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How Regional Identity Transforms Value into Loyalty: A Multidimensional Study of Agricultural Regional Brands

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Abstract

This study investigates the formation mechanism of brand loyalty (BL) for Agricultural Regional Brands (ARBs), focusing on the interplay between multidimensional perceived value (functional [FV], emotional [EV], social [SV]) and regional identity (RI). Using survey data from 312 consumers of *Wuchang Rice* (a flagship Chinese ARB), structural equation modeling (SEM) reveals: (1) FV ($\beta = 0.15$, $p < 0.01$) and EV ($\beta = 0.19$, $p < 0.001$) directly enhance BL, while SV exhibits no significant direct effect; (2) RI exerts a strong positive direct effect on BL ($\beta = 0.49$, $p < 0.001$); (3) FV, EV, and SV all positively influence RI ($\beta = 0.18, 0.42, 0.25$; $p < 0.01$); and (4) RI mediates the relationships between perceived value dimensions and BL—partial mediation for FV-BL (indirect $\beta = 0.09$) and EV-BL (indirect $\beta = 0.21$), and full mediation for SV-BL (indirect $\beta = 0.12$). The findings demonstrate RI's critical role as both a direct driver and mediator of ARB loyalty, with EV emerging as the strongest antecedent of RI. This research advances ARB theory by integrating multidimensional value and place-based identity, offering managers actionable insights for fostering sustainable loyalty through value positioning and regional affinity cultivation.

Keywords: Agricultural Regional Brands, Brand Loyalty, Perceived Value, Regional Identity, Structural Equation Modeling, Mediation Analysis, Rural Revitalization

Introduction

Against China's Rural Revitalization Strategy and the pursuit of high-quality agricultural development, agricultural product branding has become increasingly imperative. Agricultural Regional Brands (ARBs)—products from specific geographic origins with qualities inherently linked to their terroir—serve as key tools to enhance product competitiveness, increase

farmer income, and boost regional economic growth (Belletti & Marescotti, 2011; Taylor, J. J. et al., 2018; Tregear et al., 2007). Sustainable brand loyalty (BL), defined as a strong commitment to repurchase despite competitive influences (Oliver, 1999), is critical for ARB longevity and equity (Aaker, 1991). However, fostering enduring BL remains challenging, hindered by product homogenization, counterfeiting-induced trust crises, and weak consumer emotional connections (Giacomarra et al., 2020). Existing ARB loyalty research often uses qualitative methods or focuses on single antecedents (e.g., perceived quality), leaving a gap in quantitative studies on complex psychological drivers: consumer perceived value (PV)—encompassing functional (FV), emotional (EV), and social (SV) dimensions (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001)—and regional identity (RI, an affective bond to a geographic place; Williams & Vaske, 2003), and their synergistic role in loyalty formation.

This study addresses this gap by exploring three questions: (1) How do ARB PV dimensions (FV, EV, SV) directly affect BL? (2) How does RI directly affect ARB BL? (3) Does RI mediate the relationship between PV dimensions and BL? Its primary aim is to develop and test an integrated model explaining ARB loyalty formation, examining direct effects of multidimensional PV and RI on BL, and RI's hypothesized mediating role in translating value perceptions into loyalty.

Theoretically, this research advances ARB scholarship by integrating multidimensional PV and RI into a cohesive model, clarifying their interactive role in driving loyalty beyond isolated constructs. Practically, findings provide actionable evidence for ARB managers and policymakers to position value propositions, strengthen regional emotional connections, and design strategies for sustainable BL, contributing to rural revitalization and agricultural prosperity.

Literature Review and Theoretical Foundation

Theoretical Framework

Agricultural regional brands (ARBs) are collective intellectual property for products linked to specific geographic origins via un ique qualities, reputation, or terroir (Belletti & Marescotti, 2011). They feature collective ownership, geographical indication (GI) protection, origin-based reputation, and embedding in local culture (Taylor, J. J. et al., 2018), creating value by reducing search costs, signaling authenticity, and boosting rural development (Tregear et al., 2007). Yet they face challenges like homogenization, trust crises from counterfeiting, and low loyalty due to weak differentiation (Giacomarra et al., 2020).

