like eating and seeking shelter, this reward system underscores the important link between neuroscience and consumer behavior and the subtle mechanisms at play in the realm of brand allegiance.

The behavioral elements of reward



Reciprocity

Humans are hardwired to pay back what they receive from others.

- Discover how goal gradients can keep customers coming back for more

Pleasure

Dopamine-driven positive feelings and experiences play a vital role in repeat behavior.

- Find out if value-driven rewards elicit the same dopamine rush as financial rewards

Recognition

People want to feel seen by the brands they patronize.

- Learn how social rewards can help brands build trust

Read on for

the Coca-Cola experiment, Saucony's dopamine-driven challenge, and why DoorDash is rewarding customers for dining out, not in.

Humans are hardwired to pay back what they receive from others.

The reciprocity principle in social psychology states that we pay back what we receive from others. Humans, by nature, are hardwired to respond positively to a gift—even if it wasn't requested—and automatically feel indebted to the giver. Sociologist Dr. Alvin Gouldner says, "To require a benefit, or to be grateful to him who bestows it, is probably everywhere," arguing that reciprocity is a "concrete and special mechanism involved in the maintenance of any stable social system" and central to the human experience.

When it comes to consumer/brand relationships, people are more likely to stay loyal to a brand if they feel like an exchange of value is underway—or, in other words, if they're getting something back for their loyal behavior.

31%

of consumers believe it's important that brands reward them with special deals and discounts.



SOCIAL EXPERIMENT

Testing the power of reciprocity
In 1971, the Coca-Cola experiment tested the theory of reciprocity. Experiment participants evaluated paintings alongside a peer named Joe. While the participant looked at the paintings, Joe would receive a phone call, which he would either answer politely or rudely. After the phone call, Joe would leave and either return empty-handed or with a Coca-Cola for the participant. Once they finished evaluating the paintings, Joe would then ask the participant to purchase raffle tickets. They found that participants who had received a soda from Joe were more likely to purchase raffle tickets, even if they had been witness to Joe's rude phone call earlier. As a whole, the study showed the powerful effect of reciprocity as a driver of behavior.

BRAND CASE STUDY

ALO YOGA

Alo Yoga, loved for their leggings and athletic accessories, launched Alo Access, a reward program that balances transactional elements with engaging incentives.

With a tiered structure, those who join get early access to merchandise drops, free shipping, and private members-only sales. Once customers reach the second level, they're included in surprise giveaways and days where bonus points increase in value, yielding better discounts. At the highest level of the program, customers can attend exclusive events and studio classes and get access to a special concierge service. With multiple levels to their reward program, Alo utilizes the goal gradient effect, a motivational tactic that encourages and motivates customers to keep spending and engaging to reach new tiers.

Thought starters

- How can you encourage a sense of mutual benefit by leveling up your customer service and making customers feel like a top priority?

- Keep things interesting by going beyond transactional interactions with your customers. Consider DoorDash, which launched a rewards program where customers can earn app credits for dining out at local restaurants.

- Deepen the sense of reciprocity by rewarding customers for engaging with your brand. The Adidas Creators Club offers members early access to sales, product discounts, and invites to exclusive events in exchange for joining in with things like running clubs and clothes recycling.

REWARD — PLEASURE

Dopamine-driven positive feelings and experiences play a vital role in repeat behavior.

In the pursuit of pleasure, dopamine takes center stage as the conductor of our neural orchestra, regulating feelings of reward and anticipation. But beyond merely offering enjoyment, dopamine molds our brain's perception of pleasure, fostering strong connections between stimuli and pleasurable outcomes. This neural imprint, coupled with the experience of positive emotions like happiness, forms the foundation of consumer behavior, driving individuals to seek out brands that evoke these dopamine-fueled sensations. For businesses aiming to foster loyalty, understanding and harnessing this emotional resonance can cultivate a desire for repeated engagement, solidifying the bond between consumer and brand.



BRAND CASE STUDY

SAUCONY

Saucony, maker of athletic footwear and apparel, found that every year, the average American swipes their phone screen a distance equivalent to roughly 78 miles.

That means your thumb is running more than 3 marathons. As a result, the brand organized the [Marathumb Challenge](#), offering customers rewards such as discount codes and free items for running further than they scroll. Interestingly, both exercise and scrolling have been proven to release dopamine, but, as most people know, too much scrolling can be bad for their mental health. Saucony is boosting the dopamine hit people get from moving by adding more rewards and encouraging people to choose exercise over their phones.

Thought starters

- How can you boost overall positive feelings among your consumers? Could you provide an inside track to special deals? Or a sense of community and connection with other shoppers?

- Build in happiness by crafting reward schemes that anticipate and respect the desires and values of your customers. When customers of sock brand [Bombas](#) share a referral link with a friend, it's not just both parties who benefit from a discount—the brand also donates a pair of socks to someone in need.

- Increase customer satisfaction by adding an element of mystery and surprise with gamification. Skincare brand [Blume](#) offers all who visit their website a mystery discount, inviting them to enter their email address to reveal the deal.

People want to feel seen by the brands they patronize.

In the intricate world of consumer psychology, recognition emerges as a potent tool for building trust between individuals and brands. Research underscores the significance of personalized recognition—feeling seen—in this relationship, which ignites a cascade of neural responses associated with reward, moral judgment, and self-identity. Even seemingly trivial acts like expressing gratitude wield remarkable influence, triggering the brain's production of oxytocin, the “trust hormone.” Ultimately, whether in consumer/brand relationships or interpersonal connections, the desire for recognition underscores a fundamental human longing—to be acknowledged and valued as an individual.

64%

of 18-34-year-olds expect brands to reward them with special deals and discounts (vs 53% total).



SOCIAL EXPERIMENT

The motivating power of recognition

In Japan, researchers found that compliments could be used to motivate people into action by activating the brain's pleasure center. In the experiment, participants mastering a keyboard pattern were divided into 3 groups: the first group received compliments, the second group was observed, and the third group evaluated their own performance. Those directly complimented were more likely to keep repeating the pattern and improve more quickly, revealing the motivational power of recognition. The team had previously discovered that the same area of the brain, the striatum, is activated when a person receives cash, with both perceived as social rewards.

BRAND CASE STUDY

MOODEAUX

Perfume brand Moodeaux invites its customers to join a mailing list that will give them access to exclusive content, new drops, and special events.

Moodeaux also leads efforts to level the playing field for Black perfumers, providing mentorship, community resources, and microgrants. Through their personalized fragrances and commitment to inclusivity, Moodeaux strives to ensure that each individual feels recognized, valued, and empowered in their unique self-expression.

Thought starters

- How can you make consumers feel individually valued through deeply personalized offerings?

- Celebrate your customers' continued loyalty by finding moments to surprise and delight them. For instance, customers who join The Body Shop's Love Your Body Club receive a voucher on their birthdays, perfect for buying themselves a gift.

- Show your understanding of evolving consumer needs with rewards catered to their pains and plights. Mike's Hard Lemonade, for example, effectively paid for some customers to take an extra day off in response to growing desires for a better work-life balance.

