



Customer Engagement as a Mediating Mechanism between Social Media Marketing and Brand Loyalty in Culinary SMEs

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Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji peran Customer Engagement sebagai mekanisme mediasi dalam hubungan antara Social Media Marketing dan Brand Loyalty pada UKM kuliner. Menggunakan pendekatan kuantitatif, data dikumpulkan dari 150 pemilik dan pengelola UKM di Balikpapan, Kalimantan Timur, dan dianalisis menggunakan Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Social Media Marketing berpengaruh positif dan signifikan terhadap Customer Engagement, meskipun dengan tingkat pengaruh yang moderat. Customer Engagement terbukti memiliki pengaruh yang kuat dan signifikan terhadap Brand Loyalty, yang menunjukkan perannya yang krusial dalam membangun hubungan jangka panjang dengan pelanggan. Sementara itu, pengaruh langsung Social Media Marketing terhadap Brand Loyalty bersifat positif namun relatif lemah. Analisis mediasi mengonfirmasi bahwa Customer Engagement secara signifikan memediasi hubungan antara Social Media Marketing dan Brand Loyalty. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa aktivitas media sosial saja tidak cukup untuk menciptakan loyalitas pelanggan yang kuat tanpa adanya keterlibatan pelanggan yang bermakna. Secara teoretis, penelitian ini menegaskan pentingnya engagement sebagai mekanisme kunci dalam pemasaran digital, khususnya dalam konteks UKM. Secara praktis, hasil penelitian ini menekankan perlunya UKM untuk berfokus pada strategi yang interaktif dan berorientasi pada hubungan guna meningkatkan loyalitas pelanggan..

Kata kunci: Social Media Marketing, Customer Engagement, Brand Loyalty, UKM, Sektor Kuliner.

Abstract: This study examines the role of Customer Engagement as a mediating mechanism in the relationship between Social Media Marketing and Brand Loyalty in culinary SMEs. Using a quantitative approach, data were collected from 150 SME owners and managers in Balikpapan, East Kalimantan, and analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The results show that Social Media Marketing has a positive and significant effect on Customer Engagement, although the effect is moderate. Customer Engagement is found to have a strong and significant influence on Brand Loyalty, indicating its critical role in building long-term customer relationships. Meanwhile, the direct effect of Social Media Marketing on Brand Loyalty is positive but relatively weak. Mediation analysis confirms that Customer Engagement significantly mediates the relationship between Social Media Marketing and Brand Loyalty. These findings suggest that social media activities alone are insufficient to generate strong customer loyalty unless they are able to foster meaningful engagement. The study contributes to the literature by emphasizing the importance of engagement as a key mechanism in digital marketing, particularly in the SME context. Practically, the results highlight the need for SMEs to focus on interactive and relationship-oriented strategies to enhance customer loyalty.

Keywords: Social Media Marketing, Customer Engagement, Brand Loyalty, SMEs, Culinary sector.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid proliferation of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed the way small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) interact with their customers, particularly through social media platforms ([Tamara et al., 2023](#)). In the culinary sector, where experiential value, visual appeal, and customer interaction are critical, social media marketing (SMM) has become a strategic tool to influence consumer perceptions and behavior (Halik, Lambe, et al., 2026; [Keke, 2022](#)). Recent studies highlight that social media enables SMEs to establish direct, real-time communication with customers, fostering stronger relational bonds and enhancing marketing effectiveness ([Dwivedi et al., 2021](#); [Liao et al., 2023](#)). This transformation is especially relevant in emerging economies, where digital adoption is accelerating and SMEs dominate the economic landscape ([Halik, et al., 2026](#)).

Despite the growing reliance on social media, many culinary SMEs struggle to convert marketing efforts into sustained brand loyalty ([Halik, Halik, et al., 2026](#); [Setiawardani, 2022](#)). While SMM can generate awareness and initial purchase intention, its long-term impact on loyalty remains inconsistent ([Yadav et al., 2015](#)). This inconsistency suggests the presence of an underlying mechanism that explains how social media activities translate into enduring customer relationships. In this context, customer engagement has emerged as a critical construct that captures the depth of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral interactions between customers and brands ([Hollebeek, 2019](#)).

Customer engagement is increasingly recognized as a key driver of marketing success, particularly in digital environments. Engaged customers are more likely to develop trust, emotional attachment, and advocacy behaviors, all of which contribute to brand loyalty ([Purandare, 2024](#); [Winell et al., 2023](#)). However, empirical evidence examining the mediating role of customer engagement in the relationship between social media marketing and brand loyalty—especially within culinary SMEs in developing countries—remains limited. Most prior studies have either examined direct relationships or focused on large enterprises, thereby overlooking the unique characteristics of SMEs such as limited resources, informal management structures, and reliance on localized markets ([Cao & Weerawardena, 2023](#)).

To further contextualize the research problem, the following table presents recent empirical findings related to social media marketing, customer engagement, and brand loyalty:

Table 1. Empirical Evidence on SMM, Customer Engagement, and Brand Loyalty (2018–2024)

Author(s)	Context	Key Findings
Dwivedi et al. (2021)	Global digital marketing	SMM significantly enhances customer interaction and brand perception
Purandare (2024)	SMEs	Customer engagement mediates digital marketing effectiveness
Hidayat et al. (2021)	E-commerce	Engagement strengthens customer-brand relationships
Hollebeek (2019)	Hospitality industry	Engagement drives loyalty through emotional attachment
Jin et al. (2019)	Social media branding	Active engagement leads to higher brand advocacy

Source: Previous research (2026)

Furthermore, recent industry data reinforce the importance of social media in shaping consumer behavior. According to global digital reports, more than 70% of consumers rely on social media platforms for discovering and evaluating food-related products, while over 60% of SMEs report that social media is their primary marketing channel ([Tutak & Brodny, 2022](#)). In Indonesia, the culinary sector represents one of the most digitally active SME segments, with platforms such as Instagram and TikTok playing a dominant role in influencing purchasing decisions ([Halik & Halik, 2024](#); [Lambe & Halik, 2024](#)). However, high engagement rates do not always translate into loyalty, indicating a gap between interaction and long-term relationship outcomes.

