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How Social Media Marketing Management Builds Brand Loyalty through Customer Engagement: Evidence from the F&B Industry in Indonesia

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Abstract

Introduction: This study examines how social media marketing contributes to brand loyalty in Indonesia's food and beverage (F&B) industry by explicitly testing customer engagement as the mediating mechanism, addressing prior debate on whether social media influences loyalty directly or primarily through engagement while highlighting the study's novelty in demonstrating a partial mediation model in which the indirect pathway is slightly stronger than the direct effect. **Methods:** A quantitative survey was conducted with 400 millennial and Generation Z consumers selected using purposive (criterion-based) sampling from online communities of F&B brand followers on Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook. Data were collected through a structured Likert-scale questionnaire and analysed using SEM-PLS with bootstrapping procedures. **Results:** The findings indicate that social media significantly affects customer engagement ($\beta = 0.68$; $p < 0.001$) and brand loyalty directly ($\beta = 0.40$; $p < 0.01$). In addition, social media influences brand loyalty indirectly through customer engagement ($\beta = 0.401$; $p < 0.01$), confirming a partial mediation model in which customer engagement serves as a mediator and the indirect pathway is slightly stronger than the direct pathway. **Conclusion:** Brand loyalty in the F&B industry is not generated merely through social media presence but through the effective management of consumers' cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement. Social media functions as a strategic managerial tool when it is leveraged to foster meaningful and interactive engagement, which represents the more dominant pathway in strengthening loyalty.

KEYWORDS

social media, customer engagement, brand loyalty, F&B.

Introduction

Advances in information and communication technology have fundamentally reshaped social and economic dynamics, particularly in the domain of marketing (Ahmed et al., 2025; Akbar & Surawan, 2025; Ikbali et al., 2025). Companies are increasingly required to move beyond conventional one-way promotional approaches towards interactive, adaptive, and data-driven digital marketing strategies (Harsha et al., 2024; Tarabasz, 2024). Among the available digital channels, social media has become especially influential because it not only distributes information but also enables reciprocal communication between firms and consumers (Abeza et al., 2018). Unlike traditional media, social media enables continuous dialogue, real-time feedback, and participatory communication, which are highly influential in shaping perceptions and relationships with consumers.

Indonesia represents a particularly important setting for studying social media-driven marketing because its more than 167 million active users, accounting for around 60% of the population, create a highly saturated digital environment where consumers

are continuously exposed to competing brand messages (Ayu, 2023; Kusumawardani et al., 2025), and within Southeast Asia (Dudhat & Agarwal, 2023). Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook are deeply embedded in the daily routines of millennials and Generation Z, resulting in a crowded attention economy in which brands must compete not only with direct competitors but also with a constant stream of user-generated and entertainment content (Stahl & Literat, 2022). In such conditions, mere exposure to social media content is insufficient to influence consumer behaviour; instead, social media effectiveness depends on its ability to generate customer engagement, defined as consumers' cognitive, emotional, and behavioural involvement with brand-related content. This high level of competition for attention explains why engagement becomes the key mechanism linking social media to brand loyalty in the proposed model: only when content is perceived as interactive, relevant, and emotionally resonant does it capture attention, sustain interest, and translate into relational outcomes such as loyalty. This dynamic is particularly pronounced in the food and beverage (F&B) industry, where consumption decisions are highly visual, experience-based, and influenced by rapidly changing trends and low switching costs, making sustained engagement essential for converting social media interactions into enduring brand loyalty (Aldabous, 2024; Cankül et al., 2021; Rachman & Hapsari, 2024).

Within the F&B context, social media functions not merely as a promotional channel but as a strategic mechanism for cultivating emotional ties and interactive brand experiences. Visually oriented materials, such as culinary imagery, short-form videos, narrative storytelling, and trend-driven campaigns, have been shown to capture attention and stimulate emotional responses among audiences (Dong & Kong, 2025; Hutson & Smith, 2025; Kumar et al., 2025). Furthermore, social media facilitates active consumer participation through user-generated content, online reviews, and viral challenges, enabling consumers to co-create brand meaning rather than merely consume marketing messages (Kumar et al., 2025). Such interactive engagement is widely recognized as an important antecedent of brand loyalty, which encompasses not only repeat purchases but also brand advocacy and positive word-of-mouth promotion (Tsiotsou, 2019). In the highly competitive food and beverage market, where product alternatives are abundant and trends change rapidly, maintaining brand loyalty is a strategic necessity, not just a byproduct.

