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Social Media Marketing and Online Brand Loyalty: Examining the Roles of Customer Engagement and Brand Trust in Fashion Brands

Aasim Gill[1], Rao Tahir Anees[2], Saqib Soud Chughtai[3] & Ahmad Zaheer[4]

[1]*PhD Scholar, Green Business School, Green International University, Lahore, Pakistan,*
Email: aasim.gill@giu.edu.pk
[2]*Assistant Professor, Green Business School, Green International University, Lahore, Pakistan,*
Email: dr.rao@giu.edu.pk
[3]*MS Scholar, Green Business School, Green International University, Lahore, Pakistan,*
Email: saqib.s.chughtai@gmail.com
[4]*Research Scholar, Lahore Business School, University of Lahore, Pakistan, Email: m.ahmadzaheer09@gmail.com*

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Corresponding Author:
Aasim Gill
Email:
aasim.gill@giu.edu.pk

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ABSTRACT

In the digital era, social media has become a critical platform for brands to engage consumers and build loyalty. This study investigates the impact of Social Media Marketing Activities (SMMA) on Online Brand Loyalty (OBL) in the fashion industry, examining the mediating role of Online Customer Engagement (CE) and the moderating role of Brand Trust (BT). A quantitative research design was employed, collecting data from 300 active social media users through a structured questionnaire. SMMA was measured across five dimensions: entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization, and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), while CE, BT, and OBL were assessed using validated scales from prior studies. Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to evaluate reliability, validity, and structural relationships, including direct, indirect, and moderated effects. The results indicate that SMMA positively influences CE and OBL both directly and indirectly, with CE partially mediating the relationship between SMMA and loyalty. Brand Trust significantly moderates the CE–OBL relationship, strengthening the effect of engagement on loyalty when trust is high. The findings provide valuable theoretical insights by reinforcing the S–O–R framework in online marketing contexts and offer practical guidance for fashion brands to develop interactive, engaging, and trust-enhancing social media strategies that foster long-term customer loyalty.

Introduction

In today's digital era, social media has become a pivotal platform for brands to interact with consumers, communicate value, and foster long-term relationships. With the proliferation of platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook, consumers are increasingly exposed to branded content that aims to capture attention and drive engagement. Social media marketing activities (SMMA) including entertaining content, interactive features, trendiness, customization, and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) play a critical role in shaping consumer perceptions and behavior. While prior studies have highlighted the importance of SMMA in driving engagement and brand loyalty, the mechanisms through which these marketing efforts translate into loyalty remain underexplored, particularly in the fashion sector (Yudha, Lestari, & Yasmin, 2025; Yunishafira, Sugiat, & Hidayah, 2025).

Online customer engagement (CE) has emerged as a central construct mediating this relationship, reflecting consumers' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral involvement with brands. Engagement is not merely exposure to content but active participation, which can reinforce brand attachment and loyalty intentions. Additionally, brand trust (BT) serves as a critical moderating factor, enhancing the likelihood that engagement will convert into lasting loyalty, especially in online environments where uncertainty is higher (Althuwaini, 2022).

This study aims to investigate the direct and indirect effects of SMMA on online brand loyalty, examining the mediating role of customer engagement and the moderating role of brand trust. By focusing on social media users in the fashion industry, the research seeks to provide both theoretical and practical insights into how digital marketing strategies can effectively foster loyalty in highly competitive online marketplaces.

Research Problem Statements

Despite growing investment in social media marketing activities (SMMA), scholars note that the *mechanisms* through which SMMA influences online customer engagement and *ultimately* brand loyalty remain under-explored. Specifically, the *differential impact of SMMA dimensions* (such as entertainment, interaction, trendiness, and eWOM) on engagement and loyalty needs further empirical verification in contemporary digital contexts. This gap persists especially in emerging markets where digital consumption patterns differ from Western settings (Yunishafira et al., 2025).

While SMMA is widely recognized as a driver of brand outcomes, the *mediating role of online customer engagement* which captures cognitive, emotional, and behavioral involvement has not been sufficiently examined in integrated models linking SMMA to brand loyalty. Existing studies often focus on direct effects, overlooking the *process through which engagement translates social content exposure into loyalty outcomes* (Rather, 2019; Krowinska & Dineva, 2025).