Memory

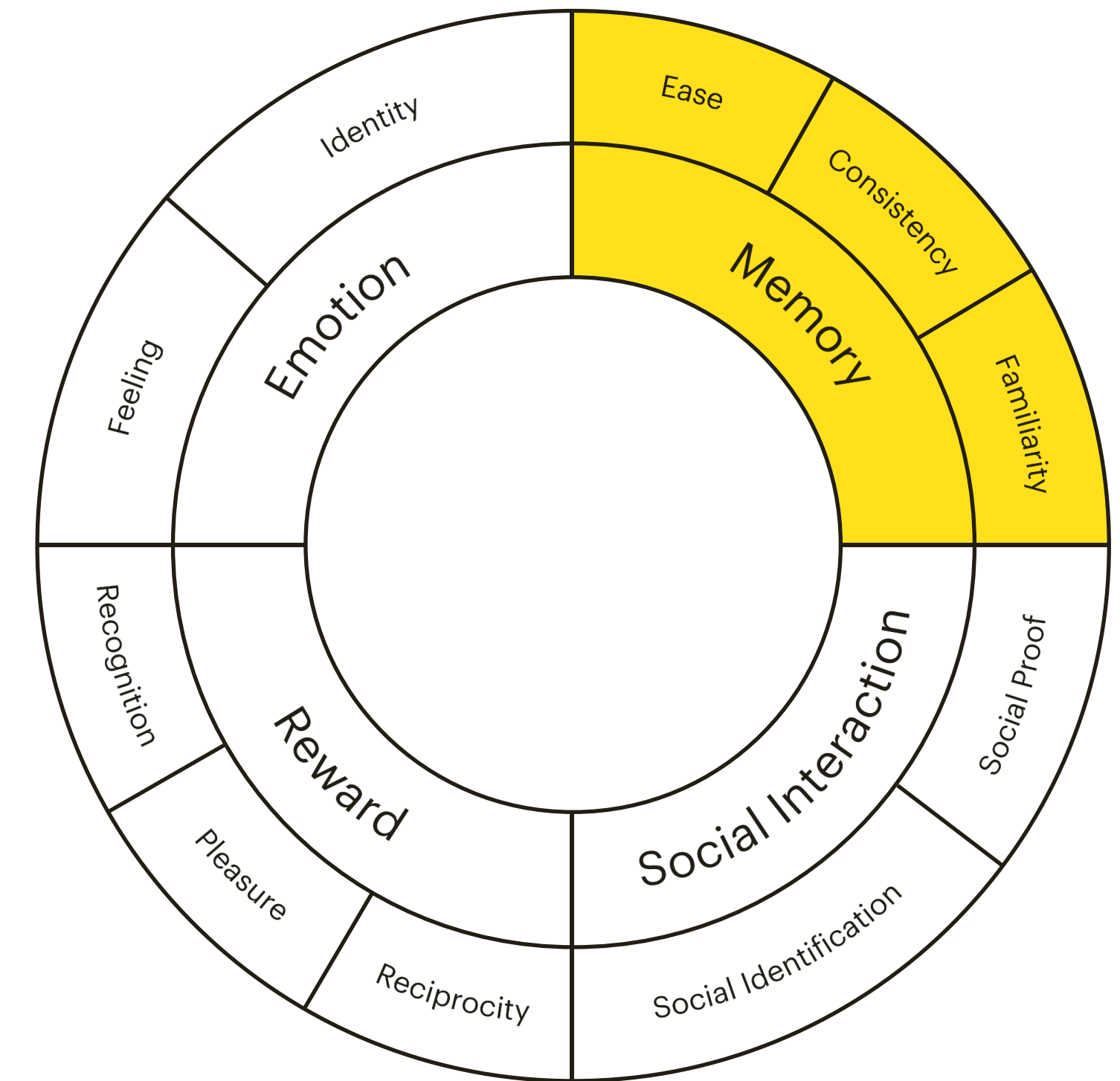


Memory is a pivotal force in decision-making, shaping people's perceptions through associations with past experiences. Emotionally charged memories of brand interactions will influence future behaviors and attitudes.

In decision-making, memory plays a crucial role, with our brains drawing from past experiences to shape how we perceive things in the present. Neuroscientist Jeff Hawkins explains this in his book *A Thousand Brains*, in which he notes that our brains prioritize making important connections by linking new information to what we already know.

Within the realm of loyalty, past interactions leave indelible imprints on attitudes and future behaviors. When memories resurface, they undergo immediate emotional scrutiny, triggering the release (or not) of dopamine from the amygdala. These emotionally charged memories of brand experiences serve as touchstones, both positive and negative, that shape future actions and intentions, underscoring the profound influence of memory on consumer loyalty.

The behavioral elements of memory



Familiarity

People have a cognitive bias toward things that they know and are familiar with.

- Learn how the mere exposure effect can nudge consumers toward loyalty

Consistency

People will repeat their past behavior to simplify the decision-making process.

- Discover how brands are using status quo bias to keep customers coming back

Ease

People are more likely to develop a preference for frictionless experiences.

- Find out why ease is one of the most influential behavioral nudges for brands

Read on for

Wendy's nostalgic cues, Quip toothbrush's auto-refill, and Grind's personalized coffee service.

People have a cognitive bias toward things that they know and are familiar with.

When consumers come into contact with a brand, the initial encounter often unfolds visually, triggering a cascade of cognitive processes. As the brain processes the image or name, it delves into its vast reservoirs of memory, summoning episodic recollections of the brand for those who have had prior interactions with it. But even without personal interactions to refer to, for well-known brands, semantic memory fills in the gaps, offering a repository of general knowledge. With each exposure, the mere exposure effect takes greater hold of an individual, making them more familiar with—and, ultimately, more confident in—the brand. This blossoming familiarity will foster a loyal and returning customer base.



SOCIAL EXPERIMENT

The influence of brand exposure on consumer choice

In a series of studies, researchers used bottles of Dasani water to investigate how exposure to branding influences consumer choices. In the first study, undergraduate participants viewed photos of people engaged in daily activities, unaware of the brand's presence. The study found that the more participants saw pictures of Dasani, the more likely they were to choose it from a list of brands. The study highlights how even unnoticed brand exposure influences choice.



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The mere exposure effect means that just being exposed to something enough times causes you to feel a little bit more positively toward it. So, just the fact that you've seen a brand or product before makes you more comfortable choosing it over a less familiar option.

Dr. Cyrus
McCandless

Neuroethologist studying goal-directed
behavior and decision-making

BRAND CASE STUDY

MCDONALD'S

One way of leveraging familiarity to build loyalty is through a strong and consistent presence—something McDonald's does very well.

The fast-food giant has maintained cross-generational appeal, evolving according to cultural changes while remaining true to its roots. Whether it's the introduction of more veggie options in meal deals, Happy Meals that are more environmentally friendly, or bringing back characters that tap into 90s nostalgia, their offer is consistent, keeping McDonald's at the top of the fast-food food chain after decades in business.

Thought starters

- How can you generate a sense of familiarity by offering consistent communications across multiple touchpoints or interactions?

- Show up with the right message at the right time, like Flo Health. The popular female health app created a series of award-winning daily stories with a countdown to women's due dates to keep them engaged every day of their pregnancy.

- Leverage the desire for familiarity by offering comfort via nostalgic cues. For example, Wendy's partnership with T-Pain strategically tapped into people's desires to revisit the past.

Driven by status quo bias, behavioral consistency is the product of a cognitive shortcut that simplifies decision-making by encouraging people to stick to familiar choices.

This bias reduces the need for constant evaluation by favoring a person's current way of doing things in matters as wide-ranging as their daily commuter routes to their takeaway meal orders. Evolutionarily, consistency also fosters social acceptance and success. Psychologist Dr. Robert Cialdini notes that once committed, we even feel pressure to act consistently to justify our original decisions.



We're sort of wired to stick with what we've got. So we're wired not to change. Once we've made the decision, we're going to stick with the decision and reinforce that decision unless things go horribly wrong.

Bri Williams

Behavioral expert and founder of People Patterns

BRAND CASE STUDY

AMAZON

Amazon's Buy Again feature serves as a powerful driver of behavioral consistency for its customers.

Much like a supermarket's "shop your regulars" cue, the feature eliminates the need for customers to search and compare products, making it effortless for them to maintain their purchasing habits. This seamless process encourages customers to stay loyal to Amazon, as it simplifies the repurchasing experience and solidifies their established buying patterns.

Thought starters

- How can you help people feel justified in their commitment to your brand so that they don't decide to go elsewhere?

- Save your customers' preferences to ensure you give them a reliably consistent experience. Grind aims to ensure no one goes without their morning cup of coffee by offering a subscription service that can be personalized according to how many cups you drink each day, the notes you prefer, and the type of coffee your machine needs.

- Ensure your brand behavior aligns with customer perceptions of the brand by maintaining an honest and transparent communication style. For example, German fashion brand Armedangels dropped any sustainable or eco-friendly claims from its marketing in line with perceptions that the brand is transparent and avoids greenwashing.

People are more likely to develop a preference for frictionless experiences.

Across the landscape of human behavior, neuroscientist [Dr. Anil Pillai](#) suggests our actions are primarily driven by the instinct to avoid pain. Through complex neural pathways, finely tuned over millennia, our brains prioritize minimizing discomfort over the pursuit of pleasure. Imagine you've found the perfect birthday gift for a friend, but the package doesn't arrive in time for the party. No matter how great the gift is, the pleasure might be diminished by the inconvenience of the late delivery. Similarly, when it comes to loyalty, customer satisfaction hinges on reducing friction instead of (solely) providing pleasurable experiences. Thus, making a process as seamless as possible becomes an essential strategy.



One theme that unites the most prestigious behavioral scientists—such as Nobel Prize winners Daniel Kahneman and Richard Thaler—is their belief that one of the most influential behavioral nudges is: ‘make it easy.’ They argue that we overestimate the impact of appeal and underestimate the impact of friction.