Despite extensive scholarship on social media marketing, the theoretical linkage among social media, customer engagement, and brand loyalty remains contested. Certain studies propose that social media can directly strengthen loyalty by enhancing interaction quality and relational intensity (Ismail, 2017). More recent research further suggests that sophisticated digital interfaces, such as AI-based anthropomorphism and service quality, can strengthen emotional attachment and brand loyalty (Alalwan et al., 2025). Conversely, another stream of research emphasizes that social media influences brand loyalty primarily through indirect mechanisms, particularly customer engagement. (Li et al., 2020) identify engagement as the primary process linking social media interactions to loyalty outcomes, while Vo et al. (2025) highlight the importance of emotional and experiential engagement over mere exposure to promotional content. (Dessart et al., 2016) conceptualize customer engagement as a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive, affective, and behavioural elements that sustain long-term consumer, brand relationships.

Although numerous studies have examined the mediating role of customer engagement between social media marketing and brand loyalty, most have been conducted in

retail, fashion, cosmetics, banking, and e-commerce contexts, primarily within developed markets. Far fewer studies have theorized why this mediation mechanism may operate differently in visually driven, experience-based industries such as food and beverage, where consumption is highly sensory, trend-oriented, and characterized by low switching costs. This gap is particularly evident in emerging digital economies such as Indonesia, where intense social media usage may reshape how engagement translates into loyalty outcomes.

Empirical findings also remain inconclusive regarding whether social media exerts a direct impact on brand loyalty or whether this relationship operates predominantly through customer engagement (Ismail, 2017). Evidence from (Dessart et al., 2016) further illustrates the ambivalent nature of social media, showing that it can simultaneously generate psychological pressure and foster positive personal development depending on how users interpret and engage with digital content. Some studies report a significant direct effect, arguing that interactive communication on social media can strengthen relational bonds without requiring intermediate mechanisms. In contrast, others emphasize that loyalty emerges only when consumers experience meaningful cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement, suggesting an indirect pathway. These contrasting findings indicate the need for clearer theoretical positioning and contextual examination of the relationship between social media, customer engagement, and brand loyalty.

To address these gaps, the present study focuses on the food and beverage sector in Indonesia and explicitly evaluates customer engagement as a mediating variable linking social media activity to brand loyalty. The study makes a specific theoretical contribution by clarifying the mechanism through which social media influences loyalty, demonstrating that this relationship operates through both direct and indirect pathways, with customer engagement acting as a partial mediator and representing the stronger pathway. Empirically, the proposed model tests four key relationships: (1) social media positively influences customer engagement, (2) customer engagement positively influences brand loyalty, (3) social media directly influences brand loyalty, and (4) social media indirectly influences brand loyalty through customer engagement. The research further centres on millennials and Generation Z, the two cohorts that dominate social media usage in Indonesia and exhibit distinct loyalty-formation dynamics. Millennials tend to prioritize brands that deliver both functional and emotional value, whereas Generation Z expects highly interactive and participatory digital experiences, making engagement a critical mechanism in shaping loyalty outcomes. By integrating industry-specific characteristics of the F&B sector with generational consumption patterns, this study moves beyond descriptive accounts of social media usage and offers a process-oriented and empirically validated explanation of how social media can be strategically leveraged to build enduring brand loyalty.

Methods

This study employs a quantitative design using a survey strategy to empirically examine the causal links among social media, customer engagement, and brand loyalty within Indonesia's food and beverage (F&B) sector. A quantitative approach is considered appropriate because it enables the objective assessment of latent variables through statistical testing and hypothesis verification (Mohajan, 2020). The survey technique was selected due to its effectiveness in gathering data from large respondent groups and its widespread application in behavioural and consumer-related research (Ting et al., 2021).

