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From Influence to Loyalty: The Mediating Role of Brand Image in Social Media Marketing

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	The dominant force in influencing customer behaviour during this digital era is social media marketing (SMM), which strongly affects consumer perceptions, along with preferences and builds brand loyalty. Research has shown direct social media marketing effects on consumer loyalty, yet the complete assessment of brand image as an emotional and psychological link remains unexplored. The research utilises quantitative methods to study how brand image functions as an intermediary factor between social media marketing activities and brand loyalty development. 200 users conducting social media activity involving brand interactions through an established questionnaire provided research data. Analysis with the Smart PLS-SEM and correlation methods statistically confirmed that brand image serves as a major intermediate factor linking social media marketing to customer loyalty. Nurtured brand images build customer loyalty and commitment. Following this study, though, social media remains the initial factor that attracts customers to a brand, according to research findings. The work adds new knowledge to digital consumer theory while giving brand marketers actionable social media recommendation strategies for building brand-focused social marketing strategies. **KEYWORDS:** Social Media Marketing; Brand Image; Brand Loyalty; Consumer Influence; Digital Marketing

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media has brought about extensive changes to digital brand interactions because of its emergence in the marketplace. The conventional sector of brand communication ran through traditional media channels, primarily using television, radio and print platforms. Brand-consumer connections evolved through the creation of social media, which brought Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and TikTok to the forefront of brand interaction. Marketers now face active consumer participation, which allows them to contribute to brand storytelling by sharing content and user-generated material (Ismagilova et al., 2021). The modern marketing approach emphasises genuine trust development alongside friendly practices above standard commercial transactions. Firms understand how customers rely on digital content and peer endorsements, so they have developed methods that focus on both exposure and emotional relationship development. The domain of social media marketing requires four critical strategies, which include influencer marketing, content customisation, storytelling and community development (Alalwan, 2018). The initial goal of these techniques is to influence customer opinions and behaviour patterns, but lasting economic success can only be achieved through turning influence into long-term customer devotion. Articles using digital platforms face an enduring problem when they attempt to convert short-lived customer attention into enduring customer loyalty and brand commitment. The research demands further studies about the social media marketing effects on customer loyalty because brand image perception maintains its pivotal function. Scholarly research, along with industrial studies, indicates that brand loyalty develops from digital impact only when a strong positive brand image exists (Charlesworth, 2014; Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016). The research examines the psychological links that appear in the relationship between brand influence and brand image, and customer loyalty. This research demonstrates whether brand image functions as the medium that connects social media marketing with brand loyalty. The research enhances existing academic understanding by applying psychological branding models to concrete digital monitoring data and yielding results that benefit both academic and marketing practice.

1.1. Rise of Social Media Marketing

Social Media Marketing has swiftly transitioned from a marginal approach to a fundamental component in the marketing plans of most companies. In 2023, over 4.9 billion individuals worldwide engage with social media, averaging 2.5 hours each day on diverse platforms (Kasemsap, 2018). This omnipresence has allowed marketers to connect with consumers instantaneously, cultivating more tailored and immersive experiences than ever possible. In contrast to conventional marketing channels, social media marketing facilitates two-way communication, fosters community engagement, and cultivates brand-consumer relationships that extend beyond simple transactions (Appel et al., 2020). Through social media platforms, brands conduct advertising campaigns in addition to sharing stories while providing support to customers, managing PR needs and enabling consumer collaboration in product development. Social media facilitates the ability to create influence because of its core strength. Companies achieve consumer perception and intent modifications through various methods that include influencer marketing combined with branded content and social listening, plus audience engagement. Influencers, both macro and micro, significantly influence consumer perceptions, particularly among Gen Z and millennial demographics, who place greater trust in peer endorsements than in corporate ads (Lou & Yuan, 2019a). Platforms such as Instagram and YouTube have transformed the construction of brand awareness and preference, establishing influence as a fundamental element of contemporary branding. Social media trends disappear quickly, together with branded content, so consumers need authentic value through engagement to stay focused. Social media marketing receives frequent criticism, despite delivering engagement success, because it often fails to establish brand loyalty (Bianchi et al., 2022). Consumer loyalty cannot be assumed solely from social media interactions, despite contentment indicators such as likes and shares. More and more marketers are dedicating their efforts to study the fundamental components that generate brand loyalty while operating in the SMM domain. The assessment of emotional resonance alongside trust and satisfaction, and brand image plays a vital role in developing enduring customer relationships, although being less visible (This encompasses the examination of constructs such as emotional resonance). Given this situation, brands need to begin investigating methods SMM strategies can develop from superficial effects into real brand loyalty mechanisms (Charlesworth, 2014).