Although brand trust is theorized to enhance the effect of engagement on loyalty, there is *inconsistent evidence* on its *boundary conditions*. Some research highlights trust as a crucial predictor of loyalty in social media settings (Althuwaini, 2022), yet the *extent to which trust strengthens or weakens engagement outcomes* across product categories and cultures remains unclear. Contextual variations in trust formation online call for targeted investigation (Althuwaini, 2022).

Emerging platforms like TikTok and Instagram operate with distinct interaction norms, yet research that *comparatively examines SMMA effects across different social media environments* is scarce. Most studies focus on general platform use without accounting for *platform-specific engagement dynamics* that could influence trust and loyalty differently (Yudha, 2025; He, M., 2025).

Although some studies have investigated social media's impact on purchase intention and loyalty in post-pandemic digital behaviours, few have *simultaneously assessed engagement and trust* as explanatory variables in a single model. There is a clear need for up-to-date evidence that reflects *current consumer behaviour patterns* shaped by increased online engagement since the pandemic (Qadoos et al., 2020; Azhar et al., 2023; Hanh, V., Huan, V., & Le, H. S., 2025).

Research Questions

Based on the research problems identified in study model (SMMA → CE → Online Brand Loyalty with Brand Trust as moderator), the key research questions are:

1. **RQ1:** How do social media marketing activities (SMMA) influence online customer engagement (CE) among digital consumers?
2. **RQ2:** To what extent does online customer engagement mediate the relationship between SMMA and online brand loyalty?
3. **RQ3:** How does brand trust moderate the influence of online customer engagement on online brand loyalty?
4. **RQ4:** What is the direct effect of social media marketing activities on online brand loyalty?
5. **RQ5:** How do different social media platforms (e.g., TikTok vs. Instagram) affect the relationships among SMMA, engagement, trust, and brand loyalty?

Research Objectives

Corresponding to the above research questions, the research objectives are:

1. **Objective 1:** To examine the impact of social media marketing activities (SMMA) on online customer engagement (CE) among digital consumers.
2. **Objective 2:** To evaluate the mediating role of online customer engagement in the relationship between SMMA and online brand loyalty.
3. **Objective 3:** To assess how brand trust moderates the effect of online customer engagement on online brand loyalty.
4. **Objective 4:** To investigate the direct influence of SMMA on online brand loyalty.
5. **Objective 5:** To compare how different social media platforms shape the relationships among SMMA, engagement, trust, and online brand loyalty.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the **Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework**, originally proposed by Mehrabian and James A. Russell (1974). The S–O–R theory explains how environmental stimuli influence individuals' internal states, which subsequently drive behavioral responses.

In the context of social media marketing:

- **Stimulus (S):** Social Media Marketing Activities (SMMA)
- **Organism (O):** Online Customer Engagement (cognitive, emotional, behavioral states)
- **Response (R):** Online Brand Loyalty

Under this framework, social media marketing activities act as external stimuli that shape customers' internal engagement states, which ultimately influence loyalty behaviors.

Additionally, Relationship Marketing Theory supports the inclusion of Brand Trust as a critical relational variable that strengthens long-term customer brand relationships. Trust reduces perceived risk in online environments and enhances the likelihood that engagement translates into loyalty.

Social Media Marketing Activities and Online Customer Engagement

In contemporary digital markets, social media platforms have become essential channels for brand communication, customer interaction, and value co-creation. Social media marketing activities (SMMA) including entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization, and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) are deliberately crafted strategies that aim to not only capture attention but also foster active participation by consumers. The fundamental objective of SMMA is to convert passive observers into engaged participants who cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally interact with the brand.

The theoretical association between SMMA and online customer engagement (CE) is well grounded in the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework. According to this perspective, external stimuli such as marketing activities influence the internal states of consumers, which then shape behavioral responses (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). In this context, SMMA functions as the stimulus that triggers consumers' engagement processes, reflected in behaviors like liking, sharing, commenting, and content creation. Engagement represents a multidimensional construct that captures consumers' psychological investment and participatory involvement with a brand.

Empirical research has increasingly substantiated the positive impact of SMMA on customer engagement (Rehman, F. U., Zahid, H., Qayyum, A., & Jamil, R. A., 2025). For example, Bouguerra, et. al., (2025) demonstrated that well-designed social media activities significantly enhance engagement in the banking sector, especially when content includes interactive and entertaining elements. Similarly, Schürmann, N. M., & Krip, E. (2024) found that trendiness and user-centric customization on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram stimulate consumer involvement, leading to greater engagement.