Richard Shotton

Author of *The Illusion of Choice*

BRAND CASE STUDY

QUIP

Quip, known for its electric toothbrushes and other oral care products, helps shoppers take dental hygiene to the next level with their membership program, Quip+.

For an annual fee, members unlock savings, whether in the form of free shipping, “Quip cash” that can be spent on products, or discounts on refills. The membership program builds customer loyalty in part by making it easier for customers to prioritize better oral hygiene, but without exerting extra mental effort; Quip+’s 90-day auto-refill delivery program, with free shipping included, helps ensure customers are changing their toothbrush heads every 3 months (as dentists recommend) without thinking about it.

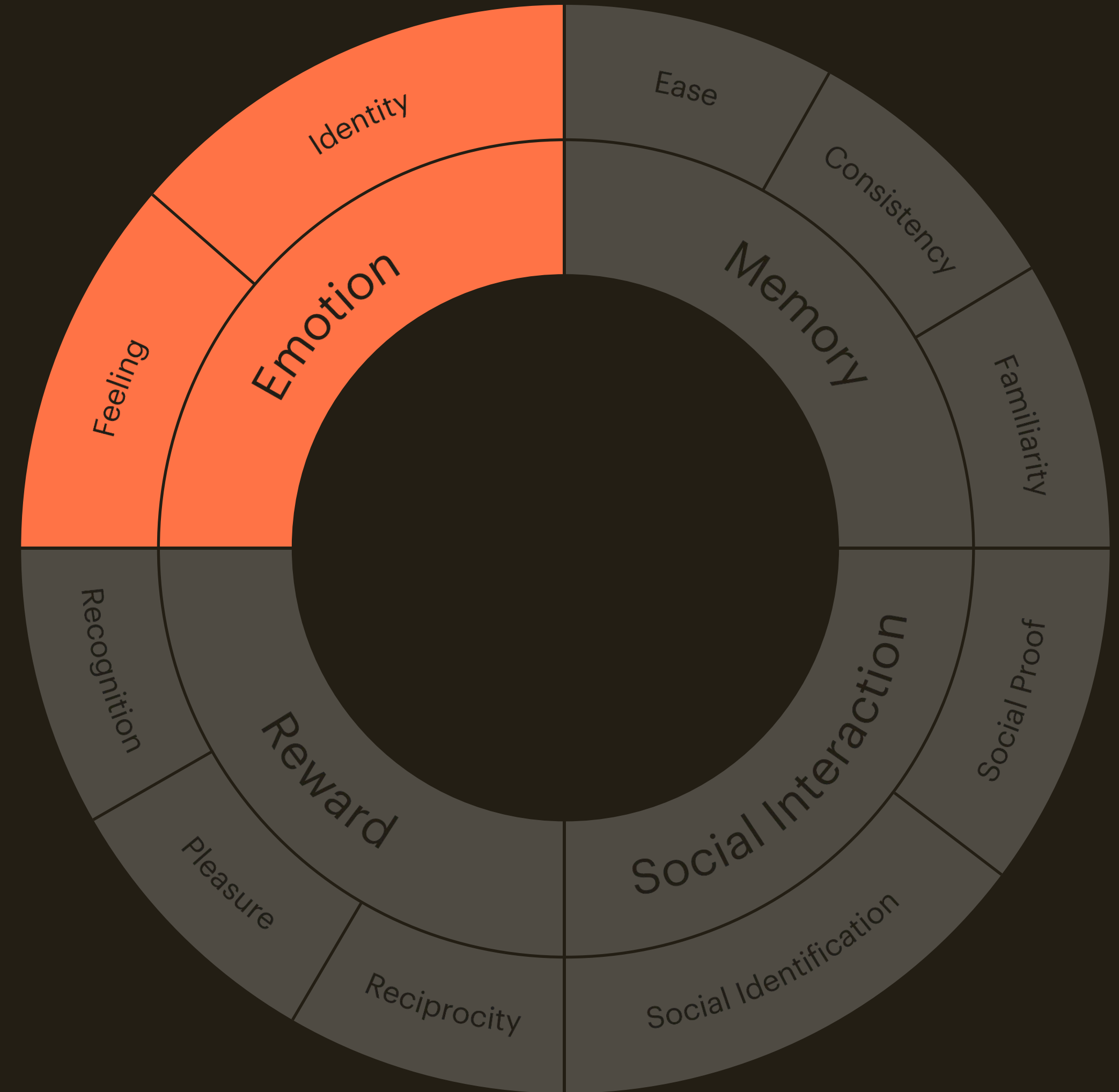
Thought starters

- How can you make the customer journey smooth at every point? Can you use AI to give customers personal recommendations that help them save time and stay within their budget?

- Remove friction by baking in features that make life easier for your customers. Australian supermarket Coles partnered with recipe shopping technology provider Northfork to streamline the shopping experience. As a result, customers can find ingredients that align with their dietary requirements, lifestyles, and preferences.

- Make your products and services more user-friendly by creating opportunities for co-creation and consumer input. For example, The Sims 4 involved their gaming community in the creation of future game add-ons through a virtual poll.

Emotion

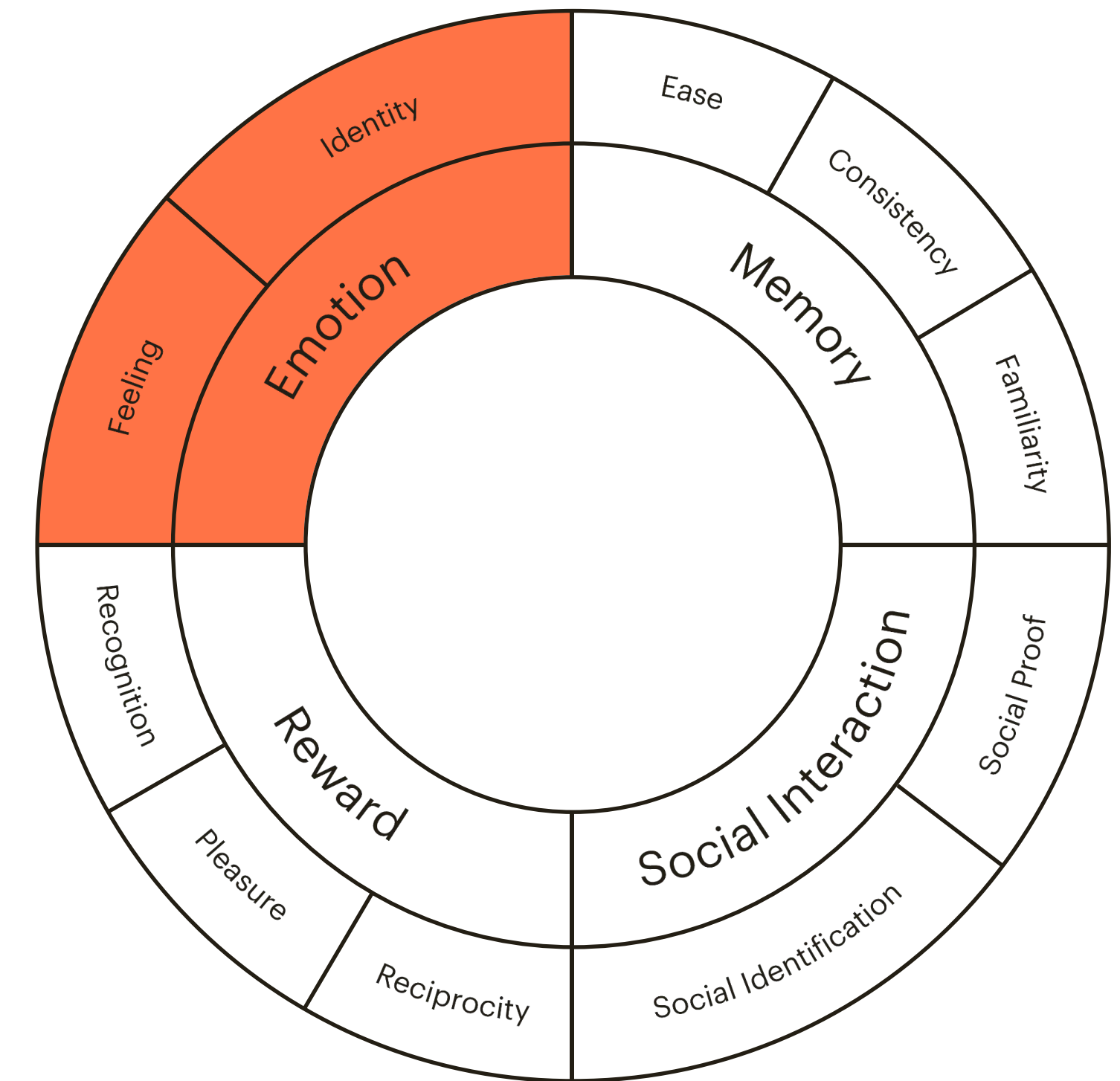


Emotion influences both memory and social interactions, inspiring loyalty-driven purchases (as distinguished from those driven by habit) that foster lasting connections between brands and customers.