1.2. Importance of Brand Image

Brand image determines customer actions because it functions as the subconscious understanding people hold about brand products or services in their minds. An image of a brand combines consumer beliefs with emotions as well as attitudes and perceptions, which form through personal experiences and media communications ranging from commercials to reviews and social media content (Keller, 2013). When a brand maintains strong image beliefs, consumers find it easier to trust the brand while reducing purchase uncertainties and modifying both the purchasing readiness and product use behaviours. Continuous exposure to brand communications has led customers to flood information channels daily, so a solid and positive brand image provides consumers with psychological grounding to build their preferences and maintain brand loyalty (Fawad Sheikh et al., 2014). Brand image matches psychological frameworks, which depict consumer behaviour theories by showing attitudes formed when people absorb functional and emotional signals (Bian & Forsythe, 2012). The psychological messages behind brand identity on social media platforms appear as influencer alliances, together with visual expressions of content and tonal communication styles that drive audience response. Through effective brand image curation, the representation of the product can improve consumer perception of product worth while strengthening its credibility before consumers experience it firsthand (Ebrahim, 2020). Favourable brand images produce emotional bonds with customers that lead to enhanced retention, together with positive word-of-mouth communications and successful resistance toward adversary marketing approaches. In the realm of social media, brand image serves as a mediator connecting marketing activity to customer responses. Although marketing initiatives may generate awareness or engagement, it is the perceived brand image that ultimately determines whether customers establish enduring connections with the brand. The mediating function holds high importance within digital environments because trust remains fragile while brands undergo constant authenticity verification (Kuswati et al., 2021). Market advertisers looking to create lasting digital brands should understand how brand image develops while studying its effects on consumer loyalty because this knowledge guides their branding strategies. The analysis focuses on brand image as the main variable to investigate its function in transforming customer influence into long-term loyalty.

1.3. Statement of the Problem

▪ Social media marketing and influencer partnerships create improved brand visibility and prompt short-term consumer reactions, yet customer loyalty, defined by repeated purchases and emotional connection, remains disorganised among different sectors (Algharabat & Rana, 2021).
▪ High engagement performance from brands through likes and shares, and comments fails to turn into sustained customer relationships or repeat sales, according to (Hajli et al., 2017).
▪ Multiple academic investigations demonstrate the necessity of brand image for building trust, together with customer loyalty (Jacksen et al., 2021), but researchers have identified that insufficient models and unclear descriptions of brand image mediating roles among social media influence and customer loyalty represent ongoing literature gaps (Ali et al., 2021).

▪ Market confusion about brand image causes difficulty for marketers to develop fully integrated strategies, moving past basic engagement levels into lasting relationships with consumers. The gap in research must be filled by understanding the psychological link between brand image, according to (Abd Elsalam et al., 2022).

1.4. Objective of the Study
▪ A study for assessing social media marketing's effects on consumer loyalty requires examining consumer reactions to branded content, together with influencer campaigns, along with social media narratives against their resulting attitudinal and behavioural loyalty attributes.
▪ This research investigates how brand image functions as a mediation factor through its analysis of customers' social media-altered brand perceptions and emotional relations leading to changes in loyalty results.
▪ To formulate and experimentally evaluate a conceptual model wherein social media marketing serves as the independent variable, brand loyalty functions as the dependent variable, and brand image acts as the mediator, utilising a quantitative methodology and mediation analysis.
▪ To furnish actionable insights for digital marketers on optimising their social media strategy for both visibility and enduring consumer loyalty and advocacy.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Social media marketing maintains its status as a revolutionary approach for brands to engage customers while modifying how consumers judge them. (Charlesworth, 2014), along with (Xiong et al., 2018) demonstrate that social media marketing changes brand equity and consumer loyalty dimensions. Excellent brand equity component Brand Image helps consumers understand marketing messages while reacting to promotional material (Keller, 2013). Research evidence shows that a strong company image creates lasting consumer loyalty through social media contacts (Ebrahim, 2020). Research about SMM and customer loyalty through brand image mediation remains scarce because only limited quantitative work has been conducted on this relationship. The study addresses this research space by creating empirical findings about the psychological elements that guide digital brand interactions.