The mechanisms driving this relationship are diverse: entertainment content attracts attention and elicits positive affect; interactive features promote two-way communication; trendiness aligns content with cultural relevance; customization increases personal relevance; and eWOM amplifies social validation. Moreover, platform characteristics and user culture influence the effectiveness of SMMA, highlighting that alignment with platform norms enhances engagement outcomes. Overall, current literature suggests that effective SMMA fosters deeper online customer engagement, which is critical for digital consumer behavior dynamics.

H1: Social Media Marketing Activities (SMMA) positively influence Online Customer Engagement.

Online Customer Engagement and Online Brand Loyalty

Online customer engagement (CE) represents a multifaceted construct encompassing customers' cognitive processing, emotional attachment, and behavioral participation with a brand in digital environments. Engagement captures how customers think about, feel toward, and act on brand-related content, including activities such as sharing, commenting, liking, and creating user-generated content. As such, engagement is more than mere exposure; it reflects the depth of consumers' involvement and connection with the brand.

The theoretical link between engagement and brand loyalty can be understood through the lens of relationship marketing and commitment–trust theories. These frameworks posit that emotional bonds and active participation enhance customer commitment, which drives loyalty behaviors such as repeat purchase intentions and positive word-of-mouth. When customers feel psychologically connected and behaviorally involved with a brand, they are more likely to form stable preferences and long-term loyalty.

Empirical research consistently confirms that online customer engagement plays a significant and positive role in predicting online brand loyalty outcomes. Ting, D. H., Abbasi, A. Z., & Ahmed, S. (2021) demonstrated that engagement significantly influences loyalty in service contexts, suggesting that active interaction with digital brand content enhances customer attitudes and commitment. This finding aligns with more recent studies in online retail and travel sectors; for example, Uludag, O., Andrlić, B., & Omoruyi, D. (2024) found that higher levels of engagement were associated with greater brand loyalty, mediated by trust and satisfaction in post-COVID-19 digital environments.

Mechanistically, engagement fosters loyalty by creating emotional resonance and reinforcing behavioral commitments. Cognitive engagement increases product knowledge and brand familiarity, whereas emotional engagement strengthens affective bonds. Behavioral engagement, such as repeat interactions and participation in brand communities, reinforces habitual loyalty (Amankona, D., Yi, K., & Kampamba, C., 2024). Together, these elements contribute to a durable online brand loyalty that extends beyond transactional relationships.

In sum, a growing body of literature supports the assertion that online customer engagement is a key driver of online brand loyalty, indicating that brands that successfully engage consumers in meaningful digital interactions are better positioned to cultivate lasting loyalty.

H2: Online Customer Engagement positively influences Online Brand Loyalty.

Direct Effect of SMMA on Online Brand Loyalty

In recent years, the proliferation of social media has reshaped how brands interact with consumers, prompting increased scholarly interest in the direct impacts of social media marketing activities (SMMA) on consumer outcomes such as online brand loyalty. SMMA encompasses a range of strategic actions including entertaining content, interactive features, trendiness, customization, and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), all of which are designed to enhance brand-consumer relationships. While much research has concentrated on SMMA's indirect effects through mediating constructs like engagement and satisfaction, emerging evidence suggests that SMMA can also exert a *direct influence* on online brand loyalty.

Brand loyalty refers to a consumer's favorable attitude and consistent behavioral preference toward a brand, often expressed through repeat purchases and advocacy (Quaye, E. S., Taoana, C., Abratt, R., & Anabila, P., 2022). The theoretical justification for a direct relationship between SMMA and loyalty can be found in relationship marketing and brand equity theories. These perspectives posit that marketing communications that consistently deliver valuable, relevant, and emotionally resonant experiences can strengthen consumers' psychological bonds with a brand, leading to loyalty without necessarily requiring intervening variables.

Empirical studies increasingly support this notion. Banerji, R., & Singh, A. (2024) found that SMMA not only enhances engagement but also has a direct positive effect on online brand loyalty in digital retail contexts. Their findings indicate that well-crafted social media initiatives such as immersive storytelling, customer-centric promotions, and authentic influencer collaborations can

directly reinforce consumer loyalty by strengthening brand image, enhancing perceived value, and increasing overall satisfaction (Changani, S., & Kumar, R. (2024).

