

ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT IN BUILDING BRAND LOYALTY: A STUDY OF FASHION BRANDS

Mr. Kamal Kishore¹, Dr. Mili², Mr. Gourav Kamboj³

¹Assistant Professor, Department of commerce, Mukand Lal National College, Yamuna Nagar, India.

²Associate Professor, Department of Home Science Govt College for Girls, Sector-14, Gurugram, India.

³Assistant Professor, LM Thapar School of Management, Thapar Institute of Engineering and Technology
(Deemed to be University) Patiala, Punjab, India.

kkishore.comm@mlncollegeynr.ac.in, miliniraniyan98@gmail.com, gkamboj_phd25@thapar.edu

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ABSTRACT

In the dynamic and highly competitive fashion industry, social media platforms have become critical tools for fostering customer engagement and strengthening brand relationships. This study investigates the role of social media engagement in building brand loyalty among consumers of fashion brands. The research explores how different dimensions of engagement—such as interaction, participation, and emotional connection—influence customer trust, brand experience, and ultimately brand loyalty. Drawing on the theories of relationship marketing and social identity, the study employs a quantitative research design with data collected from active social media users who follow fashion brands on platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. Statistical analysis, including correlation and regression, is conducted to examine the relationships among the variables. Findings are expected to reveal that higher levels of social media engagement significantly enhance brand trust and lead to stronger brand loyalty. The study contributes to marketing literature by emphasizing the strategic importance of meaningful online engagement for brand retention in the digital era. It also provides practical insights for marketers to design social media strategies that not only attract but also sustain loyal customers.

Keywords: Social Media Engagement, Brand Loyalty, Fashion Brands, Customer Trust, Brand Experience, Relationship Marketing, Digital Marketing, Consumer Behavior.

1. INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

In the modern digital landscape, social media has evolved from being a mere communication tool to a dominant marketing platform that shapes consumer perceptions, brand experiences, and purchasing decisions. With billions of active users globally, platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter) have become integral spaces for brand–consumer interaction. According to Statista (2024), more than 4.9 billion people worldwide actively use social media, and this number continues to grow annually. This widespread usage presents an unprecedented opportunity for fashion brands to engage, communicate, and build enduring relationships with their audiences.

The fashion industry, characterized by rapid trend shifts and high competition, is among the sectors most impacted by digital transformation. Social media allows brands to reach consumers instantly, promote new collections, and communicate brand values through visual storytelling. Engagement in the form of likes, shares, comments, and user-generated content helps brands create emotional connections and strengthen loyalty among consumers (Kumar & Kaushik, 2020). Unlike traditional advertising, which primarily informs consumers, social media engagement fosters two-way communication and relationship-building. This interactivity transforms consumers from passive observers into active brand advocates.

Significance of the Study

Building and sustaining brand loyalty is a core objective for marketers because loyal customers not only generate repeat purchases but also act as brand ambassadors through word-of-mouth promotion. In a market flooded with fashion alternatives, loyalty provides brands with a competitive advantage and stable revenue base. However, as consumer behavior evolves in the digital era, conventional loyalty drivers—such as product quality or price—are no longer sufficient. Instead, customers seek authentic experiences, emotional connections, and responsive interactions online (Dwivedi et al., 2021).

This study is significant as it highlights how social media engagement functions as a key determinant of brand loyalty within the fashion industry. Understanding this relationship will enable marketers to design more effective engagement strategies that foster trust, satisfaction, and emotional attachment, leading to long-term brand

commitment. Moreover, the research bridges a crucial gap by focusing on engagement quality rather than mere presence on social media platforms.

Problem Statement

While fashion brands invest heavily in social media campaigns to attract and engage customers, the actual impact of these engagement efforts on brand loyalty remains ambiguous. Many brands measure engagement in terms of metrics such as followers, likes, or impressions, without assessing whether these interactions translate into genuine loyalty or repeat purchase behavior (Alalwan, 2021). Furthermore, the psychological and emotional aspects of engagement—such as trust, community belongingness, and perceived authenticity—are often overlooked. Thus, there is a need to empirically examine how social media engagement influences consumers' loyalty toward fashion brands and what specific engagement dimensions contribute most effectively to this relationship.