2.1. Overview of Social Media Marketing
Social media marketing stands as a basic marketing method of recent times that transforms brand-consumer interactions. The platform takes advantage of social media destinations, including Facebook and Twitter, along with Snapchat, LinkedIn and Instagram for product promotions while engaging target audiences in communal activities. The instant connection capabilities of social media enable an effective method for building brand-consumer relationships, according to (Alalwan, 2018). The various social media marketing approaches consist of content marketing, together with influencer marketing, user-generated content, paid advertising and community development. According to (Dwivedi et al., 2021), social media marketing provides a substantial impact on customer choices through enhancements of brand awareness, together with increases in perceived value and emotional ties. The transition from traditional advertising to micro and macro influencers has brought about power shifts because consumer peers have gained more authority than standard marketing methods. Brand proponents exercise their role by fostering authenticity, which results in better perception and loyalty growth through authentic storytelling practices (Lou & Yuan, 2019a). A strategic and dynamic approach to content presentation determines SMM's success level. According to (Shareef et al., 2019), research results show that companies delivering relevant, valuable, customised information to their consumers usually obtain superior satisfaction levels and loyalty outcomes from their customers. The method demonstrates that SMM functions beyond promotional use because it enables the formation of relationships that grow through brand-customer exchange. Research needs to investigate the direct relationship between SMM and its ability to produce long-term loyalty effects, even though this platform is currently widespread. Research into the psychological mechanisms, including brand image, needs special focus because they influence the relationship between SMM and customer loyalty. The scientific community requires more attention to understand how social media marketing sustains customer loyalty despite its established ability to alter customer perceptions (Kasemsap, 2018).

2.2. The Role of Brand Image in Creating Brand Loyalty
Consumer brand perceptions, together with brand loyalty, develop from the brand image, which serves as a fundamental influence factor. A brand image consists of all thoughts and ideas about a brand that shape consumer purchasing decisions as well as sustained brand loyalty. As per (Keller's, 2013) In brand equity models, the creation of value for firms and customers depends heavily on brand image and the generated cognitive and emotional links directly impact customer loyalty. The scientific research of recent times reveals that strong positive brand images create customers' trust and purchasing intent (Rather, 2018). Consumers show loyalty to businesses that maintain true and consistent communication while being reputable in their public image. Brand image builds a psychological connection and sustained satisfaction, which leads customers to develop both psychological and behavioural loyalty (Saini et al., 2021). Digital channels enable brands to build brand image by creating carefully planned stories that are accompanied by visual identity elements. Social media platforms provide customers with the ability to participate and see brands practising

their values while they help construct the importance of these values. Participation from consumers enables better brand image formation while strengthening their attachment to the brand (Ul Islam et al., 2017). Brand perception quality, together with brand authenticity determines the brand image. According to (Jacksen et al., 2021) Customers feel more devoted toward brands that display images that match their conception, along with their fundamental values. The essence of image transcends aesthetic perception by incorporating elements of how a business appears ethically and delivers service, and contributes to social responsibility. Organisations that want to keep their loyal customers need to build strong brand images because social media marketing has created a volatile consumer environment (Yohana Meilani et al., 2020).

2.3. Mediating Role of Brand Image
Inside digital marketing scenarios, the brand image acts as both an independent element and a vital factor that influences customer activities in the buying process. Literature consistently demonstrates how brand image operates as a mediator when marketing activities impact customer loyalty and purchase intentions, and social media marketing engages influencers with audiences. According to (Ramesh et al., 2019), the mediating force describes the mental change processes that marketing campaigns transform into consumer perception patterns that result in behavioural changes. Brand image acts as a strong mediator that connects social media content with customer behavioural responses such as trust and loyalty, according to (Hien et al., 2020). The perception of social media marketing as informative and engaged with authentic content produces a better brand image, which enhances consumer loyalty. The model functions correctly from SMM to Brand Image to Loyalty. (BİLGİN, 2018) demonstrates that social media marketing produces positive effects on brand equity elements, which include brand awareness, brand image and perceived quality that leads to better brand loyalty. Consumers rely on brand image as their interpretation tool before endorsing loyalty behaviours after reading marketing communications. Unique empathy traits within brand image function as mediators, particularly in the fashion and electronics markets, which heavily rely on self-expression from consumers (Tan et al., 2022). Social media stories delivered by brands enhance emotional value because they help users develop trust connections and become brand advocates. Brand image operates actively to deliver marketing-driven influence because it acts as a transformation point that generates consumer loyalty. Knowledge of this mediation process helps marketers create stronger bonds between consumers and brands through their social media content strategies (Khan & Fatma, 2023).