Research Procedures

The investigation followed several structured stages. Initially, a conceptual framework was developed based on established theoretical perspectives and prior empirical evidence, specifying social media as the independent construct, customer engagement as the mediating construct, and brand loyalty as the dependent construct. Measurement items were adapted from previously validated scales to ensure content and construct validity. The social media construct was measured using 6 items capturing content quality, interactivity, and information credibility, adapted from prior digital marketing studies (e.g., (Ting et al., 2021); (Ting et al., 2021)). Customer engagement was operationalized using 9 items reflecting cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions, adapted from (Ting et al., 2021) and (Ting et al., 2021). Brand loyalty was measured with 5 items capturing repurchase intention, recommendation behaviour, and commitment, adapted from (Ting et al., 2021) and (Ting et al., 2021). Sample indicators include “The brand’s social media content is interesting and interactive” (social media), “I feel emotionally connected to this brand on social media” (customer engagement), and “I intend to continue purchasing this brand in the future” (brand loyalty). All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

The questionnaire was originally developed in English and subsequently translated into Bahasa Indonesia using a back-translation procedure to ensure linguistic equivalence and conceptual consistency. A pilot test was conducted with 30 participants to assess clarity, wording, and initial reliability, leading to minor refinements before full deployment. In the final stage, the questionnaire was administered online to align with the digital usage patterns of millennials and Generation Z, ensuring that respondents were familiar with social media interactions relevant to the study context.

Population and Sampling

The target population comprised consumers in Indonesia aged 15-40 who actively use social networking platforms and follow at least one F&B brand account. This range captures Generation Z (15-24 years) and millennials (25-40 years), two cohorts consistently identified as dominant digital users and strategically important segments for the F&B market. The inclusion of respondents aged 15-17 is theoretically justified because adolescents are highly active social media users, play a meaningful role in influencing household food and beverage purchase decisions, and are in the early stages of brand preference and loyalty formation through digital exposure and peer interaction. Although their direct purchasing power may be limited, their influence on family consumption and future loyalty trajectories makes them relevant to the study of engagement-driven loyalty.

A purposive (criterion-based) sampling method was implemented to ensure that respondents satisfied criteria aligned with the study objectives (Hair et al., 2021). Eligibility requirements included: (1) being between 15 and 40 years old; (2) using social media for a minimum of one hour daily; (3) following at least one F&B brand on Instagram, TikTok, or Facebook; and (4) having previously purchased products from the followed brand, either personally or as part of household consumption decisions. Participants were recruited through online communities of F&B brand followers across these platforms. For respondents aged under 18, parental or guardian consent was obtained through an initial screening statement in the questionnaire.

A total of 400 usable responses were obtained. This number surpasses the minimum threshold recommended for SEM-PLS, which suggests a sample size of at least ten times the number of indicators associated with the most complex construct (Hair et al., 2021). Considering the presence of

three principal constructs with multiple indicators, the sample size is deemed adequate to support reliable statistical estimation.

Ethical Considerations

The research complies with fundamental ethical standards. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents received an informed consent statement at the beginning of the questionnaire outlining the study’s purpose, anonymity, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any moment. For individuals younger than 18, participation was permitted only after parental or guardian approval was confirmed through an initial screening item. No personally identifiable data were collected, and all information was used exclusively for academic purposes.

Data Collection Techniques

Data collection utilized a structured questionnaire composed of closed-ended questions measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The measured constructs included social media (content quality, interactivity, and information trustworthiness), customer engagement (cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions), and brand loyalty (repurchase intention, recommendation behaviour, and commitment to the brand). Distribution was conducted electronically via an online survey platform to enhance accessibility and response efficiency (McGilvray, 2008). Respondents were recruited purposively through social media communities, including followers of F&B brand accounts on Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook, using invitation links shared in relevant groups and direct messages.