Sustainable brand loyalty (BL) is key to ARBs' long-term viability. Beyond repeat purchases, BL reflects a strong commitment to repurchase despite pressures (Oliver, 1999), with attitudinal (preference) and behavioral (advocacy) dimensions (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). It ensures market share, cuts costs, and builds equity (Aaker, 1991). While antecedents like perceived quality are studied (Krystallis & Chryssochoidis, 2005), place-based identity's role in ARB loyalty is underexplored.

Perceived value (PV)—a holistic utility assessment (Zeithaml, 1988)—is multidimensional. Using Sweeney and Soutar (2001), this study focuses on Functional Value (FV, from quality/price), Emotional Value (EV, from pleasure/authenticity), and Social Value (SV, from social approval). PV drives loyalty across contexts (Gallarza et al., 2011); in agriculture, FV

relates to freshness, EV to place-based emotion, and SV to supporting local culture (Carpio & Isengildina-Massa, 2009).

Regional identity (RI)—an affective bond to a geographic area (Williams & Vaske, 2003)—influences consumption, motivating preferences for local products and premium payments (Everett, S. et al., 2008; Bannor, R. K. et al., 2021). ARBs tie to regional terroir and heritage, so regional identification can transfer to brand loyalty (Kladou & Kehagias, 2014). This integration suggests ARB loyalty (BL) is driven by multidimensional PV (FV, EV, SV) and mediated by RI, addressing gaps in understanding place-based identity's role in value-perception-to-commitment translation.

Research Gap, Conceptual Model, and Hypotheses

While existing research acknowledges the significance of perceived value (PV) and regional identity (RI) for brands, critical gaps persist in studies on agricultural regional brands (ARBs). First, there is inadequate integration of multidimensional PV: most studies either treat PV as a unidimensional construct or focus narrowly on functional aspects, neglecting the distinct roles and interactions of functional value (FV), emotional value (EV), and social value (SV) in shaping ARB outcomes. Second, the mediating role of RI remains underexplored—the potential of RI as a key mediator that translates FV, EV, and SV into enduring ARB loyalty, along with the specific pathways involved, has been largely unexamined. Third, there is a lack of holistic understanding of ARB loyalty mechanisms, as a comprehensive account of how multidimensional PV and RI interact to drive ARB loyalty is absent.

To address these gaps, this study proposes and empirically tests an integrated conceptual model (Figure 1). This model examines three sets of relationships: the direct effects of FV, EV, and SV on both brand loyalty (BL) and RI; the direct effect of RI on BL; and the mediating role of RI in the relationships between FV/EV/SV and BL.

Based on the theoretical framework and the proposed model, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H1a: Functional Value (FV) has a significant positive effect on Brand Loyalty (BL).
H1b: Emotional Value (EV) has a significant positive effect on Brand Loyalty (BL).
H1c: Social Value (SV) has a significant positive effect on Brand Loyalty (BL).
H2: Regional Identity (RI) has a significant positive effect on Brand Loyalty (BL).
H3a: Functional Value (FV) has a significant positive effect on Regional Identity (RI).
H3b: Emotional Value (EV) has a significant positive effect on Regional Identity (RI).
H3c: Social Value (SV) has a significant positive effect on Regional Identity (RI).
H4a: Regional Identity (RI) mediates the relationship between Functional Value (FV) and Brand Loyalty (BL).
H4b: Regional Identity (RI) mediates the relationship between Emotional Value (EV) and Brand Loyalty (BL).
H4c: Regional Identity (RI) mediates the relationship between Social Value (SV) and Brand Loyalty (BL).