2.4. Research Gap
The study becomes essential because existing literature on social media marketing and brand loyalty contains various unaddressed gaps.
▪ Few Research Studies Investigate Mediation Effects within SMM Contexts while Standing Imprecise of Psychological Processes by Which SMM Transforms into Long-Term Consumer Loyalty.
▪ Few quantitative studies exist that integrate SMM with brand image and loyalty theory to explain their relationships. Qualitative findings and conceptual models about the brand image mediation between SMM and loyalty exist, but quantitative statistical models that demonstrate this relationship using the Smart PLS.
▪ The current research fails to use empirical data from specific industries, which include lifestyle brands and fashion products, alongside electronic products alongside computing devices. The examination needs to narrow its focus to generate marketable insights for marketers.
▪ Temporal Gaps in Understanding Evolving Social Media Dynamics. Most of the existing research materials about social media may not reflect the current dynamics of platforms and user behaviour because these aspects evolve quickly. Repeat studies have failed to track recent developments such as short-form video and AI influencers in brand image mediation models.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design utilises an online questionnaire approach for obtaining quantitative data from users who are actively present on social media. A validated Likert-scale system measures the concepts of social media marketing plus brand image, and brand loyalty. The research data set is analysed with Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) through the Smart-PLS software.

3.1. Research Design
The research design implemented quantitative methods for studying numerical amounts to obtain statistical findings. The research approach proved sufficient to construct a model that evaluates the impact of SMM on brand loyalty, which utilises brand image as an intermediary influence. The study examined three specific dimensions through which it measured social media marketing engagement and consumer brand perception, and brand loyalty expression. The researcher built a structured questionnaire from reliable measuring items in the literature about social media marketing and its relationship to brand image and loyalty. Survey participants relied on a self-administered online survey as their main data collection instrument. The survey focused on active social media users who keep networking with companies on these platforms. The research utilised convenience sampling to seek feedback from participants who displayed a digital brand experience among volunteers who chose to participate in the survey. These participants gave 110 total responses. The proposed

model would face statistical acceptance alongside hypothesis validation, as the research utilised the obtained data to perform mediation testing.

3.2. Data Analysis Techniques

For this research study, the collected quantitative survey data underwent multiple-stage statistical analysis to study the relations between social media marketing (SMM) and brand image, together with brand loyalty. The research employed correlation and regression methods to determine direct causes and mediation effects between variables. Researchers established the magnitude and direction of variable relationships through evaluation using Pearson's correlation. Social media marketing initiatives and their effects on customer loyalty intentions and perceived brand image were established through this analysis. Smart PLS procedures enabled researchers to determine the extent to which brand image connects social media marketing practices to brand loyalty prediction. The study's results empirically validated all proposed associations and underlined brand image as the key element for permanent consumer loyalty generation from digital impact.

3.3. Measurement

We adapted the measurement items from other studies so they would work in our research. The scale items for Social Media Marketing (SMM) were measured via dimensions like Trustworthiness, Attractiveness, Informativeness, and Trendiness (Appel et al., 2020; Charlesworth, 2014; Ferreira et al., 2021; Hasan et al., 2023; Kasemsap, 2018; Lou & Yuan, 2019b; Noguti & Waller, 2020; Wijayaa et al., 2021); Brand Image were measured through cognitive and emotional perceptions (Abd Elsalam & Ezzat, 2022; Hien et al., 2020; Saini et al., 2021; Tan et al., 2022; Yohana F. C. P. Meilani & Ian N. Suryawan, 2020) Brand Loyalty was measured using repurchase intent, advocacy, and resistance to switching (BİLGİN, 2018; Fawad Sheikh et al., 2014; Kuswati et al., 2021; Rather, 2018; Saini et al., 2021) On a 5-point Likert-type scale, from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5), all items were evaluated.
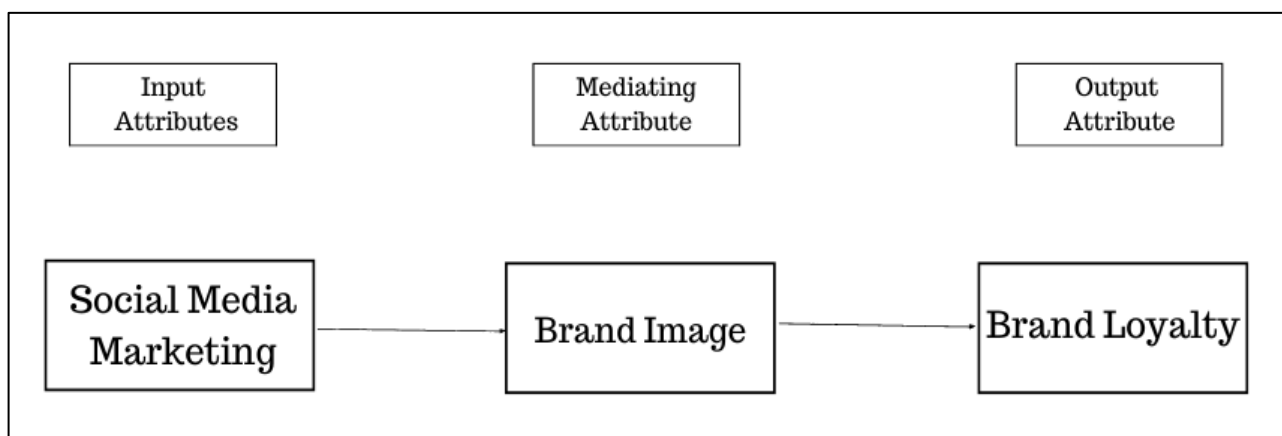
3.4. Hypothesis