To ensure data quality, several screening procedures were applied. First, eligibility questions were included at the beginning of the survey to confirm that respondents met the criteria (age range, active social media use, and prior interaction with F&B brands). Second, duplicate and fraudulent responses were minimized by restricting one response per device and cross-checking IP addresses and completion patterns. Third, responses with excessive missing values or straight-lining patterns were removed; however, the dataset contained minimal missing data due to the use of required-response settings in the online form. Outlier detection was conducted using standardized values and boxplot inspection, and no extreme outliers were retained that could bias the results. A total of 432 responses were initially collected, of which 400 were deemed valid after the screening process, resulting in a usable response rate of approximately 92.6%. This rigorous recruitment and data screening process enhances the reliability and validity of the findings.

Common Method Bias Assessment

Because all variables were obtained from the same respondents through a single questionnaire, the possibility of common method bias (CMB) was examined. Harman’s single-factor test indicated that no dominant factor accounted for more than 50% of the total variance, suggesting that CMB was not a critical concern. Additionally, variance inflation factor (VIF) values were evaluated to assess multicollinearity, and all values remained below recommended limits, further supporting the absence of serious method bias (Hair et al., 2021; Sarstedt et al., 2022).

Data Analysis Methods

Statistical analysis was performed using Structural Equation Modelling-Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) with SmartPLS software. This technique was selected because it is appropriate for complex model estimation, mediation testing, and datasets that may violate multivariate normality assumptions (Putra, 2022). The analytical process consisted of three main phases: (1) assessment of the measurement

model, including convergent validity, discriminant validity, and reliability; (2) evaluation of the structural model to determine explanatory capability, predictive relevance, and the significance of path coefficients through bootstrapping; and (3) mediation testing to estimate the indirect influence of social media on brand loyalty via customer engagement using bootstrapping, complemented by the Sobel test as a robustness procedure (Anubha & Shome, 2021; Hair et al., 2021; Sarstedt et al., 2022; Soleman & Jones, 2021).

Expected Outcomes

By applying these methodological procedures, the study ensures analytical rigor, ethical compliance, and robustness of findings. The research design allows for a clear examination of whether social media affects brand loyalty directly or indirectly through customer engagement, while providing practical insights for F&B companies in developing effective digital marketing strategies.

Result and Discussion

Respondent Profile

The majority of participants were between 18 and 35 years old (70%), with females representing 55% of the sample and males accounting for 45%. Instagram emerged as the most commonly used social media platform (60%), followed by TikTok (25%), Facebook (10%), and other platforms such as Twitter and YouTube (5%) (see Table 1).

Measurement Model Evaluation (Outer Model)

The measurement model was assessed to determine the validity and reliability of the constructs. Convergent validity was examined through factor loadings and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE), while internal consistency reliability was evaluated using Composite Reliability (CR) and Cronbach's Alpha. As presented in Table 2, all constructs demonstrate satisfactory measurement properties. Social media (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.89, CR = 0.92, AVE = 0.65), Customer Engagement (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.91, CR = 0.93, AVE = 0.68), and Brand Loyalty (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.88, CR = 0.91, AVE = 0.63) all exceed the recommended thresholds, confirming adequate convergent validity and internal consistency (Hair et al., 2021).

Discriminant Validity (HTMT)

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio. As presented in Table 3, all HTMT values are below the recommended threshold, indicating that each construct is empirically distinct. Specifically, the HTMT value between social media and Customer Engagement is 0.72, between social media and Brand Loyalty is 0.69, and between Customer Engagement and Brand Loyalty is 0.78, confirming adequate discriminant validity.

To further assess potential common method bias and multicollinearity, Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values were examined. The results indicate that all VIF values range between 1.45 and 2.10, which are well below the critical threshold, suggesting that collinearity is not a concern and that common method bias is unlikely to affect the results.

Structural Model Evaluation (Inner Model)

The structural model was evaluated by examining the coefficient of determination (R^2), predictive relevance (Q^2), and effect size (f^2). As reported in Table 4, the model demonstrates adequate explanatory power and predictive relevance. Customer Engagement is explained by social media with an R^2 value of 0.46, indicating a moderate level of explanatory power. Brand Loyalty shows a higher R^2 value of 0.64, suggesting that it is substantially explained by both social media and customer engagement.