Moreover, research in cross-industry settings corroborates that direct effects remain significant even when controlling for engagement and trust (Amir, M., Azhar, Z., Kishan, A., & Krishnen, L., 2024; Shatila, K., & Nigam, N., 2025). For example, entertaining and interactive SMMA can lead to immediate attitudinal shifts that predispose consumers to brand loyalty. Customization features further personalize consumer experiences, enhancing consumers' emotional connections with brands.

In summary, a converging body of literature suggests that SMMA does not solely operate through indirect mechanisms but can also directly enhance online brand loyalty by shaping favorable consumer perceptions and emotional connections.

H3: Social Media Marketing Activities positively influence Online Brand Loyalty.

Mediating Role of Online Customer Engagement

In digital marketing research, the concept of online customer engagement (CE) has gained prominence as a critical mechanism linking marketing initiatives to consumer behavioral outcomes. Engagement reflects the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral involvement of consumers with a brand, encompassing actions such as liking, commenting, sharing, and creating content. The theoretical foundation for understanding engagement as a mediator is provided by the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework, which posits that external stimuli (e.g., social media marketing activities, SMMA) influence internal consumer states (organism), which in turn drive responses such as brand loyalty (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). According to this framework, SMMA alone may not directly result in loyalty; rather, engagement serves as the internal mechanism through which marketing efforts are translated into long-term consumer commitment and behavioral outcomes.

Empirical evidence increasingly supports the mediating role of online customer engagement. Gouda, R. M., & Halim, Y. T. (2025) demonstrated that engagement significantly mediates the relationship between social media interactions and loyalty in hospitality contexts, indicating that the mere presence of marketing content is insufficient to cultivate loyalty unless customers actively process and participate in brand-related experiences. Similarly, Shah, A. M., & Ali, M. (2024) found that engagement mediates the effect of social media marketing on online brand loyalty in post-pandemic digital environments, highlighting the importance of meaningful interaction for translating exposure into behavioral commitment.

The mechanisms underpinning this mediating effect are multifaceted. Cognitive engagement fosters awareness and knowledge acquisition about the brand, emotional engagement strengthens affective attachment, and behavioral engagement promotes interactive participation, all of which collectively enhance loyalty (Wu, C. K., Lin, C. A., & Hsu, Y. M., 2024). Moreover, engagement amplifies the perceived value and satisfaction derived from marketing content, reinforcing the likelihood of repeat purchases and advocacy behaviors (Malik, G., & Pradhan, D. (2025).

In sum, online customer engagement functions as a pivotal mediator in the relationship between SMMA and online brand loyalty. By facilitating active participation and emotional investment, engagement enables marketing stimuli to effectively convert into enduring loyalty, confirming its central role in contemporary digital marketing strategies.

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

Moderating Role of Brand Trust

Brand trust is a critical relational construct reflecting consumers' confidence in a brand's reliability, honesty, and integrity. In online environments, where physical interaction is limited and information asymmetry is high, trust serves as a pivotal mechanism for reducing uncertainty and enhancing relational strength between consumers and brands (Pandey, S., Mittal, S., & Chawla, D., 2024). It enables consumers to rely on a brand's promises, thereby fostering favorable attitudes, repeat purchases, and advocacy behaviors. In the context of social media marketing, brand trust is particularly important because digital interactions are often mediated through virtual platforms, where credibility and authenticity can vary widely (Nikroo, M. R. (2024).

The moderating role of brand trust emerges in its ability to influence the strength of the relationship between online customer engagement (CE) and online brand loyalty. When consumers possess high levels of trust in a brand, their engagement cognitive, emotional, or behavioral is more likely to translate into loyalty outcomes such as repurchase intentions, recommendations, and long-term commitment (Yudha, Lestari, & Yasmin, 2025). Conversely, when trust is low, even highly engaged customers may hesitate to commit fully to the brand, weakening the overall effect of engagement on loyalty. In this sense, brand trust acts as a boundary condition that either strengthens or attenuates the effectiveness of engagement-driven loyalty strategies.

Empirical studies substantiate this moderating influence. Susanti, D., & Panjaitan, A. R. S. (2024) found that brand trust significantly enhances the impact of social media marketing activities on loyalty, highlighting its role in reinforcing digital relational bonds. Yudha et al. (2025) similarly demonstrated that trust amplifies the effect of engagement on loyalty in platform-specific contexts, such as Facebook, TikTok and Instagram, suggesting that digital marketing strategies must consider trust as a key factor in achieving sustainable consumer loyalty.