In contemporary digital marketing, social media marketing (SMM) has become a formidable instrument that both informs and engages consumers while also influencing their perceptions of brands. Translating this impact into enduring brand loyalty necessitates more than just exposure; it requires the establishment of a robust, positive brand image. This study examines the role of brand image as a mediating variable between social media marketing initiatives and brand loyalty.

H1: Social Media Marketing exerts a substantial beneficial influence on Brand Image.
Social media platforms function as conduits for brands to disseminate educational, fashionable, engaging, and credible content. These factors affect consumers' cognitive and emotional perceptions of a brand. Previous research indicates that social media marketing can enhance brand image when the information is genuine, consistent, and congruent with customer expectations.

H2: Social Media Marketing exerts a substantial beneficial influence on Brand Loyalty.
Social media marketing is essential for initiating contact, generating awareness, and fostering involvement. Beyond the initial interaction, the ongoing engagement and value delivered via social media initiatives foster trust and emotional connection, essential antecedents to brand loyalty.

H3: The brand image exerts a substantial beneficial influence on brand loyalty.
Consumers develop their brand image according to the perceptions they have, combined with brand beliefs and emotional connections to a particular product. A reliable brand image helps consumers notice products and develop emotional bonds and strong product value perceptions needed to create loyal customers. Positive traits associated with brands motivate customers to pursue repeated purchases and advocacy and stand against market competitors.

H4: The relationship between Social Media Marketing and Brand Loyalty passes through brand image, working as a mediating factor.

Brand loyalty results directly from social media marketing strategies, yet customer perceptions about the brand usually strengthen these outcomes. This study posits that brand image serves as a mediator, assimilating and converting the impact of social media marketing into enhanced emotional engagement and loyalty. This corresponds with the concept that cognitive perceptions (brand image) convert environmental inputs (SMM) into behavioural responses (loyalty).

4. RESULTS

The section performs an extensive analysis of the collected data as it identifies the core study results. The research objectives and hypotheses have a tight connection with the analysis results, which reveal how social media marketing affects brand loyalty through brand image as a mediator.

☝ Measurement Model Analysis

The reliability table 1 confirms that outer loadings of Social Media Marketing, Brand Image and Brand Loyalty produce reliable measurement validity through the Smart PLS-SEM approach. Every observed variable that loads at 0.708 or higher meets the criterion, which proves the adequate contribution to its corresponding latent construct measurement. Brand Image indicators BI1 through BI6 produce high statistical significance and reliability since their loadings range from 0.759 to 0.824 and their T-statistics exceed the critical value while producing p-values at 0.000. Correspondingly, the indicators for Brand Loyalty (BL1 to BL6) span from 0.771 to 0.858, thus affirming the internal consistency and strength of the concept. The strong external loadings confirm that the construct measurement process succeeds in verifying Hypothesis 3, which demonstrates that brand image has a significant influence on brand loyalty. The outside loading measurements in Social Media Marketing (SMM1 to SMM6) range from 0.855 to 0.901, exceeding the normative standard. The items achieve high t-statistics (37.414 for SMM2 and 40.282 for SMM4), which establishes their statistical significance when evaluating the concept. Social media marketing proves to be instrumental for improving brand image and brand loyalty, according to the research findings, which uphold both Hypotheses 1 and 2. Brand image serves as the mediator between social media marketing and brand loyalty because the constructs exhibit equal indicator loading levels. This strengthens the analysis of Hypothesis 4. Research effectiveness depends on excellent indicator reliability because the data confirms crucial variables used in this entire investigation.

