FROM SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING TO CUSTOMER LOYALTY: THE MODERATING ROLE OF BRAND TRUST IN E-COMMERCE

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Abstract

In this research, we will discuss the direct impact of social media advertising, influencer marketing, and content quality on customer loyalty in e-commerce, and at the same time discuss the mediating variable of brand trust. The current study is an integrated framework where the brand trust is viewed as a psychological infrastructure between and among the translation of marketing investments into the result of relational loyalty, based on the Social Exchange Theory, Trust-Commitment Theory and Signaling Theory. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data in 355 active e-commerce consumers in Pakistan and was later analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) which was used with SmartPLS4. The measurement model had excellent psychometric characteristics (Cronbach's alpha >0.83; composite reliability 0.88; average variance extracted 0.64), and the structural model had significant explanatory power (R2=0.977 customer loyalty). Empirical support was given to all ten hypotheses. The strongest and direct predictors of customer loyalty were influencer marketing (b = 0.364) and, the strongest effect on the formation of trust, was observed in the case of social media advertising (b = 0.501). Mediation analysis established that brand trust partially mediates all the three marketing-to-loyalty channels, meaning that loyalty development occurs in two processes direct value recognition and trust-mediated confidence. The study results contribute to the theoretical knowledge of trust contingent loyalty and offer practical implications towards how social media marketing can be maximized in the context of digital retailing.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid integration of social media platforms with e-commerce platforms has radically changed the chain of command by which brands build consumer relations. With digital media becoming a dominant source of marketing spending, scholarly research has taken on a fresh dimension of not merely determining whether the social media marketing incites engagement but also questioning under what circumstances this engagement can condense into a loyal consumer (이영찬, 2020). Social media advertising, influencer marketing, and the quality of content have become three dimensions of social media marketing that are viewed as especially impactful in influencing consumer attitudes in an online

retail setting: social media advertising that organizes brand visibility in algorithmically curated feeds, influencer marketing that relies on parasocial trust and perceived endorser authenticity, and the quality of content that promotes a sense of brand competence in terms of both informational and aesthetic value (Leung et al., 2022). Despite the strong evidence of the independent effect of each of the dimensions on the purchase intentions, however, the field does not provide a coherent empirical explanation of how the mechanisms are combined to yield loyalty, and most importantly, which psychological conditions increase or diminish the effects of such mechanisms.

1.1 Problem Statement

Despite the growing number of investments in social media marketing, online commerce businesses lose customer loyalty that can be explained by the rise in consumer distrust and the reduced brand trust . Additionally, the existing literature has not been able to clarify a combined model in which brand trust mediates the nexus between the cardinal dimensions of social media marketing advertising, influencer marketing and content quality and customer loyalty, especially in the developing market setting like in Pakistan.

This gap acquires critical significance because of growing consumer skepticism. With the blurring of the lines between the content that is produced by the organics and commercial persuasion, consumers become more and more unable to determine the authenticity of the marketing messages, thus making the trust an ever more frail but invaluable currency in online markets (Kim & Kim, 2021). The recent literature shows that as influencer credibility is lost, due to their perceived inauthentic nature, vaguely sponsored relationships, or manipulation of the audience, the reputational consequences of such actions are directly passed on to aligned brands via associative trust. In terms of this trust transfer dynamic, the brand trust is not merely an outcome consequence of positive marketing experiences but is an active condition that shapes how the consumers process and react to

marketing stimuli (Bu et al., 2022). Based on this, the given research anticipates brand trust as a conditioning factor that defines the boundary under which the presence of social media advertising, influencer endorsements, and the quality of a piece of content can be converted into customer loyalty.

In theory, the study is grounded on Social Exchange Theory in which consumer loyalty is viewed as a mutual reaction to perceived brand worth and on the Trust -Commitment model in which trust is the psychological base through which relational commitment is built. The combination of these views with the Signaling Theory in which the quality of content and endorsements of the influencer act as signals of credibility makes the study a multi-theoretical approach to empirically test the trust-conditional nature of social media marketing efficacy. The analytical model uses the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling, which is considered especially adequate to theory-building questions that involve latent constructs and interactions (Barta et al., 2023). This study is an action-oriented replacement of brand trust as a downstream effect by an action-oriented boundary condition influencing loyalty dividends of marketing investments or dilution in the face of consumer apathy.