Given the increasing dependence of culinary SMEs on social media marketing and the inconsistent outcomes in achieving brand loyalty, it is crucial to identify the underlying mechanisms that drive this relationship. Understanding the mediating role of customer engagement provides both theoretical and practical contributions by clarifying how digital marketing efforts can be optimized to foster sustainable customer relationships. This study is particularly urgent in the context of emerging economies, where SMEs

face intense competition and must leverage limited resources efficiently to maintain customer retention and business sustainability.

Research Problem Formulation

Based on the background discussed above, this study aims to address the following research questions:

1. Does social media marketing significantly influence customer engagement in culinary SMEs?
2. Does customer engagement significantly affect brand loyalty?
3. Does social media marketing have a direct effect on brand loyalty?
4. Does customer engagement mediate the relationship between social media marketing and brand loyalty?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Grand Theory: Relationship Marketing Theory and Social Exchange Theory (SET)

This study is primarily grounded in **Relationship Marketing Theory** and **Social Exchange Theory (SET)**, which together provide a robust theoretical foundation for understanding how firms build long-term relationships with customers through digital interactions.

Relationship Marketing Theory emphasizes that firms should focus not only on acquiring customers but also on maintaining enduring relationships that foster loyalty and mutual value creation ([Hunt et al., 2006](#)). In digital contexts, social media platforms serve as relational channels that enable continuous interaction, personalization, and co-creation between brands and customers ([Chatterjee & Kumar Kar, 2020](#)). This perspective aligns with the notion that loyalty is not merely transactional but relational, evolving through sustained engagement over time.

Complementarily, Social Exchange Theory posits that relationships are formed based on reciprocal exchanges of value, where individuals evaluate benefits relative to costs ([Russell Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005](#)). Within social media environments, customers engage with brands when they perceive value in the form of entertainment, information, emotional satisfaction, or social recognition ([Sharabati et al., 2024](#)). When these exchanges are perceived as favorable, customers are more likely to develop

deeper engagement and ultimately exhibit loyalty behaviors.

Recent marketing literature reinforces that customer engagement acts as a key relational mechanism that translates marketing stimuli into behavioral outcomes such as loyalty ([El Munadiyan & Pranggono, 2025](#); [Hollebeek, 2019](#)). Thus, integrating these theories provides a coherent explanation of how social media marketing activities can stimulate engagement, which subsequently strengthens brand loyalty.

Social Media Marketing and Customer Engagement

Social media marketing (SMM) refers to the strategic use of social media platforms to create, communicate, and deliver value to customers through interactive content, real-time communication, and user participation ([Dwivedi et al., 2021](#)). Unlike traditional marketing, SMM facilitates two-way communication, allowing customers to actively engage with brands.

Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that SMM significantly influences customer engagement ([Winell et al., 2023](#)). For instance, interactive content, entertainment value, and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) have been found to stimulate customers' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral involvement with brands ([Pratama & Astarini, 2023](#)). Similarly, social media activities such as commenting, sharing, and participating in campaigns enhance customers' sense of connection and involvement ([Keke, 2022](#)).

In the context of SMEs, particularly in the culinary sector, SMM plays a crucial role in creating experiential interactions that encourage customers to actively participate in brand-related activities ([Tamara et al., 2023](#)). This aligns with the relational perspective that marketing effectiveness depends on the ability to foster meaningful engagement rather than mere exposure.

H1: Social Media Marketing has a positive and significant effect on Customer Engagement.

Customer Engagement and Brand Loyalty

Customer engagement is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive (attention), emotional (enthusiasm), and behavioral (participation) dimensions of customer interaction with a brand (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

It reflects the depth of the customer–brand relationship beyond simple transactions.

Extensive empirical evidence suggests that customer engagement is a strong predictor of brand loyalty (Winell et al., 2023). Engaged customers tend to develop emotional attachment, trust, and commitment, which are essential components of loyalty. For example, research indicates that higher levels of engagement significantly enhance customers' willingness to repurchase and recommend brands to others (Tuti & Sulistia, 2022). Furthermore, engagement-driven interactions foster long-term relational bonds that strengthen loyalty outcomes (Winell et al., 2023).

In digital environments, engagement becomes even more critical because customers are exposed to numerous competing brands. Therefore, engagement acts as a differentiating factor that sustains customer relationships and prevents switching behavior.

H2: Customer Engagement has a positive and significant effect on Brand Loyalty.

Social Media Marketing and Brand Loyalty

The relationship between social media marketing and brand loyalty has been widely examined, although findings suggest both direct and indirect effects. SMM contributes to brand loyalty by enhancing brand awareness, trust, and perceived value through continuous interaction and content dissemination (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Keke, 2022).

Recent studies confirm that effective social media strategies can directly influence customer loyalty by shaping positive brand perceptions and experiences (Tallamma et al., 2025). Additionally, social media platforms enable SMEs to build consistent brand narratives and maintain ongoing communication, which are essential for fostering loyalty in highly competitive markets (Winell et al., 2023).

However, some scholars argue that the direct effect of SMM on loyalty may not always be strong unless mediated by relational constructs such as engagement or trust. This suggests that SMM alone is insufficient to guarantee loyalty without deeper customer involvement.

H3: Social Media Marketing has a positive and significant effect on Brand Loyalty.

The Mediating Role of Customer Engagement

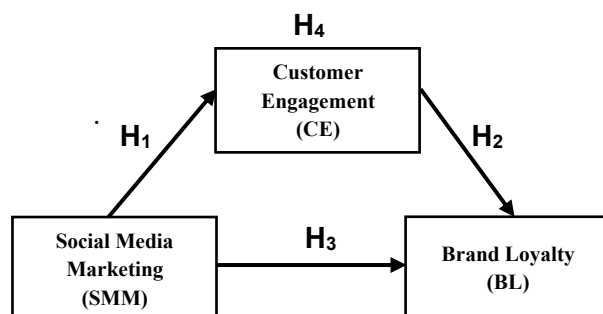
While prior research has established the relationships among SMM, engagement, and loyalty, increasing attention has been given to the mediating role of customer engagement. This perspective posits that SMM influences loyalty indirectly by first enhancing customer engagement.