Furthermore, the Q^2 values for Customer Engagement (0.31) and Brand Loyalty (0.42) are above zero, confirming that the model has satisfactory predictive relevance.

The effect size (f^2) analysis further clarifies the contribution of each exogenous construct. As shown in Table 5, social media has a large effect on customer engagement ($f^2 = 0.46$), while customer engagement exerts a large effect on brand loyalty ($f^2 = 0.52$). In contrast, the direct effect of social media on brand loyalty is moderate ($f^2 = 0.18$), indicating that although the direct pathway remains meaningful, the indirect mechanism through customer engagement plays a more substantial role.

Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis testing was performed using the bootstrapping technique within the SEM-PLS framework. As presented in Table 6, social media exerts a significant positive influence on

Table 1. Profile of Research Respondents

Characteristic	Category	Total (n)	Percentage (%)
Age	18-24 years	160	40,0
	25-30 years	120	30,0
	31-35 years	80	20,0
	>35 years	40	10,0
Gender	Male	180	45,0
	Female	220	55,0
Education	High school diploma	100	25,0
	Undergraduate (S1)	240	60,0
	Postgraduate (S2 / S3)	60	15,0
Most Used Social Media Platforms	Instagram	240	60,0
	TikTok	100	25,0
	Facebook	40	10,0
	Other (Twitter, YouTube, etc.)	20	5,0

Table 2. Construct Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	AVE
Social media	≥0.89	≥0.92	≥0.65
Customer Engagement	≥0.91	≥0.93	≥0.68
Brand Loyalty	≥0.88	≥0.91	≥0.63

Table 3. Discriminant Validity (HTMT Ratio)

Constructs	SM	CE	BL
Social media (SM)	-		
Customer Engagement (CE)	<0.72	-	
Brand Loyalty (BL)	<0.69	<0.78	-

Table 4. Structural Model Evaluation

Endogenous Variable	R^2	Q^2
Customer Engagement	≥0.46	>0,31
Brand Loyalty	≥0.64	>0,42

Table 5. Effect Size (f^2)

Relationship	f^2	Effect Size
Social media → Customer Engagement	≥0.46	Large
Customer Engagement → Brand Loyalty	≥0.52	Large
Social media → Brand Loyalty	≥0.18	Medium

customer engagement (H1: $\beta = 0.68$; $p < 0.001$), and customer engagement significantly affects brand loyalty (H2: $\beta = 0.59$; $p < 0.001$). The direct relationship between social media and brand loyalty is also significant (H3: $\beta = 0.40$; $p < 0.01$).

To determine the type and strength of mediation (H4), the indirect and total effects were calculated. The indirect effect of social media on brand loyalty through customer engagement is $\beta = 0.401$ ($p < 0.01$), which is marginally stronger than the direct effect ($\beta = 0.40$). The total effect of social media on brand loyalty is therefore $\beta = 0.801$. These results confirm a partial mediation model, in which social media influences brand loyalty both directly and indirectly through customer engagement, with the engagement pathway representing a slightly stronger mechanism. This interpretation is consistent with the findings reported in the abstract, discussion, and conclusion.

Mediation analysis using bootstrapping confirms that customer engagement plays a significant mediating role. The Sobel test ($z = 4.21$; $p < 0.001$) further supports this finding as a robustness check, indicating that brand loyalty is strengthened through both direct and engagement-based mechanisms, with evidence supporting a partial mediation structure.

This study offers empirical support that both confirms and extends existing theoretical views regarding the role of social media in fostering customer engagement and brand loyalty within Indonesia's F&B sector. The results emphasize the capacity of social media platforms to operate as strategic instruments for generating interactive experiences, encouraging consumer involvement, and reinforcing emotional connections with brands. By revealing a significant linkage between engagement and loyalty, the research advances the broader discourse on digital marketing and relationship management, while also delivering practical implications for managers aiming to strengthen competitiveness in rapidly evolving and intensely competitive markets.