Scope

The current research is placed into the context of the e-commerce sphere and aims at active online customers who use social media to connect with brands. It focuses on three dimensions of social media marketing, advertising, influencer marketing, and content quality and their various impacts on customer loyalty, and brand trust is the mediating variable. The empirical design is cross-sectional with the use of structured survey tool and analysis with SPSS and SmartPLS to measure both direct and moderated pathways according to the proposed framework.

Research Questions

➢ Which are the nature and strength of relationships between the social media

advertising, influencer marketing, content quality, and customer loyalty in e-commerce?

➢ Does customer loyalty depend on brand trust as a moderator of the relationships among the social marketing dimensions of social media and brand marketing?

➢ What is the difference between the relative contribution of the social media advertising, the influencer marketing, and the quality of content to customer loyalty under the introduction of the brand trust as a boundary condition?

Study Objectives

➢ To analyze a direct impact of social media advertising, influencer marketing, and the quality of the content on customer loyalty in the e-commerce settings.

➢ To examine how brand trust can be moderated to conditionalize the strength of such relationships.

➢ To build a combined, theory-informed empirical approach that contributes to the knowledge about the role of trust as a condition of the formation of loyalty in online retail.

2. Literature Review

Coupled with the digitalization of the commercial ecosystems, the social media marketing has moved out of the marginal role of a promotional tool to a leading factor of consumer-brand relations in the e-commerce. Since platforms are becoming experiential business space, where discovery, evaluation, and purchase meet, the need to understand how particular marketing dimensions influence consumer behavior is an urgent academic concern. This review is a synthesis of modern day evidence regarding three dimensions of marketing in social media advertising, influencer marketing, and content quality, and a consideration of brand trust as the psychological scaffolding on which the three dimensions ultimately lead to customer loyalty.

2.1 Social Media Advertising in E-Commerce Contexts:

The social media advertisement works based on algorithmically edited exposure and improves brand recognition, allows targeted messaging, and strengthens acquaintance in the consumer decision-making processes. As opposed to the conventional advertising, the social media advertisements are integrated into the natural content feeds as such, thus obscuring the line between commercial persuasion and genuine social interaction. (Koay et al., 2020) illustrated that the perceived social media marketing activities played a significant role in the consumer-based brand equity via the perceived relevance and information value. More importantly, the effectiveness of advertising in the digital context is not only a reach phenomenon but a perceived conformity to the expected informational needs of the consumer, a relationship that would convert the exposure into the commitment or disbelief of attitudes (이영찬, 2020).

2.2 Influencer Marketing and Credibility Dynamics:

Influencer marketing capitalizes on the parasocial relationships that followers form with the content creators and convert them into endorsement deals by the brands. Recent empirical research has shown that the validity of such endorsements is weak. Studies analyzing deceptive influencer behavior have visibly demonstrated that non-disclosure of sponsorship elicits the crisis of trust of severe levels, and credibility violations completely mediate with reputational damages to related brands (Ali et al., 2025). This result highlights that the effectiveness of influencer marketing essentially depends on perceived authenticity wherein consumers identify inauthenticity, whether in the form of obfuscated compensation systems or fake amplified audience figures, the association trust linking influencer credibility to brand assessment is broken (Kim & Kim, 2021). The trust -transfer process is reciprocal: genuine endorsement enhances brand trust, and credibility breaches relay reputational damage by the same associative figure (Leung et al., 2022).

2.3 Content Quality as a Credibility Signal:

In the Signaling Theory, content quality is a visible expression of the unobservable brand effects competence, reliability and consumer orientation. Informational depth and visual coherence as well as contextual relevance of high-quality content minimize evaluative uncertainty and indicate the long-term brand investment in the relationships with consumers (Barta et al., 2023). The quality of content is a major heuristic in which consumers deal with purchase risk in e-commerce settings where physical product evaluation is inapplicable.