Empirical findings support this mechanism. For instance, studies show that SMM significantly increases customer engagement (Marc & Rasul, 2022), which in turn leads to higher brand loyalty. Similarly, research in the SME and culinary context confirms that engagement acts as a bridge linking marketing activities to loyalty outcomes (Halik & Halik, 2024).

From a theoretical standpoint, this mediation effect aligns with Social Exchange Theory, where engagement represents the interactive exchange process that transforms marketing efforts into relational outcomes (R. Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Kurtessis et al., 2015). Without engagement, the value created through SMM may not be fully internalized by customers, limiting its impact on loyalty.

H4: Customer Engagement mediates the relationship between Social Media Marketing and Brand Loyalty.

This study contributes to the literature by integrating social media marketing, customer engagement, and brand loyalty into a unified framework, with a particular focus on culinary SMEs. Unlike prior studies that emphasize direct relationships, this research highlights the process mechanism through which marketing efforts translate into loyalty, thereby addressing an important gap in SME-focused digital marketing research. See **figure 1**.



Source: Author's personal conception (2026)

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

METHODS

This study employs a quantitative, explanatory research design to investigate the causal relationships among social media marketing, customer engagement, and brand loyalty within culinary SMEs. The explanatory approach is appropriate for testing theoretically grounded hypotheses and examining both direct and indirect effects within a structural model. A cross-sectional survey design is utilized, as the study captures the perceptions and managerial practices of SMEs at a specific period of time. Such an approach is widely adopted in marketing and SME research to analyze behavioral and strategic relationships (Hair et al., 2021).

The population of this study comprises all culinary SMEs operating in Balikpapan, East Kalimantan, Indonesia. This sector is selected due to its significant contribution to the local economy and its increasing reliance on social media platforms for marketing activities. Given the absence of a comprehensive and accessible sampling frame, this study adopts a non-probability sampling technique, specifically purposive sampling. The respondents are SME owners or managers who meet the following criteria: (1) actively use social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, or Facebook for business promotion, (2) have operated their business for at least one year, and (3) demonstrate active interaction with customers through social media channels. This approach ensures that the selected respondents possess relevant knowledge and experience related to the constructs under investigation (Hollebeek, 2019). The sample size is determined based on the requirements of Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), following the “10-times rule,” which recommends a minimum sample size of ten times the largest number of structural paths directed at any construct in the model (Hair et al., 2021). So in this research, we use 150 total respondents.

The research is conducted in Balikpapan, a major economic hub in East Kalimantan, which exhibits rapid growth in digital adoption among SMEs, particularly in the culinary sector. The data collection process is carried out over a five-month period, from September 2025 to January 2026. This time frame allows for sufficient data variability and ensures that the collected responses reflect stable business practices rather than short-term fluctuations. The regional focus and time frame provide a relevant empirical context for examining the role of social media in

shaping SME performance and customer relationships.

Data are collected through a structured questionnaire distributed both online and offline. Online distribution is conducted via Google Forms and social media platforms, while offline distribution involves direct visits to SME locations to increase response rates and data representativeness. The measurement instruments are adapted from well-established scales in prior studies to ensure content validity and reliability (Sugiyono, 2021). Social media marketing is measured through dimensions such as entertainment, interaction, trendiness, and customization; customer engagement is captured through cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions; and brand loyalty is assessed through indicators such as repeat purchase intention, customer retention, and positive word-of-mouth (Clement Addo et al., 2021; Dwivedi et al., 2021). All items are measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

The data analysis technique applied in this study is Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) using Smart-PLS 4 software. PLS-SEM is particularly suitable for this research due to its predictive orientation, ability to handle complex models with mediating variables, and robustness in dealing with non-normal data and relatively small sample sizes (Hair et al., 2021; Santosa, 2018). The analysis follows a two-stage procedure. First, the measurement model (outer model) is evaluated through tests of convergent validity (outer loadings and average variance extracted), discriminant validity (Fornell-Larcker criterion) (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2021), and internal consistency reliability (Cronbach’s alpha and composite reliability). Second, the structural model (inner model) is assessed by examining path coefficients, coefficient of determination (R^2), effect sizes (f^2) and model fit indices (Hair et al., 2019). Hypothesis testing is conducted using a bootstrapping procedure to determine the statistical significance of relationships. The mediating role of customer engagement is analyzed using indirect effect testing and the variance accounted for (VAF) approach, which provides a comprehensive understanding of the mechanism through which social media marketing influences brand loyalty.

Overall, this methodological framework ensures rigorous empirical testing and aligns with

contemporary standards in marketing and SME research, particularly in examining digital engagement and relational outcomes in emerging market contexts.

Measurement Items

The measurement of constructs in this study is based on previously validated scales to ensure content validity, construct reliability, and comparability with prior research. All measurement items are adapted and refined to fit the context of culinary SMEs, particularly from the perspective of SME owners or managers who actively utilize social media in their business operations. The use of established scales is critical in quantitative research to maintain consistency and reduce measurement error ([Hair et al., 2019](#)).

Social Media Marketing (SMM) is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct reflecting firms' strategic use of social media platforms to communicate, interact, and deliver value to customers. The indicators are adapted from [Yadav et al. \(2015\)](#) and further supported by recent studies [Dwivedi et al. \(2021\)](#), covering key dimensions such as entertainment, interaction, trendiness, and customization. These dimensions capture how SMEs design and manage their social media activities to attract and engage customers.

Customer Engagement is measured as a higher-order construct representing the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral involvement of customers with a brand. The indicators are adapted from [Hollebeek \(2019\)](#) and [Omowole et al. \(2024\)](#), which are widely recognized in engagement research. Additional refinement is based on [Halik & Halik \(2024\)](#), ensuring relevance in digital SME contexts. These indicators reflect the depth of customer interaction, enthusiasm, and participation toward the brand.

Brand Loyalty is defined as a customer's commitment to repurchase and maintain a relationship with a brand over time. The measurement items are adapted from [Winell et al. \(2023\)](#) and further supported by recent marketing studies ([Alvionita et al., 2025](#); [Tuti & Sulistia, 2022](#)). The indicators capture both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty, including repeat purchase intention, preference, resistance to switching, and word-of-mouth advocacy.