Neuroscientist Dr. Paul MacLean delineates the brain into 3 domains that shape our emotions: the reptilian brain drives primal instincts, fueling a sense of urgency; the limbic brain dictates feelings and value judgments, guiding gut decisions; and the neocortex rationalizes experiences. These drivers of emotion influence what information the brain stores and retrieves. They intertwine with memory and social interaction, shaping preferences and inspiring loyalty.

An emotional bond between consumer and brand is what distinguishes habitual purchases from loyalty-driven ones. For instance, while the limbic brain may steer someone habitually toward chocolate ice cream, the neocortex rationalizes the choice as one based on loyalty developed over past experiences. An understanding of these emotional pathways illuminates how brands can foster lasting connections with customers.

The behavioral elements of emotion



Feeling

Beyond products or services, people are loyal to a brand based on how the brand experience makes them feel.

- Discover how brands are inducing the feeling of nostalgia to keep people loyal

Identity

People gravitate toward products that reflect their perception of themselves.

- Understand why brands need to know their customers to better know themselves

Read on for

SunnyD's adult-friendly drinks, Basma Beauty's very personal backstory, and why Bloom & Wild is helping people to opt out of emails.

Beyond products or services, people are loyal to a brand based on how the brand experience makes them feel.

While feelings and emotions are often thought of as interchangeable, they, in fact, belong to distinct levels within the brain. Emotions serve as the deeper, subconscious undercurrents that ultimately surface as feelings, typically perceived as either pleasant or unpleasant. Take the fight-or-flight instinct, an innate stress response ingrained in our genetic makeup: it triggers emotional reactions, leading to feelings of stress or fear. Much like how individuals alter their behavior to evade certain emotions, many also gravitate toward products that elicit specific feelings.

35%

of consumers said it's important for brands to make them feel good.



“

An emotional bond between a customer and a brand is not just focused on transactional elements. It's a type of loyalty that goes above and beyond. People's emotional loyalty may not stem from convenience but rather from a genuine appreciation of your brand, so they'll deliberately choose you over and over again.

Line-Ariel (L.A)
Bretous

Behavioral scientist, customer experience expert, and founder of 1 LAB Consulting

BRAND CASE STUDY

BLOOM & WILD

Bloom & Wild recognized the emotional challenges some face on big calendar dates like Mother's Day.

So, in March 2019, they invited customers to opt out of Mother's Day emails, generating significant media attention and customer support. The initiative was even acknowledged in Parliament in the UK, with supporters highlighting its potential to ease emotional distress. This step reflects the brand's commitment to thoughtful marketing, which it invites others to embrace in the hope of fostering empathy and inclusivity in commerce.

Thought starters

- Can you evoke positive emotions among your customers by leveraging nostalgia? Whether it's by bringing back limited-edition merchandise or playing with fun, retro logos, how can you make your consumers feel like they're grabbing a piece of your brand's history?

- Make sure you account for people's varying emotional needs, as the British Airways Flying with Confidence programs do. These programs are customized for nervous flyers, those who have never flown before, and those looking to help someone else fly comfortably.

- Tap into 90s nostalgia to draw in old audiences. Recognizing the value of doing this, SunnyD released a Vodka Seltzer version of its drinks, capitalizing on the hard seltzer trend while also catering to millennials and Gen Z adults eager for a beverage that reminds them of their childhood.

People gravitate toward products that reflect their perception of themselves.

Identity within branding is a profound notion, reflecting how deeply a brand resonates with a customer's sense of self. Rooted in self-congruity theory, consumer behavior hinges on a psychological alignment between one's identity and the brand's image. Today's consumers, particularly Gen Zers, prioritize brands that reflect their personal values, with 23% saying it's important for a brand to do so (vs 18% total). This preference stems from a desire to avoid cognitive dissonance—the mental discomfort that comes from harboring conflicting values or beliefs. And as value alignment grows more important to consumers—whether those values relate to aesthetics, the environment, or otherwise—people will increasingly forge enduring connections with the brands they feel reflect them.

23%

of 18-24 year olds say its important for a brand to reflect their personal values (vs 18% total).



SOCIAL EXPERIMENT

Testing the theory of cognitive dissonance

In 1959, Leon Festinger and James M Carlsmith put cognitive dissonance to the test. In the experiment, participants were asked to perform a dull and tedious task. Afterward, they were assigned to one of two conditions: one group was paid \$1 and told to lie to fellow participants and say that the task was enjoyable, while the other group was just paid \$20. Participants were then asked to repeat the boring task and rate how enjoyable they found it the second time around. Surprisingly, those who were paid less said they enjoyed it more. This showed how people adjust their beliefs to justify their actions (in this case, to align with the lie) and avoid feeling uncomfortable.



“

Search for yourself in the life of your customer, in their identity. Try to understand what identity your brand represents for people and work with that. It might mean that you have a smaller market, but your customers will be loyalists. And when they're more loyal, they're going to advocate on your behalf.

Bri Williams

Behavioral expert and founder of People Patterns

BRAND CASE STUDY

BASMA BEAUTY

Inspired by marketing like Dove's Real Beauty campaign, many of today's beauty brands are drawing on, or even founded on, identity and inclusivity.

For example, [Basma Beauty](#) was founded by Basma Hameed, who grew up with scarring from a kitchen accident and could not find a foundation that covered her scars, let alone one that matched her skin tone. The brand, available in Sephora, will likely inspire a loyal following among those who feel represented by Basma's story and her work toward creating an inclusive landscape where everyone feels seen and accepted.