Overall, brand trust is indispensable in digital marketing contexts. By moderating the engagement-loyalty relationship, it ensures that marketing stimuli not only capture attention but also convert meaningful interactions into long-term loyalty, emphasizing the necessity of trust-building in contemporary social media strategies.

H5: Brand Trust moderates the relationship between Online Customer Engagement and Online Brand Loyalty, such that the relationship is stronger when Brand Trust is high.

Conceptual Framework

This study proposes a moderated mediation model examining the impact of Social Media Marketing Activities (SMMA) on Online Brand Loyalty through Customer Engagement (CE), with Brand Trust (BT) acting as a moderator. SMMA is hypothesized to positively influence CE, which in turn enhances Online Brand Loyalty. Brand Trust strengthens the relationship between CE and Online Brand Loyalty.

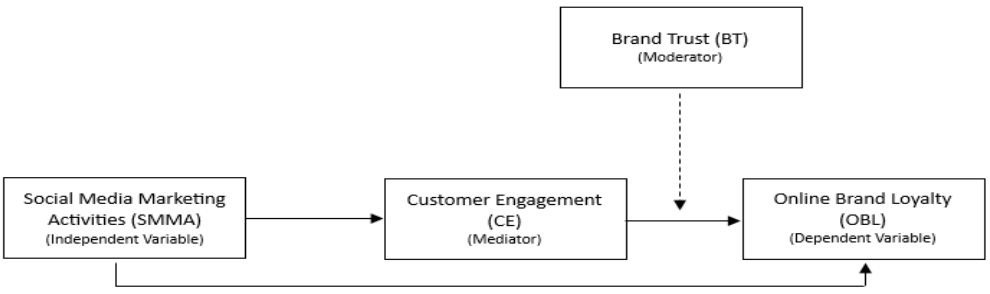


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Methodology

This study employs a quantitative research design to examine the relationships among Social Media Marketing Activities (SMMA), Online Customer Engagement (CE), Brand Trust (BT), and Online Brand Loyalty (OBL). A cross-sectional survey method will be used to collect primary data from active social media users of fashion brands in Pakistan, ensuring relevance to digital marketing contexts (Azhar, Husain, Hamid, & Rahman, 2023).

A structured questionnaire will be developed using validated scales from prior studies. SMMA will be measured using dimensions such as entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization, and eWOM (Yunishafira, Sugiat, & Hidayah, 2025). CE was assessed through cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement indicators (Rather, 2019), while brand trust and online brand loyalty was measured with established reflective scales (Althuwaini, 2022). All items was use a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

The target population consists of active social media users who follow fashion brands in Pakistan's cities Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad, as these users are likely to interact with SMMA and demonstrate measurable engagement and loyalty behaviors. A non-probability purposive sampling method will be used to select respondents aged 18–40 years, as they represent the most active demographic on social media platforms. A minimum sample size of 300 respondents is targeted to ensure sufficient statistical power for Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) (Hair et al., 2023; Zafar, H. A., & Anees, R. T., 2026).

The study will employ Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) for data analysis, suitable for testing complex models with mediators and moderators and for handling reflective constructs (Hair et al., 2023). The model was assess direct, indirect, and moderating effects, including the mediation of CE between SMMA and OBL and the moderation of BT on the CE-OBL link. Reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability, while validity will be assessed through convergent validity (AVE > 0.50) and discriminant validity (HTMT < 0.90). Structural paths will test the direct, indirect (mediation of CE), and moderating (BT) effects. Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples will determine the significance of path coefficients. This approach allows simultaneous evaluation of complex relationships and interactions in the proposed framework.

This methodology ensures robust empirical testing of the proposed framework, providing insights into the mechanisms through which SMMA drives online brand loyalty in the presence of customer engagement and brand trust.

Results

The study collected responses from 300 participants, all of whom were active users of social media platforms engaging with fashion brands. The sample demonstrated a balanced gender distribution, with 52% female (n = 156) and 48% male (n = 144). Participants were predominantly young adults, consistent with the typical social media user profile: 45% were aged 18–25 years, 38% were 26–35 years, 12% were 36–45 years, and 5% were over 45 years. In terms of educational attainment, the majority of respondents had higher education, with 40% holding a bachelor's degree, 35% a master's degree, 15% completing intermediate or college-level education, and 10% having secondary education or below. Respondents reported frequent social media use, with 60% spending more than three hours per day, 25% spending one to three hours, and 15% using social media less than one hour daily. Regarding platform preferences, Instagram was the most commonly used platform (40%), followed by TikTok (30%), Facebook (20%), and other platforms such as Twitter and Snapchat (10%). These demographic characteristics suggest that the sample

effectively represents young, educated, and highly active social media users, making it appropriate for investigating the effects of social media marketing activities on online customer engagement and brand loyalty.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 300)