Table 1: Outer Loadings (Mean, STDEV, T values, P values)

Mean, STDEV, T values, p values	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics ($|O/STDEV|$)	P values
BI1 <- Brand Image	0.813	0.811	0.037	21.983	0.000
BI2 <- Brand Image	0.824	0.822	0.032	25.451	0.000
BI3 <- Brand Image	0.818	0.815	0.036	22.456	0.000
BI4 <- Brand Image	0.804	0.801	0.047	17.112	0.000
BI5 <- Brand Image	0.759	0.759	0.041	18.613	0.000
BI6 <- Brand Image	0.820	0.820	0.034	24.283	0.000
BL1 <- Brand Loyalty	0.826	0.825	0.041	20.204	0.000
BL2 <- Brand Loyalty	0.842	0.842	0.028	29.750	0.000
BL3 <- Brand Loyalty	0.817	0.817	0.031	26.025	0.000
BL4 <- Brand Loyalty	0.804	0.802	0.040	20.095	0.000
BL5 <- Brand Loyalty	0.771	0.768	0.052	14.890	0.000
BL6 <- Brand Loyalty	0.858	0.856	0.031	27.612	0.000
SMM1 <- Social Media Marketing	0.868	0.867	0.023	37.414	0.000
SMM2 <- Social Media Marketing	0.856	0.855	0.028	30.448	0.000
SMM3 <- Social Media Marketing	0.815	0.809	0.063	12.940	0.000
SMM4 <- Social Media Marketing	0.901	0.900	0.022	40.282	0.000
SMM5 <- Social Media Marketing	0.885	0.887	0.025	35.688	0.000
SMM6 <- Social Media Marketing	0.872	0.875	0.030	26.536	0.000

Table 2 shows reliability tests for Behavioural Intention (BI) and Brand Loyalty (BL), and Social Media Marketing (SMM) in the research show strong internal construct reliability across the study. Structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) guidelines are satisfied through analysis of Cronbach's alpha and both rho_c and rho_a Composite Reliability measures along with Average Variance Extracted (AVE). The research applied Cronbach's alpha coefficients at 0.893 for BI, along with 0.902 for BL and 0.894 for SMM. The measurement

consistency exceeds 0.70 for all constructs, which shows excellent internal structure quality in addition to accurate indicator assessment of their latent components. The stability and reliability of the constructs are confirmed by Composite Reliability (rho_a) and (rho_c) values, which exceed the required threshold of 0.70. The rho_a measurement for BI amounted to 0.895, BL reached 0.905, and SMM ended at 0.904. Similarly, rho_c values surged past 0.70 at 0.918 for BI yet exceeded 0.70 at 0.925 for BL to end at 0.922 for SMM. The high values verify that the observed indicators effectively explain significant segments of variance from their respective underlying components, which strengthens the reliability of the measurement model.

The measurement approach depends on AVE values together with reliability standards to conduct a convergent validity evaluation. Research has established 0.50 as the minimum threshold for satisfactory Average Variance Extracted (AVE). The assessment indicates that the constructs' AVE values surpass threshold standards, where BI reaches 0.651, while BL reaches 0.693, and SMM reaches 0.670. The results demonstrate strong convergent validity for all constructs, and their indicators show appropriate measurement relationships to underlying latent variables. The evaluation method used for hypothesis testing in this study finds support from these research results.

Table 2: Construct Reliability and Validity

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Brand Image	0.893	0.895	0.918	0.651
Brand Loyalty	0.902	0.905	0.925	0.693
Social Media Marketing	0.894	0.904	0.922	0.670

Table 3 shows Fornell-Larcker criterion helps establish construct discriminant validity between BI, BL, and SMM within the framework of this study. The Fornell-Larcker criterion demonstrates discriminating validity when the square root of the Average Variance Extracted value from each construct surpasses the related construct correlations. The evaluation indicated that BI held an AVE value of 0.651 and BL displayed 0.693, and SMM showed 0.670. The square root values of these AVE measurements amount to 0.807 for BI and 0.832 for BL, alongside 0.818 for SMM. The two correlation measurements reveal an inferior value of 0.759 between BI and SMM, while showing a value of 0.625 between SMM and BL when compared to their constructs' square root AVE values. The study results demonstrate that the research constructs possess separate empirical existence and reliable measurement capabilities. The proposed structural linkages maintain dependability because of these findings. The established discriminant validity demonstrates that Social Media Marketing creates positive significant effects on BI and BL as proposed by H1 and H2. The results support H3 by showing how BI brings a significant impact to BL while adding strength to H4 by verifying that BI act as a mediator between SMM and BL. The structural model analysis demonstrates reliability because the Fornell-Larcker criterion upholds the strength of the measurement model.