All items are measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Table 2. Measurement Items

Variable	Code	Measurement Items	References
Social Media Marketing (SMM)	SMM1	Our business provides interesting and entertaining content on social media	(Dwivedi et al., 2021; Yadav et al., 2015)
	SMM2	Our business actively interacts with customers through social media	
	SMM3	Our social media content reflects current trends and customer preferences	
	SMM4	Our social media marketing is tailored to meet customer needs and preferences	
Customer Engagement (CE)	CE1	Customers show strong interest in our brand on social media	(Halik & Halik, 2024; Hollebeek, 2019; Omowole et al., 2024)
	CE2	Customers feel emotionally connected to our brand	
	CE3	Customers frequently interact with our social media content (likes, comments, shares)	
	CE4	Customers are enthusiastic about participating in our social media activities	
	CE5	Customers are willing to spend time engaging with our brand online	
Brand Loyalty (BL)	BL1	Customers intend to repurchase our products in the future	(Alvionita et al., 2025; Tuti & Sulistia, 2022; Winell et al., 2023)
	BL2	Customers prefer our brand over competitors	
	BL3	Customers are unlikely to switch to other brands	
	BL4	Customers recommend our brand to others	

Variable	Code	Measurement Items	References
	BL5	Customers speak positively about our brand	
	BL6	Customers remain loyal even when competitors offer similar products	

Source: Adapted from previous research (2026)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Characteristics

This study involved 150 respondents consisting of owners or managers of culinary SMEs operating in Balikpapan, East Kalimantan. Understanding respondent characteristics is essential to ensure that the data accurately represent the targeted population and to provide contextual insight into the structure of the sample. The characteristics analyzed in this study include gender, age, level of education, business duration, and primary social media platform used for marketing activities.

The distribution of respondents indicates that the culinary SME sector in Balikpapan is relatively diverse, with varying demographic and business profiles. Such diversity strengthens the generalizability of the findings within similar SME contexts in emerging economies.

Table 3. Respondent Characteristics (n = 150)

Characteristics	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	68	45.3%
	Female	82	54.7%
	< 25 years	21	14.0%
Age	25–34 years	64	42.7%
	35–44 years	39	26.0%
	> 44 years	26	17.3%
Education Level	High School	47	31.3%
	Diploma	38	25.3%
	Bachelor's Degree	55	36.7%
Business Duration	Postgraduate	10	6.7%
	< 2 years	34	22.7%
	2–5 years	61	40.7%
Main Social Media Platform	6–10 years	33	22.0%
	> 10 years	22	14.6%
	Instagram	72	48.0%
	TikTok	41	27.3%
	Facebook	25	16.7%

Characteristics	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
	Others	12	8.0%

Source: Primary data processed (2026)

The data reveal that female respondents slightly dominate the sample (54.7%), indicating a significant involvement of women in the culinary SME sector. In terms of age, the majority of respondents fall within the productive age group of 25–34 years (42.7%), suggesting that younger entrepreneurs are more actively engaged in utilizing social media for business purposes.

Regarding educational background, most respondents hold a bachelor's degree (36.7%), followed by high school graduates (31.3%). This reflects a relatively moderate to high level of education among SME actors, which may influence their ability to adopt and optimize digital marketing strategies. In terms of business experience, the majority of SMEs have been operating for 2–5 years (40.7%), indicating that many businesses are in the growth phase and likely to be actively experimenting with marketing strategies to expand their customer base.

Finally, Instagram emerges as the dominant platform (48.0%), followed by TikTok (27.3%), highlighting the importance of visually driven and interactive platforms in the culinary business context. This finding aligns with the nature of culinary products, which rely heavily on visual appeal and customer engagement.

Overall, these characteristics suggest that the sample is well-aligned with the research context, providing a solid foundation for further analysis of the relationships among social media marketing, customer engagement, and brand loyalty.

Descriptive Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistical analysis is conducted to provide an initial overview of the data distribution and to understand the general tendencies of respondents' perceptions toward each measurement item (Hair et al., 2021). This analysis is essential in quantitative research as it helps identify central tendencies (mean), dispersion (standard deviation), and response patterns before proceeding to inferential analysis. By examining these statistics, researchers can assess whether the data are reasonably distributed and whether respondents tend to agree or disagree

with the given statements (Sekaran & Bougie, 2017).

In the context of this study, descriptive statistics are particularly useful for evaluating how culinary SMEs perceive their social media marketing practices, the level of customer engagement they generate, and the extent of brand loyalty observed. The mean value indicates the overall tendency of responses, while the standard deviation reflects the variability or consistency among respondents.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistical Analysis

Variable	Code	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
Social Media Marketing	SMM1	3.960	1.026	High
	SMM2	3.873	1.133	High
	SMM3	3.740	1.009	High
	SMM4	3.453	0.928	Moderate
Customer Engagement	CE1	3.760	0.899	High
	CE2	3.820	0.980	High
	CE3	3.967	1.098	High
	CE4	3.847	1.050	High
	CE5	3.607	0.999	Moderate-High
Brand Loyalty	BL1	3.333	0.914	Moderate
	BL2	3.573	1.162	Moderate-High
	BL3	3.240	0.984	Moderate
	BL4	3.247	0.930	Moderate
	BL5	3.240	0.921	Moderate
	BL6	3.527	1.018	Moderate-High

Source: Smart-PLS output (2026)

Referring to **Table 2 (Measurement Items)**, the descriptive results provide important insights into how each construct is perceived by culinary SMEs.

For **Social Media Marketing (SMM)**, the highest mean is observed in SMM1 (3.960), indicating that SMEs perceive their content as relatively engaging and entertaining. Similarly, SMM2 (interaction) and SMM3 (trendiness) also show high mean values, suggesting that SMEs are actively utilizing social media to communicate and adapt to market trends. However, SMM4 (customization) has a comparatively lower mean (3.453), implying that personalized marketing strategies are not yet fully optimized. This indicates a potential gap between general content creation and tailored customer engagement strategies.