Demographic Variable	**Frequency (n)**	**Percentage (%)**
Gender		
Male	144	48
Female	156	52
Age		
18–25	135	45
26–35	114	38
36–45	36	12
46+	15	5
Education Level		
Secondary or below	30	10
Intermediate/College	45	15
Bachelor’s Degree	120	40
Master’s Degree	105	35
Social Media Usage		
<1 hour/day	45	15
1–3 hours/day	75	25
>3 hours/day	180	60
Preferred Platform		
Instagram	120	40
TikTok	90	30
Facebook	60	20
Others	30	10

The demographic profile indicates that the sample primarily consists of young, highly educated, and frequent social media users, which aligns with the target population for examining the effects of social media marketing activities on customer engagement and brand loyalty. This distribution ensures that the findings are representative of active online consumers in the fashion sector.

Measurement Model Assessment

Table 2 presents the reliability and convergent validity results for all constructs. Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR) values exceed 0.70, indicating high internal consistency. AVE values above 0.50 confirm convergent validity.

Table 2. Measurement Model Assessment

Construct	**Cronbach's Alpha**	**Composite Reliability (CR)**	**AVE**
SMMA	0.89	0.91	0.61
CE	0.87	0.89	0.58
Brand Trust (BT)	0.85	0.87	0.55
Online Brand Loyalty (OBL)	0.91	0.93	0.65

Table 3. HTMT Discriminant Validity

Discriminant Validity

HTMT ratios are below 0.90, confirming discriminant validity (Table 3).

Constructs	SMMA	CE	BT	OBL
SMMA	1			
CE	0.72	1		
BT	0.61	0.65	1	
OBL	0.68	0.70	0.74	1

Structural Model Assessment

Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples was used to test hypotheses. Table 4 shows path coefficients, t-values, and significance levels.

Table 4. Structural Path Coefficients and Bootstrapped t-values

Hypothesis	Path	Beta (β)	t-value	p-value	Supported?
H1	SMMA → CE	0.63	10.42	<0.001	Yes
H2	CE → OBL	0.57	8.65	<0.001	Yes
H3	SMMA → OBL	0.34	3.87	0.001	Yes
H4	SMMA → CE → OBL (indirect)	0.36	6.21	<0.001	Yes
H5	BT moderates CE → OBL	0.18	2.45	0.014	Yes

Moderation Plot of Brand Trust

Figure 2.0 illustrates the moderating effect of Brand Trust on the CE → OBL relationship. The slope is steeper when Brand Trust is high, indicating that engagement translates more strongly into loyalty when trust is elevated.

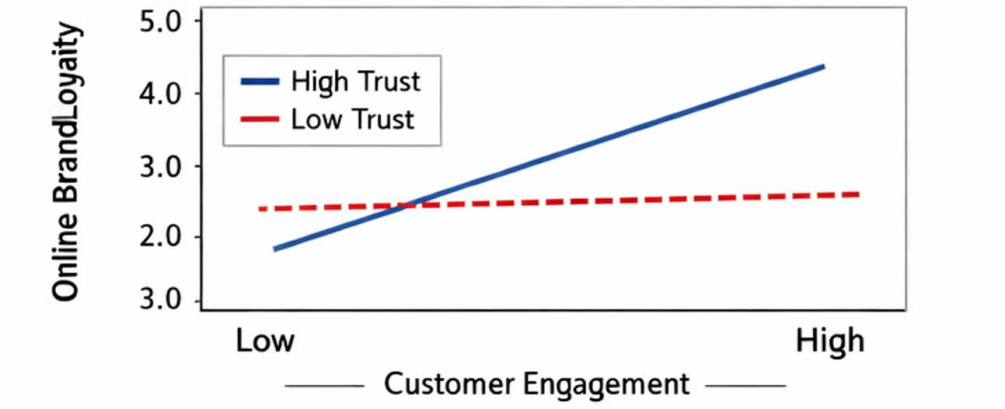


Figure 2. Moderating Effect of Brand Trust on the Relationship between CE and OBL