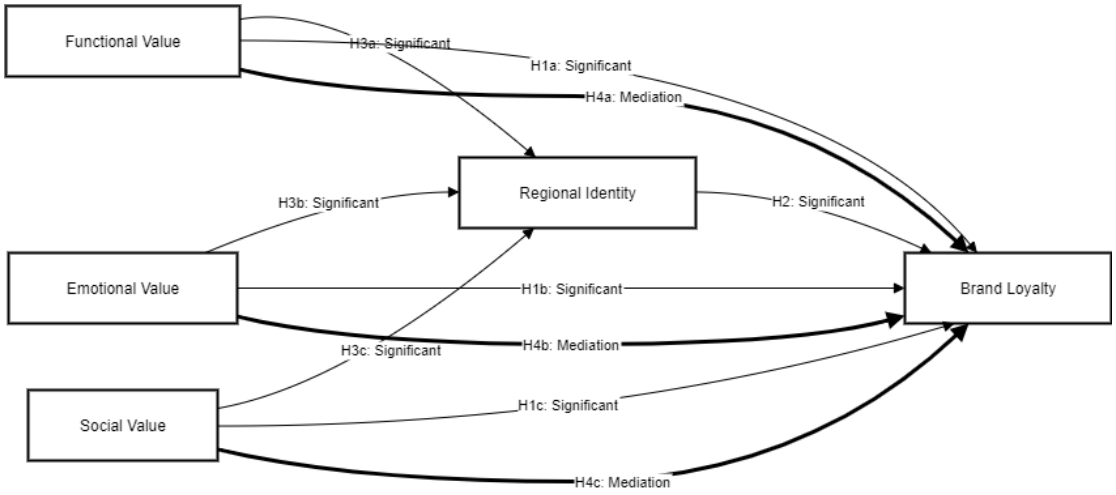

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Research Method

Research Design

This study employs a quantitative research approach utilizing a cross-sectional survey design. This design is appropriate for examining the hypothesized relationships between the latent constructs (perceived value dimensions, regional identity, brand loyalty) at a specific point in time and testing the proposed structural model.

Variable Measurement and Scale Development

All constructs used established scales adapted to Wuchang Rice for validity and reliability. Perceived Value (FV, EV, SV) drew on Sweeney and Soutar (2001): FV (e.g., "Wuchang Rice is consistently high-quality"), EV (e.g., "Wuchang Rice gives me pleasure"), SV (e.g., "Using Wuchang Rice earns social approval"). RI, adapted from Williams and Vaske (2003), included items like "I feel a strong belonging to Wuchang". BL, based on Zeithaml et al. (1996) and Chaudhuri & Holbrook (2001), had items such as "I am loyal to Wuchang Rice". All items used a 7-point Likert scale. Latent constructs (FV, EV, SV, RI, BL) had multiple observed variables (see Table 1).

Table 1
Construct Definitions and Measurement (Example Items)

Construct	Definition	Example Measurement Items (Adapted for Wuchang Rice)	Source (Adapted from)
Functional Value (FV)	Perceived utility derived from Wuchang Rice's inherent attributes and performance.	"Wuchang Rice products are consistently of high quality." "Wuchang Rice products are reasonably priced for what you get."	Sweeney & Soutar (2001)
Emotional Value (EV)	Perceived utility derived from feelings or affective states generated by Wuchang Rice.	"I feel relaxed when I consume Wuchang Rice products." "Wuchang Rice products give me pleasure."	Sweeney & Soutar (2001)
Social Value (SV)	Perceived utility derived from Wuchang Rice's ability to enhance social self-concept.	"Using Wuchang Rice products helps me feel accepted by people important to me." "Using Wuchang Rice products gives me social approval."	Sweeney & Soutar (2001)
Regional Identity (RI)	Consumer's affective attachment and sense of belonging to the Wuchang area.	"I feel a strong sense of belonging to the Wuchang area." "The Wuchang area means a lot to me."	Williams & Vaske (2003)
Brand Loyalty (BL)	A deeply held commitment to repurchase Wuchang Rice consistently in the future.	"I consider myself loyal to Wuchang Rice products." "I intend to keep purchasing Wuchang Rice products in the next few years."	Zeithaml et al. (1996); Chaudhuri & Holbrook (2001)

Questionnaire Design and Pretesting

The final questionnaire included two sections: (1) socio-demographic and behavioral characteristics (e.g., age, gender, education, income, purchase frequency of the target brand, purchase channels); and (2) measurement scales for latent constructs (FV, EV, SV, RI, BL). This study focused on consumers of Wuchang Rice (a prominent geographically protected agricultural regional brand in China), with this purposive selection enabling focused investigation within a well-defined brand context. A preliminary questionnaire was pretested with 40 Wuchang Rice consumers, and data were analyzed using SPSS 26.0: Cronbach's Alpha coefficients were calculated for each scale to assess internal consistency, with scales showing Alpha < 0.70 reviewed for problematic items; Principal Component Analysis (PCA) with

Varimax rotation was conducted on multi-item scales to examine factor structure, identify cross-loadings (>0.4), and detect items with low communalities (<0.4) or weak primary loadings (<0.5). Ambiguous or poorly loading items were revised or removed based on these analyses to enhance clarity and unidimensionality, thereby verifying content validity and refining the measurement instrument before the main survey.