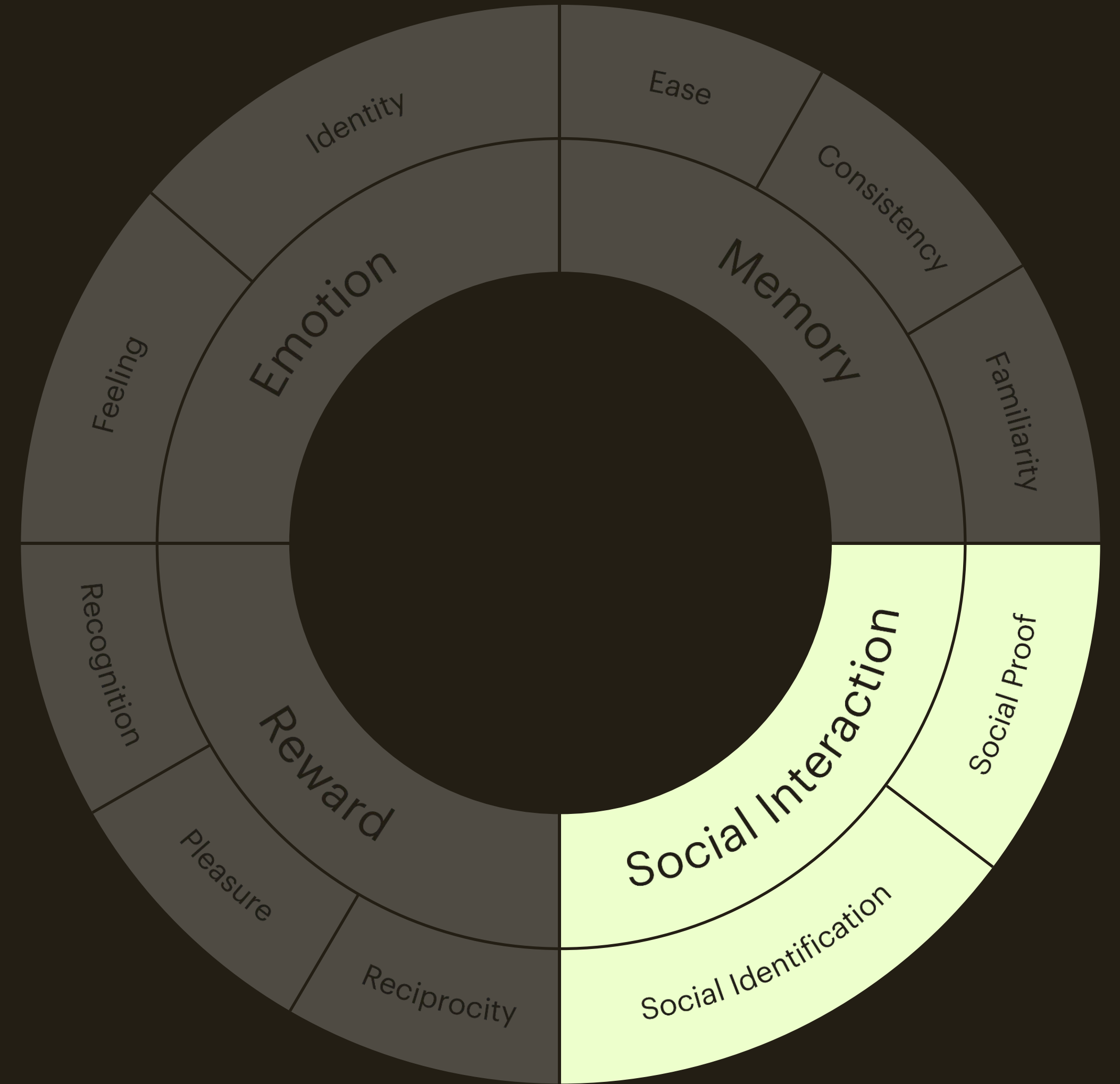
Thought starters

- Beyond being entertaining, humor can be a great way for you to make your marketing more relatable and authentic. Can a little self-deprecating humor help to humanize your brand and lighten the mood?

- Understand the nuanced ways in which people identify with your products by tapping into cultures and fandoms, like [New Balance](#), whose partnership with basketball player Cameron Brink caters to the rising demand for women's sports.

- Ensure your company's values are more than just a marketing campaign. [Patagonia](#) took this to the next level by restructuring its business model to ensure more of its profits go toward sustainability initiatives.

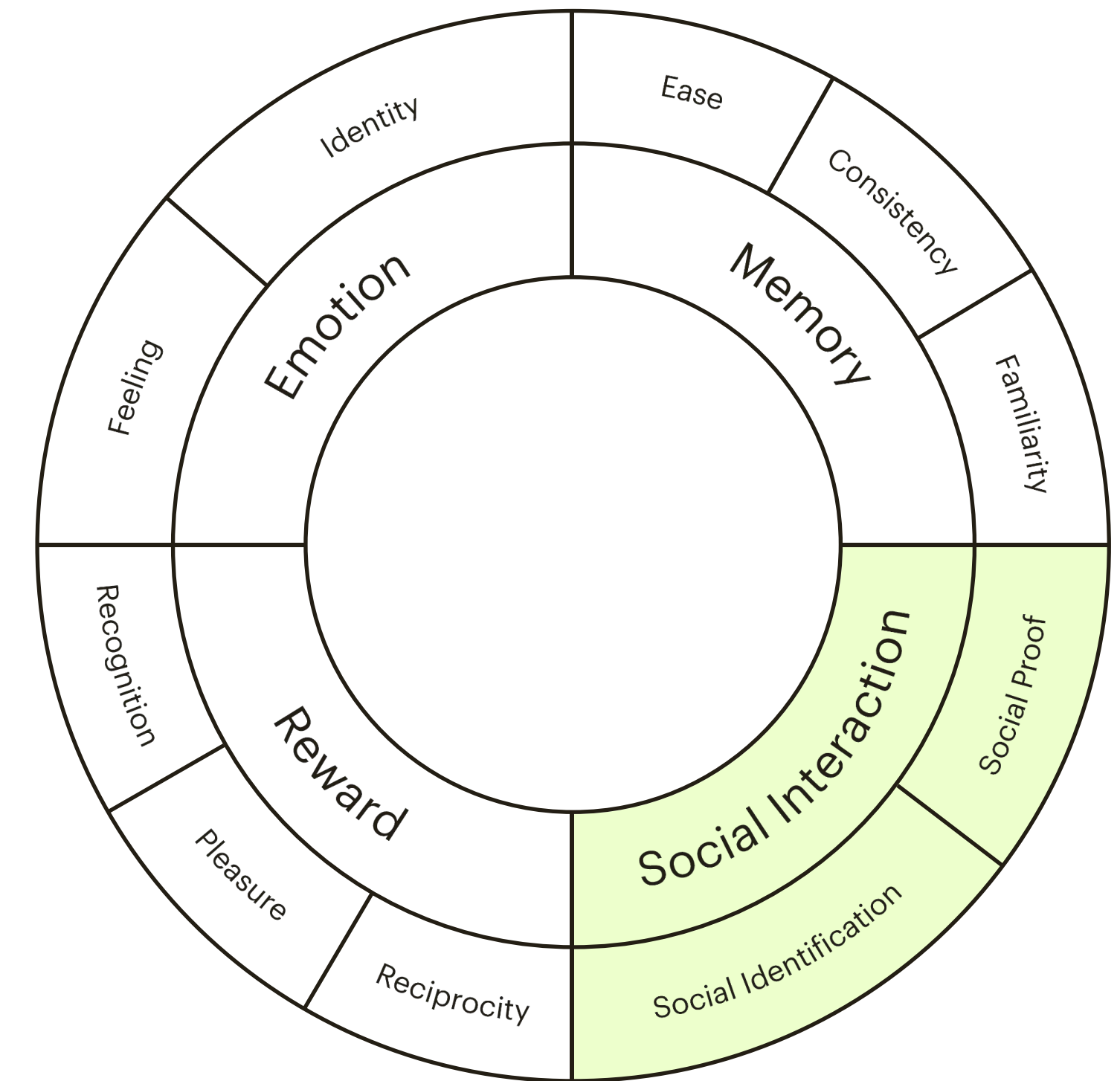
Social Interaction



Social dynamics and interactions reshape our brains and behaviors, significantly influencing consumer decision-making.

The limbic system, central to reinforcement learning, underscores the inherently social nature of decision-making. As consumers, our choices are profoundly influenced by social dynamics, highlighting the importance of leveraging interpersonal relationships in cultivating loyalty. Despite our belief in independent decision-making, social opinions wield significant influence—a legacy of our evolutionary past in which group cohesion ensured survival. In fact, social interactions can quite literally reshape our brains as part of a process known as neuroplasticity. Through repeated social encounters, particularly those orbiting our most significant relationships, our brains undergo sculpting, which shapes many behaviors, including those associated with shopping preferences and brand affinity.

The behavioral elements of social interaction



Social proof

People are primed to conform and make decisions based on the behaviors of those around them.

- Discover how brands can use a “social proof nudge” to help customers with decision-making

Social identification

People crave community and belonging and constantly look for signifiers through which to identify themselves and categorize others.

- Learn how brands are cultivating social currency to grow loyalty

Read on for

Monzo’s neon-colored bank cards, Panera’s use of the “Roman Empire” trend, and how Sonny Angels gained their collectible cult status.

As social creatures, humans are acutely attuned to the behavior of others, which results in the phenomenon known as social proof.

Richard Shotton summarizes: “What people value is heavily influenced by what they perceive others value.” In moments of uncertainty, individuals often look to their peers for guidance. Whether it’s seeing a shampoo in a GRWM (Get Ready With Me) TikTok video or hearing a friend talk about a new supplement, word-of-mouth remains, as studies affirm, a potent force in shaping the perceptions of a brand. This emphasizes the profound impact of social influence on consumer behavior.



SOCIAL EXPERIMENT

Proving social proof

One study used a color-categorization task to test the social proof phenomenon. Participants were shown cards, colored either blue or green. When the colors were clearly defined, people had no trouble answering. But in some cases, when the color sat somewhere along the spectrum of blue and green, it was hard to determine which color the card was. In these cases, researchers provided a “social proof nudge” where they told the person which color previous participants had decided upon. When this nudge was given, participants were much more likely to choose the same color as their predecessors.



“

One way of boosting desire for a product among one group is to create the impression that your product is super-popular among a like-minded group. People don't want to waste time thinking about what the right purchase is. A quick way of deciding is to think about what everyone else is doing.

Richard Shotton

Author of *The Illusion of Choice*

BRAND CASE STUDY

MONZO

For marketers, a big part of wielding social proof in practice is getting customers to notice what other customers are doing.