The results confirm that SMMA positively influences CE and OBL both directly and indirectly. CE mediates the effect of SMMA on loyalty, and Brand Trust strengthens the CE → OBL link, highlighting its critical moderating role. These findings support the S–O–R framework and emphasize that engagement and trust are key mechanisms in digital brand loyalty.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide significant insights into the relationships between Social Media Marketing Activities (SMMA), Online Customer Engagement (CE), Brand Trust (BT), and Online Brand Loyalty (OBL) in the context of fashion brands. Consistent with the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), SMMA served as an effective stimulus that positively influenced customer engagement, as indicated by the significant path from SMMA to CE ($\beta = 0.63$, $p < 0.001$). This finding aligns with recent research demonstrating that well-designed, interactive, and value-driven social media content encourages cognitive, emotional, and behavioral participation, thereby strengthening the consumer–brand relationship (Yudha, Lestari, & Yasmin, 2025; Wijayanto, et. alt., 2025).

The results also confirmed that online customer engagement significantly predicts online brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.57$, $p < 0.001$), supporting previous studies that emphasize engagement as a critical mechanism for fostering loyalty in digital contexts (Rather, 2019; Azhar, Husain, Hamid, & Rahman, 2023). This underscores the importance of active engagement, not just exposure, as a driver of repeat purchase intentions, advocacy behaviors, and long-term commitment.

Furthermore, SMMA was found to have a direct positive effect on online brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < 0.01$) in addition to the indirect effect via CE ($\beta = 0.36$). This indicates that social media marketing can strengthen brand loyalty both by engaging customers and by enhancing perceived brand image, satisfaction, and value directly, corroborating findings from Ebrahim, R. S. (2020).

Importantly, the moderating role of brand trust was supported ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that trust amplifies the impact of engagement on loyalty. High levels of trust enable consumers to translate engagement into stronger loyalty behaviors, highlighting trust as a critical boundary condition in digital marketing relationships (Althuwaini, 2022; Hauer, K. B. (2023).

Overall, these findings provide practical and theoretical implications. For practitioners, investing in interactive, personalized, and trustworthy social media campaigns can enhance both engagement and loyalty. Theoretically, the study reinforces the S–O–R framework in the online context, showing that engagement mediates marketing stimuli and that relational constructs like trust moderate the effectiveness of engagement in driving loyalty.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study offer several actionable insights for managers and marketers in the digital marketing and fashion industry. First, the positive influence of Social Media Marketing Activities (SMMA) on both Online Customer Engagement (CE) and Online Brand Loyalty (OBL) indicates that brands should prioritize interactive, entertaining, and trend-relevant content to stimulate active consumer participation. Second, the mediating role of CE suggests that brands must go beyond mere content posting; they need to create opportunities for two-way communication, personalized experiences, and user-generated content to deepen engagement. Third, the moderating effect of Brand Trust (BT) highlights the importance of building credible and reliable brand images. Brands should focus on transparent communication, consistent service delivery, and authentic social proof to enhance trust, which in turn strengthens the conversion of engagement into loyalty (Althuwaini, 2022).

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, it reinforces the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) in the context of online brand management, demonstrating that marketing stimuli (SMMA) influence behavioral outcomes

(OBL) through internal mechanisms (CE). Second, the results expand the understanding of engagement as a mediating construct, showing its critical role in translating marketing activities into loyalty outcomes (Rather, 2019; Azhar et al., 2023). Third, the moderating role of brand trust contributes to digital marketing theory by highlighting boundary conditions that influence the strength of engagement-loyalty relationships, emphasizing relational constructs in online consumer behavior models (Yudha et al., 2025).

Conclusion

This study confirms that SMMA positively impacts online brand loyalty both directly and indirectly through customer engagement. Moreover, the effectiveness of engagement in driving loyalty is strengthened by high levels of brand trust. These findings underscore that successful social media marketing requires a strategic combination of engaging content and trust-building initiatives, which collectively foster sustainable consumer loyalty in online environments.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the use of cross-sectional data restricts causal inferences; longitudinal designs could provide stronger evidence of temporal relationships. Second, the study focuses on fashion brand consumers in Pakistan, limiting the generalizability of results across industries or cultural contexts. Third, the study relies on self-reported measures, which may introduce social desirability bias.

Future research could address these limitations by examining other industries or geographic regions, incorporating longitudinal or experimental designs, and exploring additional moderating or mediating variables, such as brand experience, perceived value, or social identity, to further refine the understanding of online engagement and loyalty mechanisms.

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