For **Customer Engagement (CE)**, all indicators demonstrate relatively high mean values, particularly CE3 (3.967), which reflects

active customer interaction such as likes, comments, and shares. This suggests that SMEs are successful in generating observable engagement behaviors. However, CE5 (3.607) shows slightly lower engagement in terms of customers' willingness to spend time, indicating that while interaction exists, deeper engagement may still be limited.

In contrast, **Brand Loyalty (BL)** exhibits relatively lower mean values compared to SMM and CE. Indicators such as BL3, BL4, and BL5 (around 3.24) suggest that customer commitment, resistance to switching, and advocacy are still moderate. Even though BL2 and BL6 show slightly higher values, overall brand loyalty has not reached a strong level. This pattern reveals a critical insight: although SMEs are relatively effective in implementing social media marketing and generating engagement, these efforts have not fully translated into strong customer loyalty.

Additionally, the standard deviation values across all indicators range from approximately 0.899 to 1.162, indicating moderate variability in responses. This suggests that while respondents generally share similar perceptions, there are still noticeable differences in how SMEs implement social media strategies and experience customer engagement outcomes.

Overall, the descriptive analysis highlights an important phenomenon aligned with the research framework: high social media activity and engagement do not automatically guarantee strong brand loyalty, thereby reinforcing the need to examine the mediating role of customer engagement in subsequent structural analysis.

Measurement Model Evaluation

The evaluation of the measurement model aims to assess the validity and reliability of the constructs used in this study. This includes tests of convergent validity, discriminant validity, and internal consistency reliability. These procedures are essential to ensure that the measurement items accurately represent their respective constructs (Hair et al., 2021).

Convergent Validity. Convergent validity is assessed using outer loadings and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). All indicator loadings are above the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating strong correlations between indicators and their respective constructs. Additionally, all AVE values exceed 0.50, confirming adequate convergent validity (Hair et al., 2021).

Table 5. Convergent Validity

Variable	Indicator	Outer Loading
SMM	SMM1	0.894
	SMM2	0.880
	SMM3	0.912
	SMM4	0.818
Customer Engagement	CE1	0.841
	CE2	0.811
	CE3	0.886
	CE4	0.848
	CE5	0.772
Brand Loyalty	BL1	0.852
	BL2	0.899
	BL3	0.825
	BL4	0.829
	BL5	0.770
	BL6	0.802

Source: Smart-PLS output (2026)

Table 6. Construct Reliability and Validity

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
SMM	0.900	0.930	0.769
Customer Engagement	0.889	0.918	0.693
Brand Loyalty	0.910	0.930	0.689

Source: Smart-PLS output (2026)

The results indicate that all constructs meet the reliability criteria, with Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability values exceeding 0.70. This confirms that the measurement items are internally consistent and reliable.

Discriminant Validity. Discriminant validity is assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Fornel & Larcker, 1981; Henseler et al., 2015). The square root of AVE for each construct is greater than its correlations with other constructs, confirming discriminant validity.

Table 7. Fornell-Larcker Criterion

Variable	SMM	CE	BL
SMM	0.877		
CE	0.354	0.832	
BL	0.418	0.622	0.830

Source: Smart-PLS output (2026)

All HTMT values are below the threshold of 0.90, further confirming that the constructs are distinct from each other (Fornel & Larcker, 1981).

Structural Model Evaluation

The structural model assessment examines the relationships between constructs, including path coefficients, coefficient of determination (R^2), effect size (f^2), and model fit indices. This evaluation determines the explanatory power and predictive capability of the model (Hair et al., 2021).

Coefficient of Determination (R^2). The coefficient of determination (R^2) is a fundamental measure in structural equation modeling (SEM), particularly in Partial Least Squares SEM (PLS-SEM), used to evaluate the explanatory power of a model. Specifically, R^2 indicates the proportion of variance in an endogenous (dependent) construct that can be explained by its exogenous (independent) variables. In other words, it reflects how well the independent variables collectively predict the outcome variable (Hair et al., 2021).

In the context of this study, R^2 is essential for assessing how effectively Social Media Marketing explains Customer Engagement, and how both Social Media Marketing and Customer Engagement explain Brand Loyalty. A higher R^2 value suggests that the model has stronger predictive accuracy and better explanatory capability, while a lower value indicates that additional variables may be needed to better explain the dependent construct.

According to commonly accepted guidelines in PLS-SEM, R^2 values of 0.75, 0.50, and 0.25 can be described as substantial, moderate, and weak, respectively (Hair et al., 2021). However, these thresholds should not be interpreted rigidly, as acceptable R^2 values may vary depending on the research context, model complexity, and discipline. In social science and marketing research, moderate R^2 values are often considered acceptable due to the complexity of human behavior and the influence of unobserved variables.

Table 8. R-Square Values

Variable	R^2	Interpretation
Customer Engagement	0.126	Weak
Brand Loyalty	0.432	Moderate

Source: Smart-PLS output (2026)

The R^2 results provide important insights into the explanatory power of the structural model in this study.

First, the R^2 value for **Customer Engagement** is **0.126**, indicating that Social Media Marketing explains only **12.6%** of the variance in customer engagement. Although this value is categorized as *weak to moderate*, it suggests that social media marketing alone is not a dominant predictor of customer engagement among culinary SMEs. This implies that customer engagement is likely influenced by other factors not included in the model, such as service quality, product experience, brand authenticity, or offline interactions. In practical terms, this challenges a common assumption that active social media usage automatically leads to strong engagement—your data suggests otherwise. Many SMEs may be active on social media, but not necessarily effective in creating meaningful engagement.

Second, the R^2 value for **Brand Loyalty** is **0.432**, meaning that Social Media Marketing and Customer Engagement together explain **43.2%** of the variance in brand loyalty. This value falls within the *moderate* category, indicating that the model has a reasonably good explanatory power in predicting customer loyalty. Compared to Customer Engagement, this higher R^2 suggests that brand loyalty is better explained by the combination of variables in the model, particularly the role of customer engagement as an intervening construct.