2.4 Brand Trust and Customer Loyalty:

Brand trust is the closest psychological process by which the marketing messages are transformed into long-term relational consequences. Trust decreases transactional anxiety, increases readiness to tolerate relation vulnerability and

builds up repurchase pledge (Farivar & Wang, 2022). Trust is always empirically positioned as not only the consequence of positive brand experiences but as a conditioning variable to be actively engaged in the marketing investments to ensure that the returns of loyalty are realized. The stronger the trust, the greater the resonance of advertising, the stronger the purchase intentions due to the endorsement of an influencer, and commitment due to the quality of the content; in contrast, once trust is weakened, the same processes lose their persuasive power (Bu et al., 2022). Loyalty of the customer in e-commerce is therefore not a result of some single marketing exposures but a result of the trust infrastructure that the exposure must build with the help of the cumulative efforts of these exposures which maintain continuity of the relationship through competitors of the goods market and uncertainty in the markets.
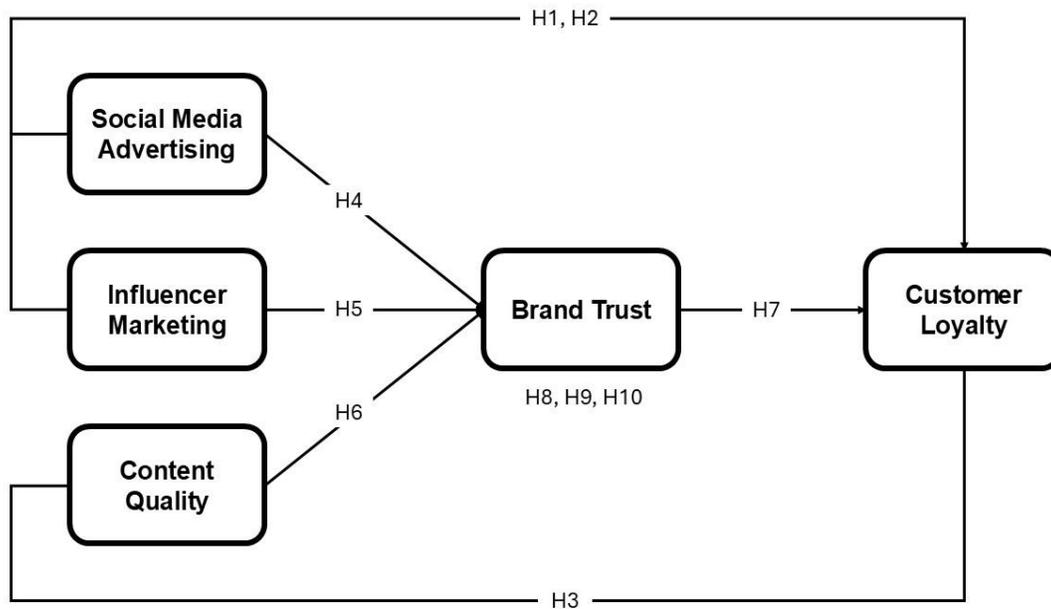

Figure 1 Conceptual Model Framework

2.5 Development of Research Hypotheses

H1: Social media advertising has a positive and significant effect on customer loyalty.
H2: Influencer marketing has a positive and significant effect on customer loyalty.

H3: Content quality has a positive and significant effect on customer loyalty.
H4: Social media advertising has a positive and significant effect on brand trust.
H5: Influencer marketing has a positive and significant effect on brand trust.

H6: Content quality has a positive and significant effect on brand trust.

H7: Brand trust has a positive and significant effect on customer loyalty.

H8: Brand trust mediates the relationship between social media advertising and customer loyalty.

H9: Brand trust mediates the relationship between influencer marketing and customer loyalty.

H10: Brand trust mediates the relationship between content quality and customer loyalty.

3. Methodology

This study is a cross-sectional, quantitative, research, with the epistemological framework of positivism, which assumes that the characteristics of attitudes and behavior intentions could be objectively measured using structured tools and statistically validated using the methods of the inference. The hypotheses assumed with the deductive reasoning are based on hypothetical constructs derived out of the Social Exchange Theory, Trust-Commitment Theory, and Signaling Theory, thus fitting in the general methodological prescriptions of consumer-behavior studies (Hair et al., 2021).