Consider Monzo, the British bank that uses brightly colored debit cards that stand out amid a sea of gray and black cards. While initially only intended as a prototype, they attracted so much attention that they became a part of the brand identity. Monzo even released limited-edition neon cards for customers who invited 2 or more friends to join.

Thought starters

- How can you build hype and garner exclusivity with limited-edition drops? Can new releases be strategically aligned with cultural events to enhance their relevance?

- Increase the popularity of your products by merging fandoms through creative collaborations. For example, Lush teamed up with The Super Mario Bros. Movie to bring a gamified twist to bath time.

- Align with trends in a way that doesn't compromise your brand identity. Panera used the "Roman Empire" trend to promote the tried-and-true menu favorites that they "just can't stop thinking about."

People aren't just loyal to brands for their products, they're loyal to brands that reflect their sense of social identity.

To illustrate this, Richard Shotton highlights the significance of nouns over verbs in self-description, pointing to how we frame ourselves as "coffee lovers" instead of saying we "love coffee." Loyalty gets wrapped up with identity as brands become symbols through which consumers define themselves and connect with others who share similar affiliations. It's a process of both self-expression and social alignment, shaping not just individual identities but also collective belonging.



SOCIAL EXPERIMENT

How social identity shapes behavior
Research by Mark Levine at Lancaster University shows just how much our behavior is influenced by our sense of belonging and community. Levine and his team staged an emergency scenario whereby a man tripped in front of a group of soccer fans. They found that the injured stranger was more likely to receive help when wearing a jersey that matched the group's favorite soccer team. And as a whole, even if the person was wearing a jersey for an opposing team, they were more likely to receive help than those who could not be easily identified as soccer fans.



“

Social currency and identity are really important aspects for customer loyalty. People ask themselves, ‘What does it say about me if I proclaim myself loyal to this business?’ Often, the brand ends up being a conduit for how they see themselves and how they want the world to see them as well.

Bri Williams Behavioral expert and founder of People Patterns

BRAND CASE STUDY

GLOSSIER

Glossier customers would be the first to tell you it isn't just a skincare brand.

While they sell merch like water bottles, bags, and hoodies (that sold out in a matter of hours), from the beginning, customers have received a free pink zip pouch and Glossier stickers alongside their purchases. Those stickers are now slapped onto water bottles and laptops, and the pouches are often used as organizational cases, serving as a signifier of brand fandom—and of the lifestyle and ethos that so many who shop there embody.

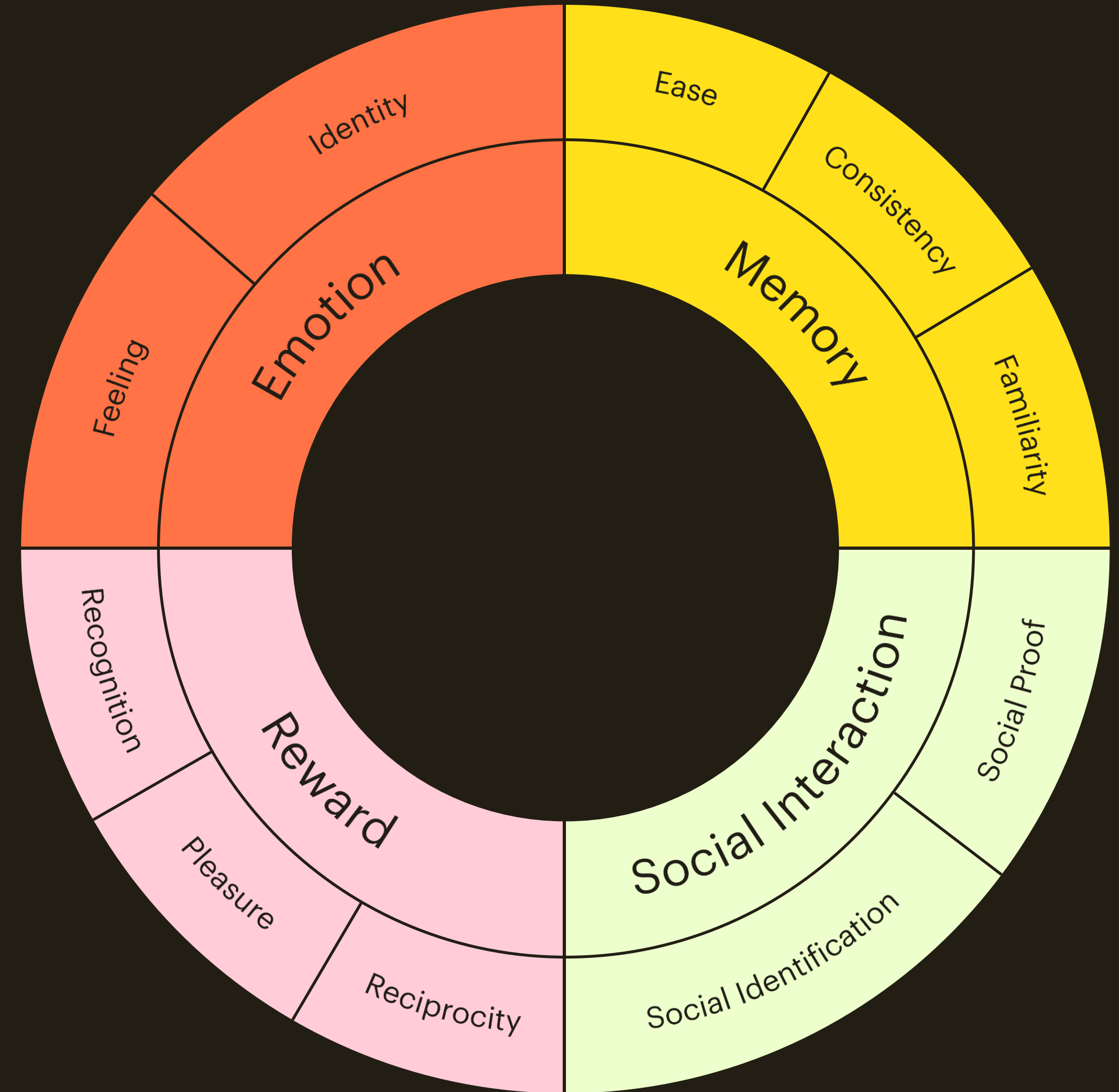
Thought starters

- Foster a sense of togetherness among your customers, like the skincare brand Bubble, which uses the social media platform Geneva to garner customer feedback and maintain an online community for fans of the brand.

- Use exclusivity to help your customers signal and spur their fandoms. Spotify's capsule collection, for example, offers exclusive merchandise from fan-favorite artists; the top listeners of those artists get the first opportunity to purchase.