Social Media and Customer Engagement

The findings of this research demonstrate that social media exerts a statistically significant and positive influence on customer engagement ($\beta = 0.68$; $p < 0.001$), thereby supporting Hypothesis H1. This outcome is consistent with Uses and Gratifications Theory, which proposes that individuals actively engage with media to satisfy needs related to information, entertainment, identity formation, and social interaction (Wei et al., 2024). Within the F&B setting, visually appealing and interactive materials, such as digital menus, short-form videos, and trend-oriented campaigns, can simultaneously capture cognitive attention and evoke emotional involvement, ultimately strengthening engagement levels. A substantial body of empirical evidence supports this association. For instance, (Öksüz et al., 2025) report that interactive social media functionalities enhance consumer engagement through reciprocal communication processes, while (Schreiner et al., 2021) highlight that engagement manifested on social platforms encompasses cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions. Likewise, (Li et al., 2020) emphasize the importance of meaningful and interactive digital experiences in cultivating customer engagement.

Nevertheless, earlier investigations have documented weaker or inconsistent relationships between social media usage and engagement outcomes. (Kreijns et al., 2022) argue that the presence of social interaction cues alone does not necessarily generate engagement unless users perceive authenticity and relational intimacy. Research conducted beyond experience-oriented industries further indicates that purely informational content may be insufficient to elicit deep engagement. Such inconsistencies suggest that the effectiveness of social media in fostering engagement is strongly dependent on contextual conditions.

The stronger relationship identified in the present study may be explained by two primary considerations. First, the F&B sector is inherently dependent on sensory stimulation and visual storytelling, which amplify the persuasive power of social media content. Second, the respondent profile was dominated by millennial and Generation Z consumers, demographic groups known to be more receptive to interactive and socially embedded digital environments (Ariani & Surawan, 2025). By highlighting these contextual and generational influences, this research refines prior scholarship by demonstrating that social media produces more substantial engagement effects in visually oriented industries and among digitally native consumer segments, thereby clarifying the contextual boundaries under which social media effectiveness is most evident.

Customer Engagement and Brand Loyalty

The results reveal that customer engagement exerts a statistically significant and positive effect on brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.59$; $p < 0.001$), thereby providing support for Hypothesis H2. These results are consistent with Relationship Marketing Theory, which emphasizes emotional bonds, trust, and commitment as key factors in building long-term loyalty (Pfajfar et al., 2022). Several studies support this relationship, (Aljuhani et al., 2023) show that actively engaged consumers develop stronger emotional bonds with brands, while (Ahmad et al., 2022) highlight that engagement driven experiences increase satisfaction and strengthen loyalty outcomes. These findings suggest that loyalty is not only behavioural but rooted in psychological connections.

Nevertheless, certain studies have identified a weaker association between engagement and loyalty, especially in environments marked by limited consumer involvement or strong price sensitivity. Under such conditions, engagement may remain superficial and fail to generate enduring loyalty. The more pronounced effect identified in this research may stem from the multidimensional operationalization of engagement, which simultaneously incorporates cognitive, emotional, and behavioural elements. By conceptualizing engagement as a comprehensive construct, this study reinforces empirical evidence that engagement functions as a fundamental antecedent of brand loyalty rather than merely a secondary consequence of digital interaction.

The Mediating Role of Customer Engagement

The mediation analysis indicates that customer engagement serves as a significant intermediary in the relationship between social media and brand loyalty (indirect effect $\beta = 0.401$; $z = 4.21$; $p < 0.001$), thereby supporting Hypothesis H4.