Research Objectives

The present study aims to explore the influence of social media engagement on brand loyalty in the context of fashion brands. The specific objectives include:

1. To examine the relationship between social media engagement and brand loyalty among fashion consumers.
2. To identify key dimensions of engagement (interaction, participation, and emotional connection) that influence brand loyalty.
3. To analyze the mediating role of customer trust and brand experience in the engagement–loyalty relationship.
4. To offer strategic recommendations for fashion marketers to enhance loyalty through meaningful social media engagement.

Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between social media engagement and brand loyalty in the fashion industry?
2. Which dimensions of engagement have the strongest effect on loyalty?
3. Does customer trust mediate the relationship between engagement and loyalty?
4. How can fashion brands improve their social media strategies to sustain customer loyalty?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in two key theories: the **Relationship Marketing Theory** and the **Social Identity Theory**. Relationship Marketing Theory emphasizes building long-term interactions between businesses and consumers through trust, commitment, and communication (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In a social media context, brands cultivate loyalty by maintaining continuous digital relationships with their followers. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) explains how individuals define themselves based on their association with groups or brands. When consumers identify with a fashion brand's online community, their engagement enhances loyalty because they perceive the brand as part of their personal identity.

These theories collectively provide a conceptual basis for understanding how engagement on social media platforms fosters emotional connections and behavioral loyalty among consumers.

Scope of the Study

The study focuses on **fashion brands**—including apparel, accessories, and footwear—operating on popular social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok. The target population consists of active social media users who follow at least one fashion brand online. The geographical scope is limited to India, where digital adoption and fashion consumption have witnessed rapid growth. The study adopts a quantitative approach, employing a structured questionnaire to collect primary data from respondents aged 18–35 years, a demographic known for high social media activity and fashion consciousness.

Expected Contributions

The research contributes to both **academic literature** and **managerial practice**. Academically, it extends the existing body of knowledge on social media marketing by empirically validating the role of engagement in driving brand loyalty within the fashion sector. It also introduces the mediating role of customer trust and brand experience, offering a more holistic understanding of consumer behavior in digital spaces.

For practitioners, the findings will provide actionable insights into how fashion brands can leverage engagement strategies—such as interactive posts, influencer collaborations, and personalized communication—to strengthen consumer relationships. This understanding will help marketers allocate resources effectively toward engagement tactics that generate tangible loyalty outcomes.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review is to examine prior studies on social media engagement and its influence on brand loyalty, with a specific focus on fashion brands. Over the last decade, the role of social media in shaping consumer–brand relationships has become a central topic of marketing research. As digital platforms have evolved from mere communication tools into brand-building ecosystems, understanding how online engagement drives loyalty has become critical. This section explores theoretical foundations, dimensions of engagement, antecedents and outcomes of engagement, and their specific implications in the fashion industry.

Concept of Social Media Engagement

Social media engagement can be defined as the degree of consumer interaction, participation, and emotional involvement with brand-related content on digital platforms (Barger et al., 2016). It encompasses both **behavioral** and **psychological** aspects—where behavioral engagement refers to visible actions such as liking, sharing, or commenting, while psychological engagement involves internal states such as attention, enthusiasm, and absorption (Hollebeek et al., 2019).

Brands use engagement to build a sense of community and foster relationships that go beyond mere transactions. According to Vivek et al. (2012), customer engagement is a multidimensional construct comprising cognitive, emotional, and behavioral elements that reflect the customer’s relationship with a brand. Social media platforms amplify this engagement by offering interactive spaces where consumers co-create content, exchange feedback, and influence brand narratives.

The **engagement-based marketing framework** (Brodie et al., 2011) suggests that meaningful interactions between consumers and brands lead to relational outcomes such as satisfaction, trust, commitment, and advocacy. In this context, engagement acts as a catalyst for strengthening long-term loyalty and brand equity.