Table 3: Fornell-Larcker criterion

	Brand Image	Brand Loyalty	Social Media Marketing
Brand Image	0.807		
Brand Loyalty	0.827	0.832	
Social Media Marketing	0.759	0.625	0.818

Table 4 structural model in this research study benefits from the explanatory power assessment provided by R-squared and modified R-squared metrics. Smart PLS-SEM reveals the strength of independent variables that explain the dependent variable variations through these reported values. Information from SMM explains 67.3% of BI variation according to the modified R-square value. A total of 68.1% of the total variance found in BL results from the combined influence of SMM and BI, according to the corrected R-square measure. The PLS-SEM analysis framework considers these values to show medium to large explanatory power because they demonstrate a moderate relationship between the predictor and outcome variables. The modified R-square values confirm how well the model fits current data because they demonstrate strong predictive power of the independent variables. The research validity improves through this element while strengthening the theoretical basis of the measured relationships within the study.

Table 4: R-square

	R-square	R-square adjusted
Brand Image	0.677	0.673
Brand Loyalty	0.684	0.681

Table 5 shows that the strength of the relationship between BI and BL reaches 0.827. The obtained data confirms H3 about BI producing a large positive influence on BL. A strong positive relationship exists between SMM and BI since their correlation stands at 0.759, thereby validating H1, which states SMM has a favourable impact on BI. The relationship between SMM and BL generates a 0.625 coefficient, which supports H2 because it indicates SMM has a favourable impact on BL. Additional evidence that strengthens H4 exists through the weaker connection between SMM and BL in comparison to the association between BI and BL. The results of the correlation matrix show stable linear relationships between every construct, which produces only positive associations. The study's theoretical framework gains support from these findings alongside statistical evidence for the proposed hypotheses, which form a solid foundation for testing the structural model and performing mediation analysis.

Table 5: Correlations

	Brand Image	Brand Loyalty	Social Media Marketing
Brand Image	1.000	0.827	0.759
Brand Loyalty	0.827	1.000	0.625
Social Media Marketing	0.759	0.625	1.000

⌘ Structural Model Analysis

Table 6 presents path coefficient analysis that serves as crucial evidence to prove the research hypothesis. The p-value functions as a vital measurement tool in this research because it reveals the statistical importance of component relationship correlations. According to PLS-SEM methodology, a link between variables becomes statistically significant when its p-value reaches below 0.05, which supports the established hypothesis. The statistical investigation demonstrates SMM creates a strong influence on BI through a path coefficient value of 0.759 and a t-value measurement of 17.404, along with a p-value of 0.000. The research findings powerfully support H1 because SMM produces substantial positive effects on BI. BI strongly influences BL according to the established link between these components, where the coefficient stands at 0.827 along with a t-value of 26.306 and a p-value of 0.000. Significant statistical results demonstrate high effect sizes, which support the hypothesis developed from theory. BI acts as a strong mediating factor that connects SMM to BL, according to the results supporting H4.

Table 6: Path coefficients

Mean, STDEV, T values, p values	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values
Brand Image -> Brand Loyalty	0.827	0.829	0.031	26.306	0.000
Social Media Marketing -> Brand Image	0.759	0.761	0.044	17.404	0.000

According to Table 7, in Smart PLS-SEM, the total direct effect represents the unmediated relationship between independent and dependent variables. The relationship between SMM and BL demonstrates a significant and robust link that the analysis detects through its 0.628 coefficient and 13.700 t-value, along with a 0.000 p-value. The results support H2 because SMM proves to have a major positive impact on BL. The empirical evidence, alongside supplementary mediation results, shows that BI operates as a partial relationship between SMM and BL, thus validating H4. The study demonstrates that SMM contributes to better brand loyalty through its positive impact on BI, which confirms the established structural relationships.

Table 7: Total Indirect Effects

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values
Social Media Marketing -> Brand Loyalty	0.628	0.631	0.046	13.700	0.000

The research analyses the particular indirect connection through which Social Media Marketing impacts Brand Image and activates changes in Brand Loyalty. The path coefficient value stands at 0.628, while the t-statistic reaches 13.700 and the p-value reaches 0.000 to confirm strong significance at p < 0.05. The research

demonstrates that such a brand loyalty relationship between social media marketing exists through a statistically significant mediation process of brand image. The study provides strong empirical backing that confirms how brand image acts as a mediator to link social media marketing to brand loyalty (H4). Social media marketing generates a significant indirect effect that demonstrates how it boosts brand loyalty through a two-step process by strengthening brand image before loyalty emerges. The results support the theoretical framework by establishing that brand image plays a vital role as a pathway that connects social media marketing to long-lasting customer loyalty.