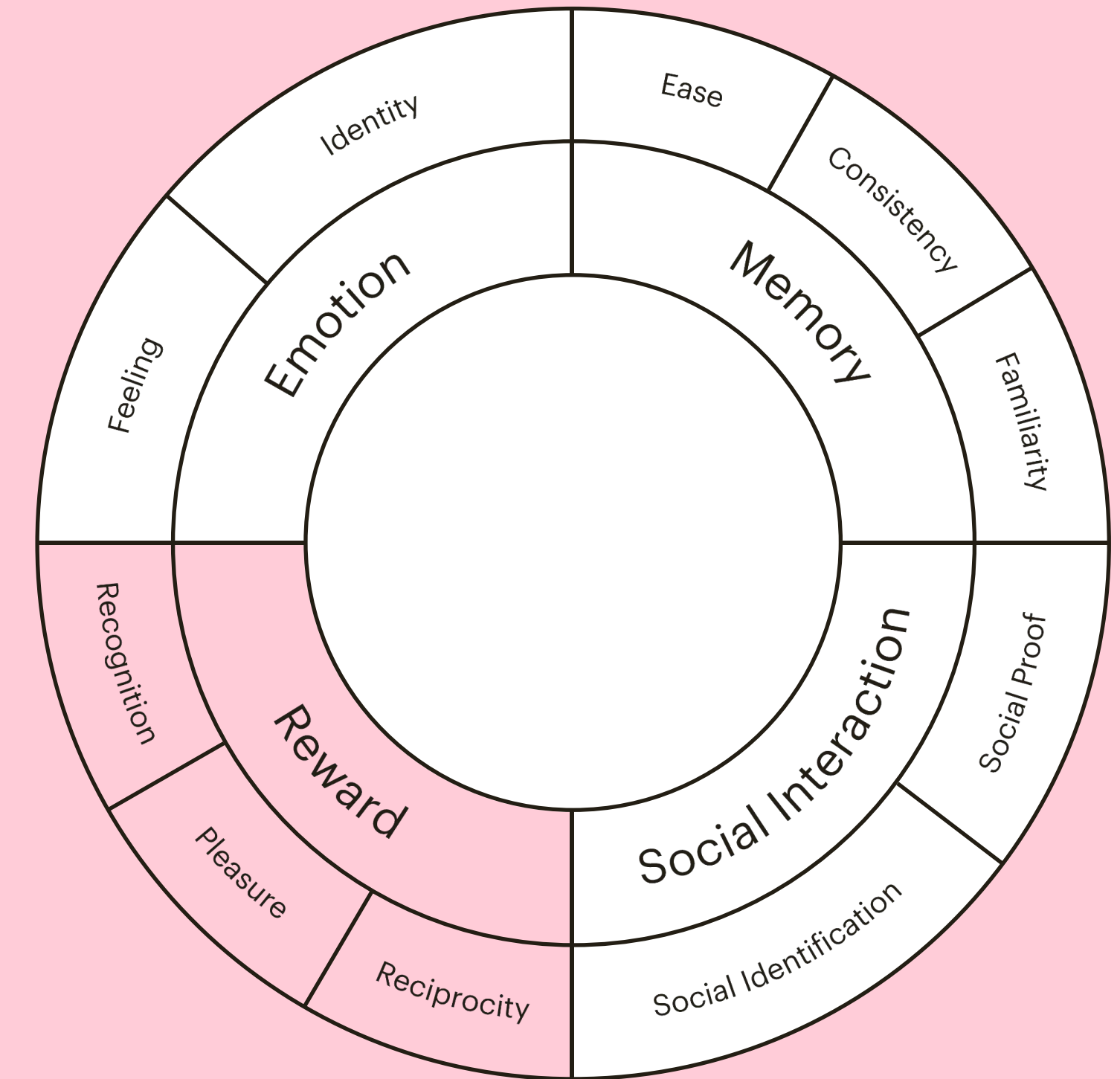
- Tap into your consumers' offline behaviors to facilitate social interaction among brand communities. Consider Sonny Angels, a collectible figurine whose cult status among Gen Z has led to group gatherings in parks where people trade with one another and build friendships.

Recap



REWARD

The brain's mesolimbic pathway, fueled by the release of dopamine, lays the groundwork for essential habit formation that's crucial for fostering consumer loyalty.



Reciprocity

Humans are hardwired to pay back what they receive from others.

- Keep people coming back for more by compensating them for their loyalty

Pleasure

Dopamine-driven positive feelings and experiences play a vital role in repeat behavior.

- Consider value-driven rewards to elicit a dopamine rush

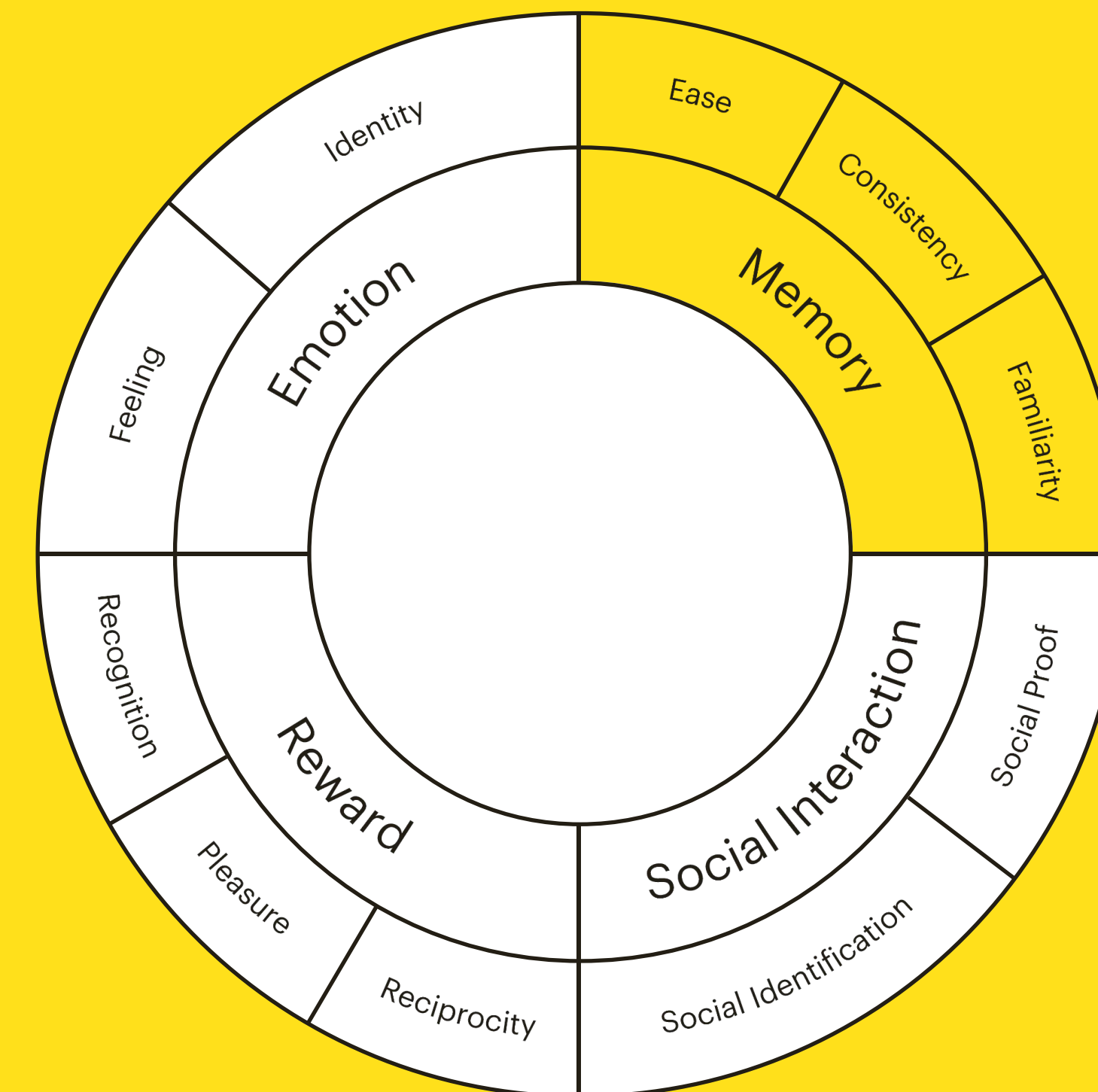
Recognition

People want to feel seen by the brands they patronize.

- Build trust with customers by showing them your gratitude and appreciation

MEMORY

Memory is a pivotal force in decision-making, shaping people's perceptions through associations with past experiences. Emotionally charged memories of brand interactions will influence future behaviors and attitudes.



Familiarity

People have a cognitive bias toward things that they know and are familiar with.

- Take advantage of the mere exposure effect to nudge customers toward loyalty

Consistency

People will repeat their past behavior to simplify the decision-making process.