Sampling and Data Collection

The target population were consumers aware of and/or having purchased Wuchang Rice. A combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling was used, supplemented by quota sampling via the professional online survey platform Credamo; quotas were set based on key demographic variables (age, geographic location in China) and purchase frequency to ensure the sample was broadly representative of the known Wuchang Rice consumer base. Adhering to structural equation modeling (SEM) guidelines, the target sample size aimed to exceed minimum thresholds: at least 10 responses per observed variable in the final structural model and a minimum of 200 valid responses (with a larger sample preferred to enhance parameter estimate stability). Data were primarily collected via an online questionnaire on Credamo, with participants screened for awareness of Wuchang Rice. A total of 368 initial responses were collected; after rigorous data cleaning (removing incomplete responses, straight-lining patterns, and those with unrealistically short completion times), 312 valid responses were retained, meeting SEM sample size requirements.

Data Analysis

The Table 2 summarizes the sequential data analysis procedures, using SPSS 26.0 for preliminary data characterization and scale refinement (reliability and factor structure checks), and AMOS 26.0 for confirmatory validation (measurement model fit and validity) and hypothesis testing (direct effects via path analysis, mediating effects via bootstrap). All analyses followed established statistical criteria to ensure rigor, consistent with academic standards for structural equation modeling studies.

Table 2
Data Analysis Procedures

Software	Analysis Type	Core Content
SPSS 26.0	Descriptive Statistics	Calculated frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations to characterize sample demographics, consumption behavior, and scale item responses.
	Reliability Analysis	Computed Cronbach's Alpha for each scale; scales with $\alpha < 0.70$ were reviewed to revise/remove problematic items ($\alpha > 0.80$ = good reliability).
	Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)	Conducted PCA with Varimax rotation to assess factor structure; identified cross-loadings (>0.4), low communalities (<0.4), and weak loadings (<0.5); revised/removed poor items to enhance unidimensionality.
AMOS 26.0	Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)	Tested measurement model (latent constructs vs. observed indicators); evaluated fit via χ^2/df (<3-5), RMSEA (<0.08), CFI/TLI (>0.90), SRMR (<0.08); assessed validity: - Convergent validity: factor loadings (>0.70), AVE (>0.50), CR (>0.70); - Discriminant validity: square root of AVE > inter-construct correlations.
	Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)	Tested hypothesized structural model (paths: FV/EV/SV→BL, FV/EV/SV→RI, RI→BL); evaluated fit using CFA indices.
		Path Analysis: Tested direct effects (H1a-c, H2, H3a-c) via standardized coefficients, S.E., C.R., and p-values.
		Mediation Effect Testing: Used bias-corrected bootstrap (2000 resamples) to test RI's mediating role (H4a-c); 95% CI for indirect effects was generated (mediation significant if CI excludes 0); reported standardized direct, indirect, and total effects.

Results and Discussion

Sample Characteristics

The Table 3 presents the demographic and consumption behavior characteristics of the valid sample (n=312). The sample shows relative balance in gender and age distribution, with geographic coverage across major regions of China. Most respondents have a college education or higher and middle-to-high household incomes. Consumption behavior data indicate high brand awareness (92.3%) and purchase participation (85.9%) among respondents, with supermarkets and online platforms as the primary purchase channels. These characteristics confirm the relevance of the sample to the research context (Wuchang Rice consumers).