Table 8: Specific Indirect Effects

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values
Social Media Marketing -> Brand Image -> Brand Loyalty	0.628	0.631	0.046	13.700	0.000

Table 9 shows the evidence demonstrates through a t-value of 13.700 and p-value of 0.000 that SMM influences BL by 0.628 with strong statistical significance. This endorses H2. The relationship between SMM and BI shows a significant positive association with a value of 0.759, which demonstrates statistical significance through a t-score of 17.404 and p-value of 0.000 (H1). The entire pathway from BI to BL demonstrates the largest total effect amounting to 0.827 (t = 26.306, p = 0.000), which validates H3. The complete impact of SMM on brand loyalty emerges through both direct relationships with BI and indirect ones established by BI to BL, which upholds H4. Test results demonstrate that the entire model shows statistical validity because each essential construct contributes effectively to brand loyalty variations.

Table 9: Total Effects

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values
Brand Image -> Brand Loyalty	0.827	0.829	0.031	26.306	0.000
Social Media Marketing -> Brand Image	0.759	0.761	0.044	17.404	0.000
Social Media Marketing -> Brand Loyalty	0.628	0.631	0.046	13.700	0.000

5. CONCLUSION & DISCUSSION

The research shows how social media marketing (SMM) directly and indirectly through brand image (BI) development affects customer brand loyalty (BL). The study demonstrates how social media marketing affects brand perception substantially, thus driving emotional and behavioural customer loyalty through quantitative PLS-SEM analysis. The structural model analysis demonstrates that social media effectively engages customers while simultaneously influencing their behaviour because it produces long-lasting brand relationships, which are confirmed through both route coefficients and p-values. Social media involvement acts as an intermediary factor that transforms initial involvement experiences into stronger brand loyalty among customers. The research data confirmed the theoretical concept, which shows that brand image functions as a linking principle between temporary internet-based interaction and lasting consumer loyalty. This study adds value to digital marketing and branding research in academia by delivering practical information for marketers to develop sustainable social media marketing approaches that advance beyond mere visibility and interaction.

The study increases human understanding about how digital brand interactions develop during the present social media revolution. Numerous brands receive substantial awareness from content and influencer marketing, yet this visibility does not guarantee customer devotion automatically. Clients form good psychological ties with brands when organisations focus on presenting consistent messaging while choosing the correct tone with authentic content that triggers an emotional response. The affiliations work together to create trust, which leads to contentment while inspiring advocacy. Research using mediation methods establishes that social media marketing works best by instilling brand values together with emotional connections instead of focusing exclusively on raising click-through or share numbers. Managerial teams should make brand content evolve from basic transactional messages into emotion-driven narratives that develop alignment between brand identity and customer emotions. Few studies before this one failed to research how brand image acts as a mediator between social media marketing and customer loyalty; therefore, this study fills a crucial gap in existing literature research. Further investigations should explore how

developing technologies such as AI influencers with immersive content will transform the current dynamics of evolving social media networks. The study presents a current applied method for digital influence conversion into consumer loyalty through thoughtful brand image advancement.

6. LIMITATIONS AND AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This research delivers essential information about brand image mediation between social media marketing (SMM) and brand loyalty, yet it contains various restrictions. Consumer perceptions were recorded by a cross-sectional survey design at a specific time point. The selected research design limits the ability to track brand image development together with customer loyalty throughout extended or variable social media marketing campaigns. Self-reported survey data in this research creates potential problems because participants might display social desirability bias and inaccurate self-evaluation, thus undermining reply trustworthiness. The study gathered a sufficient statistical number of participants, but the final sample included only 110 current social media users randomly chosen from convenience sampling. The study provides limited use of its findings across different demographic groups and various industrial sectors, and regional zones. The research does not separate results regarding different social media sites, so it cannot identify distinctive effects on brand perception and customer loyalty. Due to the absence of industry focus, the research did not permit researchers to examine specific details that would be relevant to fashion and electronics and hospitality sectors, among others.

Further research should develop this current investigation through systematic elimination of errors and exploration of fresh brand engagement characteristics. Researchers should perform follow-up research using longitudinal data collection methods to trace customer opinions together with brand loyalty changes through different social media campaign periods. New research should incorporate experimental and mixed-method strategies to reduce bias and enhance data richness, as well as experimental or mixed-method approaches. The next step for researchers involves utilising diverse sampling methods that go beyond large-scale and cross-sectional aspects from multiple countries and different age ranges across various sectors. Researchers need to perform specific tests about brand image and loyalty on each platform because they want to learn how different social media environments affect brand perceptions differently. for instance, they need to examine how Instagram storytelling differs from LinkedIn's professional language. Investigating modern technologies' effect on brand perception and loyalty becomes possible through research that includes the new digital elements of AI-driven influencers and virtual reality alongside metaverse branding. Research should investigate brand image emotional aspects together with cultural and ethical elements in the digital environment for enhancing our understanding of social media-based loyalty development.

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