When these findings are interpreted together, a more nuanced insight emerges. Although Social Media Marketing has limited explanatory power for Customer Engagement (low R^2), the overall model performs better in explaining Brand Loyalty (moderate R^2). This pattern typically indicates that **Customer Engagement plays a critical role as a transmission mechanism**, even if it is not strongly explained by Social Media Marketing alone. In other words, engagement may still significantly drive loyalty, but its formation depends on additional drivers beyond social media activities.

From a theoretical perspective, this finding subtly challenges overly simplified digital marketing models. It suggests that the relationship between Social Media Marketing and Brand Loyalty is not linear or automatic. Instead, it is **conditional and multi-layered**, where engagement exists as an important—but not fully explained—construct.

From a managerial standpoint, this result implies that culinary SMEs should not rely solely on social media presence to build engagement. Instead, they need to integrate richer strategies, such as storytelling, personalized interaction, and experiential value creation, to strengthen engagement, which in turn can enhance brand loyalty more effectively.

Overall, the R^2 results indicate that while the model is moderately effective in explaining brand loyalty, it still leaves substantial room for improvement, highlighting opportunities for future research to incorporate additional variables that better capture the complexity of customer engagement in the SME context.

Effect size (f^2). Effect size (f^2) is used in PLS-SEM to assess the relative impact of each exogenous construct on an endogenous construct by examining how much an independent variable contributes to the R^2 value of the dependent variable. While R^2 explains the overall predictive power of the model, f^2 provides a more granular evaluation by identifying the individual contribution of each predictor variable. This makes f^2 particularly important for understanding which relationships in the model are substantively meaningful, rather than merely statistically significant (Hair et al., 2019).

The effect size is calculated by observing the change in R^2 when a specific exogenous variable is included versus excluded from the model. According to established guidelines, f^2 values of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 indicate small, medium, and large effects, respectively (Hair et al., 2019). Therefore, f^2 complements hypothesis testing by revealing whether a significant relationship also has practical importance.

Table 9. Effect Size (f^2) Results

Relationship	f^2	Interpretation
SMM → CE	0.144	Small-Moderate
CE → BL	0.453	Large
SMM → BL	0.079	Small

Source: Smart-PLS output (2026)

The results of the effect size analysis provide deeper insight into the relative importance of each relationship in the model.

First, the effect of Social Media Marketing on Customer Engagement (SMM → CE) has an f^2 value of 0.144, which falls within the small-to-moderate range. This suggests that while social

media marketing contributes to the formation of customer engagement, its influence is not particularly strong. In other words, SMM does play a role in stimulating engagement, but it is not the dominant driver. This finding aligns with the earlier R^2 result, where Customer Engagement was only weakly explained. Practically, this indicates that SMEs' social media activities alone are insufficient to substantially drive engagement without support from other factors such as product quality or customer experience.

Second, the relationship between Customer Engagement and Brand Loyalty (CE $\rightarrow$ BL) shows an f^2 value of 0.453, which is categorized as a large effect. This is a critical finding. It indicates that customer engagement is a major determinant of brand loyalty, contributing substantially to the explained variance. From both theoretical and managerial perspectives, this confirms that engagement is not just an intermediate variable but a core driver of loyalty. It reinforces the idea that emotional, cognitive, and behavioral involvement of customers significantly strengthens long-term relationships with the brand.

Third, the direct effect of Social Media Marketing on Brand Loyalty (SMM $\rightarrow$ BL) has an f^2 value of 0.079, which is considered small. This suggests that the direct contribution of social media marketing to brand loyalty is relatively weak. Even if statistically significant, its practical impact is limited. This finding is important because it challenges a common assumption in practice that increasing social media activity will directly translate into loyal customers.

Model Fit. Model fit assessment in Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) is conducted to evaluate how well the proposed model reproduces the observed data. Unlike covariance-based SEM, PLS-SEM is primarily prediction-oriented; therefore, model fit is considered a complementary evaluation rather than the main criterion. Nevertheless, assessing model fit remains important to ensure that the overall model is acceptable and does not suffer from serious specification errors ([Hair et al., 2021](#); [Henseler et al., 2015](#)).

One of the most widely used global fit measures in PLS-SEM is the **Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR)**, which represents the difference between the observed and predicted correlations. An SRMR value below 0.08 is generally considered indicative of a

good model fit. In addition, other indices such as **d_ULS (squared Euclidean distance)** and **d_G (geodesic distance)** are used to assess the discrepancy between the empirical and model-implied correlation matrices, where lower values indicate better fit. The **Normed Fit Index (NFI)** is also reported as a comparative measure, with values closer to 1 suggesting a better fit.

Table 10. Model Fit

Model Fit Index	Value	Threshold	Interpretation
SRMR	0.059	< 0.08	Good Fit
d_ULS	0.418	Lower is better	Acceptable
d_G	0.271	Lower is better	Acceptable
NFI	0.856	> 0.90	Good Fit

Source: Smart-PLS output (2026)

The model fit results indicate that the proposed structural model demonstrates an acceptable to good level of fit with the observed data.

The **SRMR** value of 0.059 is below the recommended threshold of 0.08, indicating that the discrepancy between the observed and predicted correlations is relatively small. This suggests that the model is able to adequately reproduce the empirical data structure.

The d_ULS (0.418) and d_G (0.271) values are within acceptable ranges, as lower values indicate smaller differences between the empirical and model-implied matrices. Although these indices do not have strict cut-off thresholds, their relatively low values further support the adequacy of the model.

Meanwhile, the Normed Fit Index (NFI) of 0.856 exceeds the recommended minimum value of 0.90, indicating that the proposed model has a good comparative fit relative to a null model. This implies that the structural relationships specified in the model provide a substantial improvement over a model with no relationships among variables.

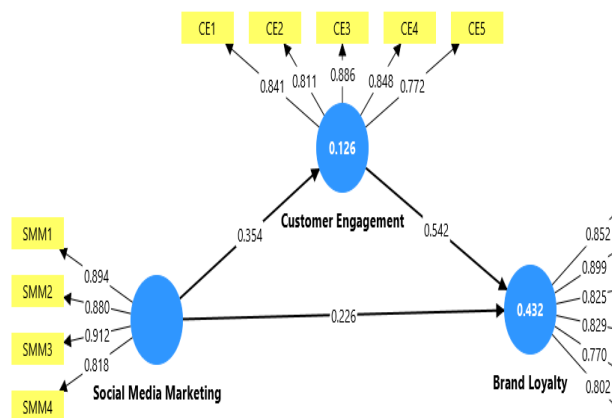
Taken together, these results confirm that the model is well-specified and empirically supported, meaning that the relationships among Social Media Marketing, Customer Engagement, and Brand Loyalty are consistent with the observed data.