The target group was the active e-commerce users in Pakistan who actively consume brand communications via social media. Convenience sampling strategy was adopted based on the operative access and the lack of a complete sampling frame of online consumers. The online structured questionnaire was administered on the main social media platforms to get 355 valid responses. This sample size is more than the minimum size that is required to carry out PLS-SEM analyses with five latent constructs and several indicators, meeting the ten-times rule and the inverse square root criteria of sufficient statistical power (Hair et al., 2021).

The survey tool consisted of multi-items scales based on the validated scales used in the marketing and consumer-behavior literature. Each of the constructs was measured with the help of a five-point Likert scale (ranging 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree)). The item adaptation was considering both the

alignment between the context of the e-commerce and the psychometric integrity of the original scales. To determine the clarity of items, response consistency and response time we did a pilot study on 35 respondents to test the clarity of the items, consistency in responses and the time taken by the respondents; slight wording changes would then be made where the respondent understanding was not affected at the expense of construct operationalization.

The analysis of data was done in two complementary platforms. The preliminary diagnostics were supported by the SPSS 27, which contained descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and evaluation of data distribution characteristics. Primary hypothesis testing used Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS -SEM) with SmartPLS 4 because it can simultaneously test complex structural relationships between latent constructs, it is resistant to non-normality, and it is useful in predictive model estimation in theory-building research (Hair et al., 2021). The analytical sequence followed the two-step protocol suggested by modern PLS-SEM authors: the evaluation of the measurement model by testing proposal indicators reliability, internal consistency, convergent and discriminant validity and the evaluation of the structural model by considering the path coefficients, the level of significance of the results obtained through bootstrapping with 5 000 subsamples, the coefficient of determination, and the mediation analysis based on special indirect effects (Sarstedt et al., 2022). This methodological guideline is necessary in order to be able to draw substantive structural inferences when measurement adequacy has been established rigorously.

4. Data Analysis and Results

The analytical process is based on the two-step PLS-SEM protocol and includes the assessment of the measurement model to determine psychometric sufficiency and the following test of the structural model to test the hypothesized relationships (Hair et al., 2021). The SmartPLS structural analysis was preceded by some preliminary diagnostics that was done in SPSS.

4.1 Correlation Analysis

The interrelations between all the variables under study were investigated to determine the direction of the bivariate relationships and the strengths before structural modeling.

Table 4.1: Correlation Matrix

Variables	SMA	IM	CQ	BT	CL
SMA	1.000				
IM	.971**	1.000			
CQ	.976**	.965**	1.000		
BT	.977**	.973**	.965**	1.000	
CL	.980**	.979**	.976**	.974**	1.000

*Note: *$p < .01$ (two-tailed). All correlations are positive and statistically significant.

The directionally projected relationships between social media marketing dimensions, brand trust, and customer loyalty were all found to be statistically significant with the 0.01 level, thereby supporting all the expected positive relationships. The consistent strong peaks of correlations indicate significant common ground between constructs, which aligns with the integrated quality of e-commerce consumer experiences where advertising experience, influencer experience, content experience, and trust building are co-presented in one integrated digital ecosystem (이영찬, 2020).

4.2 Descriptive Statistics

Table 4.2: Descriptive Statistics

Construct	N	Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max
SMA	355	3.642	0.547	2.00	4.75
IM	355	3.663	0.537	2.00	4.60
CQ	355	3.675	0.536	2.00	4.75
BT	355	3.644	0.517	2.00	4.50
CL	355	3.698	0.512	2.00	4.60

The mean score was between 3.642 and 3.698 showing moderate to high agreement among respondents based on all the constructs. Standard deviations were uniformly low (0.5120.547), indicating homogeneity in the patterns of responses. The highest mean of customer loyalty was observed (3.698), and the lowest was social media advertising (3.642), which means that the respondents have a better perception of the results of loyalty as compared to the results of individual marketing contributions(Sarwar et al., 2025).