- Use status quo bias to keep customers coming back

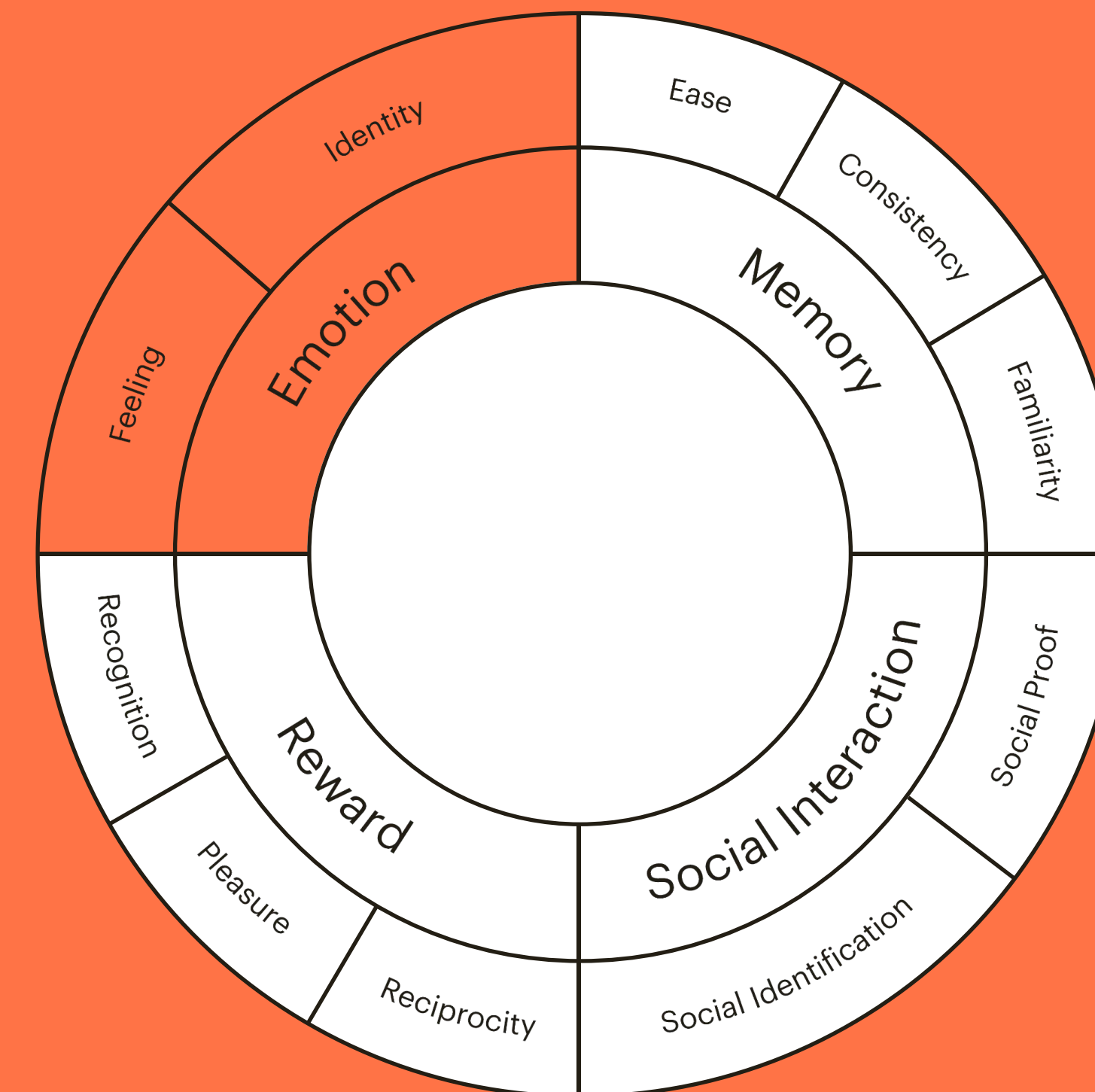
Ease

People are more likely to develop a preference for frictionless experiences.

- Prioritize ease and develop a seamless purchase journey

EMOTION

Emotion influences both memory and social interactions, inspiring loyalty-driven purchases (as distinguished from those driven by habit) that foster lasting connections between brands and customers.



Feeling

Beyond products or services, people are loyal to a brand based on how the brand experience makes them feel.

- Account for varying emotional needs with a personalized service

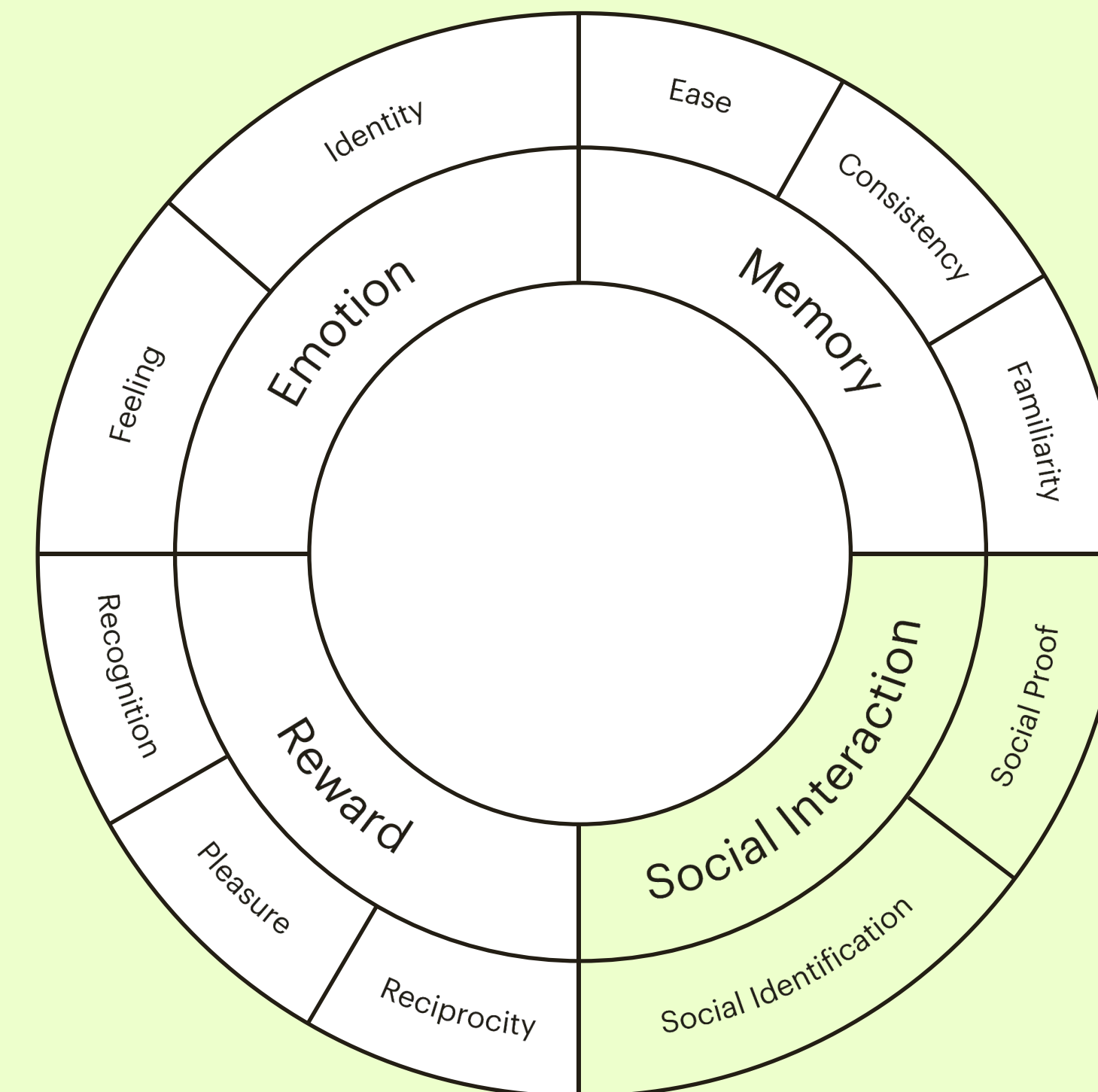
Identity

People gravitate toward products that reflect their perception of themselves.

- Design brand merch that functions as social currency

SOCIAL INTERACTION

Social dynamics and interactions reshape our brains and behaviors, significantly influencing consumer decision-making.



Social proof

People are primed to conform and make decisions based on the behaviors of those around them.

→ Employ “social proof nudges” to help customers with decision-making

Social identification

People crave community and belonging and constantly look for signifiers through which to identify themselves and categorize others.

→ Cultivate social currency to keep people coming back for more

What Comes Next?

How can the elements of loyalty help me grow my business?

The elements of loyalty explain the science, so now let's put that knowledge into practice.

Identifying loyal customers seems straightforward—they're the ones who keep coming back for more. Yet repeat purchases alone don't define loyalty.

While some customers are emotionally connected to a brand, others may merely follow out of habit or, worse, settle due to the lack of a better option.



Often, what we call loyalty is probably much more passive. It's more like a habit. Rather than genuine loyalty, it's people repeating behaviors because that's what they've done in the past or it's too much of a hassle to switch.

Richard Shotton

Author of *The Illusion of Choice*

Accompanying The Science of Loyalty is our Strategic Loyalty Playbook. The playbook expands on the principles of loyalty with tactical approaches that can help to improve your loyalty strategy.

[Read it now](#)

Check out the Strategic Loyalty Playbook to:

- Uncover myth-busting insights from our consumer survey and use the data to plot your customers on our Commitment Spectrum.

- Apply tactics based on the behavioral elements of loyalty and be inspired by brands that have built these in already.

- Learn about prompts and how they can be used to increase customer motivation and ability.

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