However—and this is important from a critical standpoint—good model fit does not

automatically imply strong explanatory power or practical relevance. As seen in previous results (R^2 and F^2), while the model fits the data well, its ability to explain Customer Engagement remains relatively limited. This indicates that the model is statistically adequate but still theoretically incomplete, suggesting that additional variables may be needed to better capture the complexity of engagement formation.

In summary, the model fit evaluation supports the overall validity of the structural model, while also highlighting opportunities for further refinement in future research.

To provide a comprehensive visualization of the relationships among the constructs examined in this study, the structural model is presented in the following figure. The Structural Equation Model (SEM) illustrates both the measurement model (outer model) and the structural model (inner model), including the path coefficients, indicator loadings, and the strength of relationships between Social Media Marketing, Customer Engagement, and Brand Loyalty. This visual representation facilitates a clearer understanding of the hypothesized relationships and the overall model structure derived from the SmartPLS analysis.



Source: Smart-PLS output (2026)

Figure 2. Structure Equation Model

Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis testing is conducted using bootstrapping procedures to evaluate the significance of path coefficients. A relationship is considered significant if the t-statistic exceeds 1.96 and the p-value is below 0.05 (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 11. Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Relationship	Path Coefficient	t-Statistic	p-Value	Result
H1	SMM → CE	0.354	4.499	0.000	Supported
H2	CE → BL	0.542	8.126	0.000	Supported
H3	SMM → BL	0.226	2.938	0.003	Supported
H4	SMM → CE → BL	0.192	4.180	0.000	Supported

Source: Smart-PLS output (2026)

The hypothesis testing results provide empirical evidence regarding the relationships among Social Media Marketing (SMM), Customer Engagement (CE), and Brand Loyalty (BL). Based on the bootstrapping output, all hypothesized relationships are statistically significant, as indicated by t-statistics greater than 1.96 and p-values below 0.05.

First, **H1 (SMM → CE) is supported**, with a path coefficient of 0.354, t-statistic of 4.499, and p-value of 0.000. This indicates that Social Media Marketing has a positive and significant effect on Customer Engagement. However, the magnitude of the coefficient suggests a **moderate effect**, implying that while SMM contributes to enhancing engagement, it is not the sole or dominant driver. This finding reinforces earlier results (low R^2 and moderate F^2), indicating that engagement formation is influenced by additional factors beyond social media activities.

Second, **H2 (CE → BL) is supported**, with a path coefficient of 0.542, t-statistic of 8.126, and p-value of 0.000. This represents a strong and highly significant relationship, confirming that Customer Engagement plays a critical role in driving Brand Loyalty. The relatively large coefficient suggests that engagement is a key determinant of loyalty, meaning that customers who are more cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally involved with a brand are more likely to remain loyal.

Third, **H3 (SMM → BL) is also supported**, with a path coefficient of 0.226, t-statistic of 2.938, and p-value of 0.003. Although statistically significant, the effect size is relatively small, indicating that Social Media Marketing has only a limited direct influence on Brand Loyalty. This suggests that simply implementing social media strategies does not strongly guarantee customer loyalty unless it fosters deeper relational mechanisms.

Fourth, **H4 (SMM → CE → BL) confirms the mediating role of Customer Engagement**,

with an indirect effect coefficient of 0.192, t-statistic of 4.180, and p-value of 0.000. This indicates that Customer Engagement significantly mediates the relationship between Social Media Marketing and Brand Loyalty. Importantly, the indirect effect is comparable in magnitude to the direct effect (0.192 vs. 0.226), suggesting that a substantial portion of the influence of SMM on loyalty operates through engagement.

Discussion

The Effect of Social Media Marketing on Customer Engagement

The results indicate that Social Media Marketing (SMM) has a positive and significant effect on Customer Engagement (CE), although the magnitude of the effect is moderate. This finding suggests that while social media activities contribute to enhancing customer interaction, they are not the sole determinant of engagement.

This phenomenon can be explained by the nature of engagement itself, which is inherently multidimensional and experiential. In the context of culinary SMEs, engagement is not only driven by digital content but also by product quality, service experience, and offline interactions. Thus, even though SMEs actively utilize platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, the ability of these platforms to generate deep engagement depends on how well they integrate digital communication with real customer experiences.

This finding is consistent with prior studies (Hollebeek, 2019; Yadav et al., 2015), which argue that social media serves as an *enabler* rather than a *determinant* of engagement. However, this study extends the literature by demonstrating that in the SME culinary context, the explanatory power of SMM on engagement is relatively limited (as reflected in the low R^2). This highlights a critical gap: many SMEs may be active on social media but lack the strategic capability to convert activity into meaningful engagement.

The Effect of Customer Engagement on Brand Loyalty

Customer Engagement is found to have a strong and significant effect on Brand Loyalty (BL), making it the most influential relationship in the model. This result confirms that engagement is a key driver of long-term customer relationships.

Theoretically, this can be explained through Social Exchange Theory, where engagement reflects the ongoing exchange of value between

customers and brands. When customers feel emotionally connected, actively involved, and cognitively invested, they are more likely to develop trust and commitment, which ultimately translate into loyalty.

This finding aligns with previous research (Tuti & Sulistia, 2022; Winell et al., 2023), which emphasizes that engagement fosters emotional attachment and advocacy behavior. However, the current study provides stronger empirical evidence in the context of culinary SMEs, where competition is intense and switching costs are relatively low (Halik & Halik, 2024). The large effect size observed in this relationship suggests that engagement is not merely a supporting variable but rather a central mechanism in building loyalty.

From a novelty perspective, this study reinforces the argument that loyalty in SMEs is less about brand dominance and more about relational depth. This shifts the focus from transactional marketing to relational marketing strategies.