Table 3
Sample Characteristics of Wuchang Rice Consumers (n=312)

Category	Subgroup	Proportion (%)
Gender	Female	53.2
	Male	46.8
Age	18–30 years	28.5
	31–45 years	35.6
	46–60 years	27.9
	Over 60 years	8.0
Geographic Region	East China	32.4
	North China	25.6
	South China	18.3
	Central China	15.7
	West China	8.0
Education	College degree or higher	68.3
Monthly Household Income	RMB 10,000–30,000	57.7
Purchase Frequency (Past Year)	At least once	85.9
	Several times per year	42.3
	Monthly or more frequently	18.6
Purchase Channels	Supermarkets	65.1
	Online platforms	58.7
Brand Awareness	"Familiar" or "very familiar"	92.3

Measurement Model Assessment: Reliability and Validity

Prior to hypothesis testing, the psychometric properties of the measurement model were rigorously assessed using SPSS and AMOS. All constructs exhibited excellent internal consistency, with Cronbach's Alpha coefficients (FV=0.89, EV=0.91, SV=0.87, RI=0.93, BL=0.92) all exceeding the 0.70 threshold. The CFA model showed good fit to the data ($\chi^2/df=2.18$, $p<0.001$; RMSEA=0.062, 90% CI:0.056,0.068; CFI=0.96; TLI=0.95; SRMR=0.041), with all indices meeting established fit criteria. Convergent validity was confirmed: standardized factor loadings (0.72–0.91) were significant ($p<0.001$) and exceeded 0.70; Composite Reliability (CR) values (0.88–0.93) surpassed 0.70; and Average Variance Extracted

(AVE) values (0.65–0.77) exceeded 0.50. Discriminant validity was supported, as the square root of the AVE for each construct (bold diagonal values in Table 4) was greater than its highest correlation with other constructs (off-diagonal values).

Table 4
Discriminant Validity Assessment
(Correlations and Square Root of AVE)

Construct	**1. FV**	**2. EV**	**3. SV**	**4. RI**	**5. BL**
1. Functional Value (FV)	0.82				
2. Emotional Value (EV)	0.58	0.85			
3. Social Value (SV)	0.42	0.67	0.81		
4. Regional Identity (RI)	0.51	0.76	0.61	0.88	
5. Brand Loyalty (BL)	0.48	0.69	0.55	0.73	0.86

Note: $p < 0.01$. Diagonals (in bold) represent the square root of the AVE.

Common Method Bias (CMB)
Harman's single-factor test was performed in SPSS. An unrotated EFA including all scale items revealed that the largest single factor explained only 32.7% of the total variance, significantly below the 50% threshold, suggesting that CMB is unlikely to be a serious concern in this study.

Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing
The hypothesized structural model (Figure 1) was tested using AMOS, demonstrating a good fit to the data: $\chi^2/df = 2.31$ ($p < 0.001$), RMSEA = 0.065 (90% CI: 0.059, 0.071), CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.94, and SRMR = 0.045. Path analysis results for direct effects (H1a-c, H2, H3a-c) are summarized in Table 5 and Figure 1. For the perceived value-brand loyalty links (H1), H1a (FV → BL: $\beta = 0.15$, $p < 0.01$) and H1b (EV → BL: $\beta = 0.19$, $p < 0.001$) were supported, indicating that functional and emotional value directly enhance brand loyalty, while H1c (SV → BL: $\beta = 0.08$, $p = 0.112$) was not supported, suggesting no significant direct effect of social value on loyalty. Regional identity exerted a strong positive direct effect on brand loyalty (RI → BL: $\beta = 0.49$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H2. For the perceived value-regional identity paths (H3), all were significant and positive: FV → RI ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.01$), EV → RI ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$), and SV → RI ($\beta = 0.25$, $p < 0.001$), fully supporting H3a, H3b, and H3c.

Table 5
Hypothesis Testing Results for Direct Effects

Hypothesis	Path	Standardized Estimate (β)	S.E.	C.R.	p-value	Result
H1a	FV → Brand Loyalty	0.15	0.05	2.87	0.004	Supported
H1b	EV → Brand Loyalty	0.19	0.04	3.91	<0.001	Supported
H1c	SV → Brand Loyalty	0.08	0.05	1.59	0.112	Not Supported
H2	RI → Brand Loyalty	0.49	0.05	9.23	<0.001	Supported
H3a	FV → Regional Identity	0.18	0.06	3.12	0.002	Supported
H3b	EV → Regional Identity	0.42	0.05	7.84	<0.001	Supported
H3c	SV → Regional Identity	0.25	0.06	4.52	<0.001	Supported