4.3 Construct Reliability and Convergent Validity

Table 4.3: Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Cronbach's α	Composite Reliability (CR)	AVE
SMA	.865	.90	.69
IM	.881	.91	.67
CQ	.848	.89	.66
BT	.838	.88	.65
CL	.866	.90	.64

The internal consistency was established, and all Cronbach alpha values were greater than 0.70, and composite reliability coefficients were greater than 0.70 (Sarstedt et al., 2022). AVE values of 0.64 to 0.69 were used to define convergent validity, which surpasses the 0.50 value, and this means that the constructs capture over half the variance. All of these psychometric properties state that the measurement model has sufficient reliability and validity to estimate structural paths(Khalid et al., 2026).

4.4 Structural Model Path Coefficients and R^2

Table 4.4: Direct Structural Paths

Path	β	t-value	p-value	Decision
SMA → CL	.259	5.308	.000	Supported
IM → CL	.364	9.124	.000	Supported
CQ → CL	.268	6.739	.000	Supported
SMA → BT	.501	9.360	.000	Supported
IM → BT	.385	8.682	.000	Supported
CQ → BT	.105	2.176	.030	Supported
BT → CL	.108	2.486	.013	Supported

All of the direct structural paths were significant. The direct impact on the customer loyalty was the greatest with influencer marketing (b = 0.364, p < .001), then content quality (b = 0.268, p < .001), and social media advertising (b = 0.259, p <.001). In the trust-formation pathway, advertising through social media had the biggest effect on brand trust (b = 0.501, p =.001), whereas brand trust was a significant predictor of customer loyalty (b = 0.108, p =.013)(Mahmood et al., 2026).

Table 4.5: Coefficient of Determination (R^2)

Endogenous Variable	R²
Brand Trust	0.965
Customer Loyalty	0.977

The model was highly explanatory with a correlation of 96.5 and 97.7 accounting to the variance in brand trust and customer loyalty respectively. Such values demonstrate that the proposed theoretical framework is rather comprehensive and covers the determinants of trust formation and loyalty development in the context of e-commerce investigated.

4.5 Specific Indirect Effects (Mediation)
Table 4.6: Indirect Effects Through Brand Trust

Indirect Path	Effect	p-value	Decision
SMA → BT → CL	Significant	.000	Supported
IM → BT → CL	Significant	.000	Supported
CQ → BT → CL	Significant	.030	Supported

Mediation analysis has validated that the brand trust is an important mediating variable in all the three dimensions of marketing. Since the direct effects were still important and indirect ones were also important, brand trust is a partial mediator, which suggests that such forms of marketing as social media advertising, influencer marketing, and the quality of content have direct and indirect impacts on customer loyalty (Hair et al., 2021).

4.7 Direct Effects Summary
Table 4.7: Direct Effects on Customer Loyalty

Independent Variable	Direct Effect on CL	Result
SMA	Significant	Supported
IM	Significant	Supported
CQ	Significant	Supported
BT	Significant	Supported

The direct pathways to customer loyalty were all found to be statistically significant and this establishes that each of the marketing aspects and brand trust alone can help to form the loyalty in the structural model.

4.8 Hypothesis Testing Summary
Table 4.8: Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Relationship	Result
H1	SMA → CL	Supported
H2	IM → CL	Supported
H3	CQ → CL	Supported
H4	SMA → BT	Supported
H5	IM → BT	Supported
H6	CQ → BT	Supported

H7	BT → CL	Supported
H8	SMA → BT → CL	Supported
H9	IM → BT → CL	Supported
H10	CQ → BT → CL	Supported

All ten hypotheses have been supported empirically, and thus they were able to validate the integrated theoretical model in which the dimensions of social media marketing could be directly and indirectly related to customer loyalty by trusting the brand as an intermediate mediating variable.

5. Discussion

The empirical results affirm the integrated framework where social media advertising, influencer marketing, and content quality play independent and comprehensive roles to promote customer loyalty in e-commerce with the brand trust functioning as a partial mediating variable throughout all three directions. The findings support the theoretical hypothesis that loyalty development is not a direct mechanical response to marketing exposure but a trust-conditional process in which consumer belief in brand integrity defines the efficacy of marketing stimuli in converting the marketing stimulus to relationship commitment.