Table 6. Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Relationship	β	p-value	Result
H1	Social media → Customer Engagement	0.68	<0.001	Supported
H2	Customer Engagement → Brand Loyalty	0.59	<0.001	Supported
H3	Social media → Brand Loyalty	0.40	<0.01	Supported
H4	Social media → Customer Engagement → Brand Loyalty	0.401	<0.01	Supported
-	Total Effect (SM → BL)	0.801	-	-

Importantly, the direct effect of social media on brand loyalty also remains statistically significant ($\beta = 0.40$; $p < 0.01$), providing clear evidence that the relationship is characterized by partial mediation rather than full mediation. This result demonstrates that customer engagement explains a substantial portion of the relationship, yet does not fully account for it.

This pattern suggests that social media influences brand loyalty through two complementary mechanisms. First, as proposed by the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework, social media acts as an external stimulus that triggers internal cognitive and emotional states, represented by customer engagement, which in turn drive loyalty outcomes (Norhidayah et al., 2025). Second, the persistence of a significant direct effect indicates that social media can also shape loyalty independently of engagement, particularly through mechanisms such as repeated exposure, promotional messaging, brand visibility, and informational value. These direct effects may operate at a more cognitive or behavioural level, influencing purchase intentions even when deeper emotional or interactive engagement is limited.

This dual-path explanation is especially relevant in the F&B industry, where consumption decisions are often visually driven, habitual, and characterized by low switching costs. Under such conditions, consumers may develop loyalty not only through meaningful engagement but also through frequent exposure to appealing content, discounts, or trending products on social media. As a result, engagement strengthens and deepens loyalty, while direct exposure ensures continued brand salience and purchase consideration.

Previous studies support the indirect mechanism (Li et al., 2020) argue that exposure to social media content alone is insufficient to generate strong loyalty unless consumers experience meaningful engagement, while. (Chavadi et al., 2023) emphasize that loyalty outcomes depend on participation and a sense of belonging within brand communities. However, studies that report only direct effects often omit engagement from the model, potentially overestimating the role of exposure. By incorporating both pathways simultaneously, this study resolves prior inconsistencies by demonstrating that social media influences brand loyalty both directly and indirectly, with the engagement pathway being marginally stronger.

Conversely, research that identifies a direct influence of social media on brand loyalty frequently overlooks the Overall, these findings provide clearer empirical justification for concluding a partial mediation model, in which customer engagement functions as a critical, but not exclusive, mechanism linking social media activity to brand loyalty.

Brand Loyalty and Theory Perspectives

The massive growth of social media has brought about a variety of content that can be enjoyed by the general public (Anwar et al., 2024). The findings of this study can be further interpreted through the lens of Brand Loyalty Theory, which emphasizes the role of sustained consumer–brand relationships in shaping repeat behaviour and long-term commitment (Jai et al., 2022), which states that loyalty develops through four stages: cognitive, affective, conative, and action. Social media can facilitate the initial stage of loyalty by providing cognitive information about products (e.g., prices, menus, or promotions). Interaction then serves to strengthen the affective (positive emotions toward the brand) and conative (intention to repurchase) aspects, which ultimately encourage actual loyal behavior (Hsu, 2023). The findings of this study support this model by showing that without engagement, social media only stops at the cognitive (awareness) level and does not develop into behavioral loyalty. These findings have strategic implications for F&B

industry players. Companies need to understand that simply advertising or providing product information on social media is not enough to build loyalty (Sharabati et al., 2024). Effective strategies focus on creating participatory interactions, such as through user-generated content (UGC), community campaigns, giveaway contests, or collaborations with micro-influencers who are considered more authentic by consumers. Additionally, companies can leverage storytelling to highlight brand values, such as emphasizing sustainability issues, local cultural uniqueness, or emotional experiences relevant to the lifestyles of young consumers. In this way, engagement can be built not only at a functional level but also at an emotional and social level, which ultimately strengthens consumer loyalty.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to the digital marketing literature by underscoring customer engagement as a pivotal mechanism that mediates the relationship between social media activities and brand loyalty, consistent with prior conceptualizations of engagement-driven loyalty formation (Samarah et al., 2021). By doing so, the findings help clarify ongoing debates in earlier studies regarding whether social media exerts a direct influence on brand loyalty. The results show that this influence operates both directly and indirectly, with the indirect pathway through engagement being slightly stronger. This pattern is particularly evident within the food and beverage sector in Indonesia, where consumption experiences are highly visual, trend-oriented, and socially embedded (Samarah et al., 2021).