Mediation effects of Regional Identity (RI) were tested using a bootstrap procedure (2000 samples, 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals [BCI]), with results shown in Table 6. For H4a (FV → RI → BL), the indirect effect was significant (β = 0.09, 95% BCI [0.04, 0.14]), and the direct effect (FV → BL) remained significant (β = 0.15), indicating partial mediation by RI, thus supporting H4a. For H4b (EV → RI → BL), the indirect effect was significant and substantial (β = 0.21, 95% BCI [0.15, 0.27]), with the direct effect (EV → BL) also significant (β = 0.19), reflecting partial mediation by RI and supporting H4b. For H4c (SV → RI → BL), the indirect effect was significant (β = 0.12, 95% BCI [0.07, 0.18]), while the direct effect (SV → BL) was non-significant (β = 0.08, p = 0.112), indicating that SV influences BL exclusively through RI (full mediation) and supporting H4c.

Table 6
Mediation Analysis Results (Bootstrap - 2000 Samples)

Indirect Path	Standardized Indirect Effect	95% BCI Lower	95% BCI Upper	Standardized Direct Effect	Standardized Total Effect	Mediation Type	H4 Result
FV → RI → BL	0.09	0.04	0.14	0.15	0.24	Partial	Supported
EV → RI → BL	0.21	0.15	0.27	0.19	0.40	Partial	Supported
SV → RI → BL	0.12	0.07	0.18	0.08 (n.s.)	0.20	Full	Supported

Note: $p < 0.01$, $p < 0.001$; n.s. = not significant; BCI = Bias-Corrected Confidence Interval.

Discussion of Findings and Implications

Interpretation of Key Findings

The integrated results clarify Wuchang Rice brand loyalty mechanisms. Perceived value dimensions show differential impacts: FV and EV directly affect BL (H1a, H1b supported), while SV does not (H1c not supported), indicating tangible benefits and emotional experiences are more immediate loyalty drivers, with SV influencing BL indirectly via regional identity. RI plays a paramount role, with its strong direct effect on BL (H2 supported) confirming it as a foundational pillar for place-based agricultural brands. RI acts as a key mediator (H4a-c supported): partially mediating FV and EV's effects on BL, and fully mediating SV's effect. Notably, EV is the strongest RI driver ($\beta = 0.42$), suggesting brand-induced affective resonance most potently fosters regional connection.

Theoretical Contributions and Managerial Implications

This study advances agricultural regional branding research by validating an integrated framework combining multidimensional perceived value and regional identity (RI) to explain brand loyalty, offering a holistic perspective beyond single-antecedent studies. It empirically identifies RI as a critical mediator—social value (SV) influences loyalty exclusively through RI—and reveals differential effects of functional (FV), emotional (EV), and SV, with Wuchang Rice data enriching insights into understudied markets.

For ARB managers like Wuchang Rice, strategies include strengthening FV (quality), amplifying EV (emotional narratives), reframing SV as regional heritage; cultivating RI via terroir storytelling and experiential marketing; and integrating these into loyalty strategies, prioritizing EV ($\beta = 0.42$ in driving RI). Segmented targeting is advised.

Conclusion and Future Research

This study explored Agricultural Regional Brand (ARB) loyalty formation via an integrated model of multidimensional perceived value (functional [FV], emotional [EV], social [SV] value) and regional identity (RI), using Wuchang Rice as the case. Based on 312 valid samples, results

showed: FV and EV directly promoted brand loyalty (BL); RI strongly drove BL; FV, EV, and SV all enhanced RI; RI partially mediated FV/EV-BL links and fully mediated SV-BL. Theoretically, it enriches ARB loyalty research by integrating these constructs; practically, it guides ARB loyalty enhancement for rural revitalization. Limitations include sample representativeness (online-based, convenience/snowball/quota sampling), focus on a single ARB (Wuchang Rice), cross-sectional data constraints, and unconsidered factors like consumer individual differences. Future research could expand to more ARBs, adopt longitudinal designs, introduce moderators (e.g., consumer involvement), explore RI's role in brand crises, and use neuroscientific/experimental methods to examine EV's impact on RI.

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