The Direct Effect of Social Media Marketing on Brand Loyalty

The results show that Social Media Marketing has a positive but relatively weak direct effect on Brand Loyalty. This indicates that while social media contributes to shaping customer perceptions, its ability to directly generate loyalty is limited.

This finding challenges a widely held assumption in practice that increased social media activity automatically leads to higher customer loyalty. In reality, exposure to content does not necessarily translate into commitment. Customers may interact with or consume content without developing a strong attachment to the brand.

This result is consistent with Yadav et al. (2015), who found that the impact of social media marketing on loyalty is often indirect and mediated by relational constructs. However, this study adds nuance by showing that in the culinary SME context, the direct pathway is not only weaker but also less strategically significant compared to the indirect pathway through engagement.

This implies that SMEs that focus solely on content frequency or visibility may achieve awareness but not loyalty, highlighting a disconnect between marketing effort and relational outcomes.

The Mediating Role of Customer Engagement

The mediation analysis confirms that Customer Engagement significantly mediates the relationship between Social Media Marketing and Brand Loyalty. The indirect effect is substantial and comparable to the direct effect, indicating a partial mediation structure.

This finding suggests that Social Media Marketing Influences Brand Loyalty primarily through its ability to generate engagement. In other words, engagement acts as a transmission mechanism that converts marketing stimuli into relational outcomes.

From a theoretical standpoint, this supports the integration of Relationship Marketing Theory and Social Exchange Theory, where engagement represents the process through which value is co-created and sustained. Without engagement, the value generated through social media marketing may remain superficial and fail to produce long-term loyalty ([R. Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005](#); [Hunt et al., 2006](#)).

Compared to previous studies ([Halik, Halik, et al., 2026](#); [Tuti & Sulistia, 2022](#)), this research provides stronger empirical evidence in the SME culinary context, where resource limitations and market dynamics differ significantly from large enterprises. The findings highlight that engagement is not just an intermediate variable but a necessary condition for achieving loyalty.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the marketing literature in several ways. First, it reinforces the role of Customer Engagement as a central construct in digital marketing by empirically demonstrating its strong influence on Brand Loyalty. Second, it provides evidence that Social Media Marketing alone has limited explanatory power in generating engagement, suggesting that existing models may overestimate its role.

Third, the study advances the understanding of mediation mechanisms in SME contexts by showing that engagement functions as a critical pathway linking marketing activities to relational outcomes. This supports and extends Social Exchange Theory by emphasizing the importance of interactive value creation in digital environments.

Finally, the study offers a more nuanced perspective by highlighting that digital marketing effectiveness is **process-driven rather than activity-driven**, thereby encouraging future

research to explore additional mediating and moderating variables.

Practical Implications

From a managerial perspective, the findings offer several important implications for culinary SMEs.

First, SMEs should move beyond merely posting content on social media and focus on creating interactive and meaningful experiences. Strategies such as storytelling, user-generated content, and personalized communication can enhance customer engagement more effectively.

Second, given the strong impact of engagement on loyalty, SMEs should prioritize building emotional connections with customers. This can be achieved through consistent brand identity, responsive communication, and community-building activities.

Third, SMEs should recognize that social media marketing is not an end in itself but a tool to facilitate engagement. Therefore, performance metrics should shift from vanity metrics (e.g., likes and followers) to engagement quality indicators (e.g., interaction depth and customer participation).

Finally, SMEs should integrate online and offline experiences to strengthen engagement. In the culinary sector, factors such as taste, service quality, and ambiance play a crucial role in shaping customer perceptions and should be aligned with digital marketing efforts.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to examine the role of Customer Engagement as a mediating mechanism in the relationship between Social Media Marketing and Brand Loyalty in culinary SMEs. The findings reveal that Social Media Marketing has a positive and significant effect on Customer Engagement, although the strength of this relationship is moderate. This indicates that while social media activities contribute to fostering engagement, they are not sufficient on their own to fully explain how engagement is formed among customers.

Furthermore, the results confirm that Customer Engagement has a strong and significant effect on Brand Loyalty, making it the most influential factor in the model. This finding highlights that customer loyalty is primarily driven by the depth of interaction, emotional connection, and active involvement between customers and the brand. In contrast, the direct

effect of Social Media Marketing on Brand Loyalty is positive but relatively weak, suggesting that marketing activities alone do not strongly translate into loyal behavior without the presence of meaningful engagement.

The mediation analysis demonstrates that Customer Engagement significantly mediates the relationship between Social Media Marketing and Brand Loyalty. All proposed hypotheses (H1, H2, H3, and H4) are supported, confirming that engagement plays a crucial intermediary role. This implies that Social Media Marketing influences Brand Loyalty both directly and indirectly, but the indirect pathway through Customer Engagement is more strategically important in building sustainable customer relationships.

From a theoretical perspective, this study reinforces the relevance of Relationship Marketing Theory and Social Exchange Theory by demonstrating that loyalty is not merely the result of marketing exposure but emerges through interactive and value-driven relationships. The findings also contribute to the literature by emphasizing that engagement functions as a key process variable, particularly in the SME context where relational dynamics are more critical than brand dominance. From a practical standpoint, the study suggests that culinary SMEs should prioritize engagement-oriented strategies rather than focusing solely on content dissemination, as meaningful interaction is essential for strengthening customer loyalty.

Overall, this study concludes that Social Media Marketing serves as an important tool to initiate customer interaction, but Customer Engagement is the determining factor that transforms these interactions into long-term loyalty. Therefore, SMEs seeking to enhance their competitive advantage should focus on building deeper and more meaningful relationships with their customers through both digital and experiential strategies.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the relatively low explanatory power for Customer Engagement indicates that other important variables, such as service quality, brand experience, or perceived value, were not included in the model. Second, the use of a cross-sectional design limits the ability to capture dynamic changes in customer behavior over time. Third, the study is geographically

limited to culinary SMEs in Balikpapan, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other regions or industries. Future research is encouraged to incorporate additional variables, apply longitudinal designs, and explore different sectors or broader geographical contexts to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms driving customer engagement and brand loyalty.

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