Influencer marketing was also identified as the most potent direct predictor of customer loyalty (b =.364), as it aligns with the dynamics of parasocial relationships that promote affective brand attachment that is integrated into behavioral loyalty (Kim & Kim, 2021). This observation gains a new dimension when taken in conjunction with the recent findings that show that violations of credibility by influencers, especially in the absence of disclosure of sponsorship, lead to trust crises that completely mediate reputational harm to the related brands (Ali et al., 2025). The current research embodies a positive aspect of this process: once the credibility of the influencer has not been damaged, the same associative transfer route that transfers reputational damage, redirects positive credibility beliefs about the endorsed brand, improving the level of loyalty.

The study showed that social media advertising had the most significant effect on the formation of brand trust (b =.501), as regular and algorithmically targeted advertising shows brand validity and permanence in the marketplace, which lowers consumer uncertainty (Koay et al., 2020). The quality of the content showed the least strong effect of trust-formation (b =.105), which is why the informational and aesthetic aspects of the content are probably the drivers of engagement rather than the main trust-establishing tool. The statistically significant, but relatively small brand trust-to-loyalty pathway (b =.108) suggested that trust is necessary but not sufficient, that is, its impact on loyalty is increased by direct marketing effects but not by itself.

5.1 Theoretical Implications

The present work contributes to the Social Exchange Theory by empirically proving that the formation of reciprocal loyalty in the digital environment uses differentiated mechanisms direct value recognition and trust-mediated confidence, which does not occur in a sequence but in parallel. The Trust -Commitment model is also expanded by placing brand trust as not only a pre-cursor to commitment, but also a mediating process linking marketing investment into relational outputs. Moreover, the results provide more specifications to Signaling Theory by showing that various types of signals have asymmetric trust-forming capabilities: advertising cues can produce significantly more significant trust effects than quality-of-content cues, and thus, the study undermines the assumption of similar levels of signaling effectiveness across marketing dimensions (Barta et al., 2023). Another aspect in which the mediation architecture helps to gain insight into credibility-based trust transfer in influencer marketing is the illustration of the beneficial alternative to the

credibility violation mechanisms reported in the literature on deception (Leung et al., 2022).

5.2 Practical Implications

Influencer marketing investments should also be a priority of the brand managers since it has enhanced direct loyalty effects in comparison to social media advertising, although the latter is the most effective trust-building tool. Influencer relationships should also be accompanied by strict authenticity checks and sponsorship disclosure guidelines, as the same credibility-enhancing process of loyalty in the condition of perceived authenticity propagates brand-damaging reputational losses in case of trust violation (Kim & Kim, 2021). Although content quality approaches help in the building of loyalty and trust, they ought to be placed as a complementary aspect as opposed to a dominant force in integrated marketing systems. E-commerce organizations ought to have trust monitoring systems that keep track of consumer confidence indicators, as well as the familiar engagement measures, in order to be able to identify the signs of trust erosion early enough before the effects of loyalty start to manifest themselves.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

The cross-sectional research design does not allow drawing causal conclusions about the dynamics of trust building and the loyalty building. The very high values of R 2 (0.965 and 0.977) should be interpreted with caution, which could be due to shared method variance in the case of single-source self-report data. Longitudinal designs should be used in future studies to obtain the evolution of trust in consumer-brand interaction sequence. Causal isolation of trust-formation mechanisms would be achievable through experimental methods, which manipulate the authenticity of influencers and the disclosure transparency. Multi-category studies that explore differences in the effects of trust-mediation that vary between product types, especially between high- and low-involvement types, would determine significant boundary conditions (Bu et al., 2022).

5.4 Conclusion

This research confirms that customer loyalty in e-commerce is achieved in two ways namely direct marketing influences and the mediation of trust. The role of brand trust is to mediate all three marketing to loyalty relationships and this is an affirmation that it is psychological infrastructure upon which marketing investments will bring relational returns over time. The results place trust not as a natural side effect of marketing exposure but as a developed consumer perception that needs strategic, transparent, and genuine brand communication on the digital channels.

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