At the same time, the findings point to several avenues for future research. First, brand loyalty may also be shaped by complementary factors, such as brand trust, brand experience, and customer satisfaction, that were not incorporated into the present model. Second, as the sample is limited to Millennials and Generation Z, the applicability of the findings to other age cohorts remains constrained. Third, the cross-sectional research design restricts the ability to infer stronger causal relationships, indicating the need for longitudinal or experimental approaches in subsequent studies. Accordingly, future research is encouraged to integrate additional explanatory variables, broaden demographic coverage, and employ more diverse methodological designs to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of loyalty formation. Overall, this study reinforces the strategic importance of social media in F&B marketing, while emphasizing that sustainable brand loyalty ultimately depends on the capacity of social media initiatives to foster deep and enduring customer engagement.

Conclusion

This study examines how social media contributes to the formation of brand loyalty within Indonesia's food and beverage (F&B) industry by specifically testing the mediating role of customer engagement in the relationship between social media activities and brand loyalty. The empirical findings indicate that social media exerts both a direct and indirect influence on brand loyalty. While social media has a significant direct effect on brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.40$; $p < 0.01$), its indirect effect through customer engagement ($\beta = 0.401$; $p < 0.01$) is marginally stronger, confirming a partial mediation model. This suggests that although social media exposure can directly shape consumer preferences and purchase intentions through visibility, promotional content, and informational cues, its impact becomes more substantial when it fosters meaningful cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study offers several contributions to digital marketing scholarship. First, rather than directly operationalizing gratification as a measured construct, the study conceptually draws on Uses and Gratifications Theory to explain why interactive and content-rich social media environments stimulate consumers' cognitive and emotional

involvement. In this sense, gratification functions as a theoretical foundation underlying customer engagement, which is empirically tested in the model. Second, grounded in the Stimulus-Organism-Response framework, the findings demonstrate that customer engagement acts as a key “organism” mechanism through which social media stimuli are translated into loyalty outcomes, while also acknowledging the persistence of a direct stimulus–response pathway. This dual-path evidence helps reconcile inconsistencies in prior studies by showing that social media influences loyalty through complementary direct and engagement-driven mechanisms, rather than a single dominant pathway. Third, within the perspective of Brand Loyalty Theory, the results indicate that social media contributes to the development of early-stage cognitive loyalty, whereas customer engagement strengthens affective, conative, and behavioural loyalty stages.

In terms of contextual contribution, this study highlights that engagement-driven loyalty is particularly salient in Indonesia's F&B industry, which is characterized by highly visual consumption experiences, strong social interaction, and experiential value creation. By focusing on this sector, the study extends the digital marketing literature beyond commonly examined contexts and reinforces customer engagement as a critical explanatory construct in experience-based industries. From a managerial perspective, the findings imply that F&B firms should not rely solely on social media exposure or promotional intensity. Instead, social media strategies should be designed as participatory engagement platforms that emphasize interaction, storytelling, influencer collaboration, and user-generated content to strengthen long-term loyalty.

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. The sample was confined to Millennials and Generation Z, which may restrict the generalizability of the

findings to other demographic groups. Additionally, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to capture the dynamic evolution of engagement and loyalty over time. Future research is encouraged to incorporate additional variables such as brand trust, perceived authenticity, and cultural values, as well as to employ longitudinal and cross-industry approaches to further enrich understanding of loyalty formation. Overall, this study demonstrates that social media plays a significant role in shaping brand loyalty both directly and indirectly, with customer engagement serving as a central but not exclusive mechanism in this relationship.

Author contributions

The first author was responsible for the conceptualization of the study, development of the research framework, methodological design, data analysis, and preparation of the initial manuscript draft. The second author contributed to data collection and interpretation of the findings, and provided critical revisions, theoretical refinement, and substantive feedback to enhance the overall quality of the manuscript. Both authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript and accept full responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the work.

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