Dimensions of Social Media Engagement

Scholars have identified several dimensions of engagement relevant to social media contexts:

1. **Cognitive Engagement** – the level of concentration and mental investment a consumer places on brand-related content (Calder et al., 2009). For example, fashion followers who analyze style tips or brand stories demonstrate cognitive engagement.
2. **Emotional Engagement** – the feelings of excitement, pleasure, or attachment generated through interactions with brand content (Dessart et al., 2015). Emotional engagement is particularly strong in fashion, where identity and aesthetics play a vital role.
3. **Behavioral Engagement** – the observable actions users take online, such as commenting, sharing, or creating user-generated content (Schivinski et al., 2016). These behaviors directly influence brand visibility and social proof.
4. **Social Connection Engagement** – a more recent addition that involves building relationships with other consumers in brand communities (Islam & Rahman, 2016). Consumers who identify with a brand’s community often exhibit higher loyalty levels.

These dimensions collectively shape how consumers perceive and respond to fashion brands on digital platforms.

Brand Loyalty in the Digital Era

Brand loyalty refers to a consumer’s commitment to repurchase a preferred brand consistently, despite situational influences or competitive pressures (Oliver, 1999). In the digital era, loyalty extends beyond repeat purchase to include advocacy behaviors—such as recommending brands on social media or defending them against criticism (So et al., 2016).

Researchers categorize brand loyalty into two primary forms: **attitudinal loyalty** and **behavioral loyalty**.

- Attitudinal loyalty reflects emotional attachment, trust, and brand preference.
- Behavioral loyalty refers to actual purchase behavior and repeat patronage (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

The shift toward digital interactions has made engagement a key antecedent of both forms. When consumers engage positively with a brand online, they develop trust and emotional connection, which enhance their loyalty (Islam & Rahman, 2017).

Relationship Between Social Media Engagement and Brand Loyalty

Numerous empirical studies have confirmed that social media engagement significantly affects brand loyalty. For instance, Laroche et al. (2013) found that online brand communities enhance customer–brand relationships by promoting trust, social identification, and commitment. Similarly, Jahn and Kunz (2012) demonstrated that engagement within Facebook brand communities leads to stronger brand loyalty and advocacy intentions.

Fashion brands, in particular, rely on visual storytelling and interactive content to engage audiences. Research by Kim and Ko (2012) revealed that luxury fashion brands' social media marketing activities positively influence brand equity and loyalty by enhancing brand–customer interactions. The study highlighted key engagement drivers such as entertainment, customization, trendiness, and interactivity.

Furthermore, De Vries and Carlson (2014) proposed that engagement acts as a mediator between social media marketing efforts and brand loyalty. In other words, marketing activities alone do not create loyalty; it is the engagement generated by these activities that determines consumers' long-term attachment.

Mediating Role of Trust and Brand Experience

Several studies have highlighted the mediating role of **trust** and **brand experience** in the engagement–loyalty relationship. Trust reflects consumers' confidence in a brand's reliability and integrity (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In the social media context, transparency, responsiveness, and authenticity enhance trust (Hajli, 2014). When brands reply promptly to queries or display genuine concern for customers' opinions, trust develops, leading to repeat patronage. Brand experience, on the other hand, refers to sensory, emotional, and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli (Brakus et al., 2009). Engaging social media content—such as influencer collaborations, virtual try-ons, and interactive videos—enhances brand experience by creating memorable digital interactions. Research by Iglesias et al. (2019) found that experiential engagement strengthens emotional bonds, which in turn lead to loyalty and advocacy.

Role of User-Generated Content and Influencer Marketing

User-generated content (UGC) is one of the most influential forms of social media engagement. When consumers share photos, reviews, or styling ideas featuring a brand, it enhances authenticity and credibility (Popp & Woratschek, 2017). In the fashion industry, hashtags, outfit-of-the-day (OOTD) posts, and product reviews encourage peer-to-peer influence, which amplifies brand loyalty through social validation.

Influencer marketing also plays a critical role in engagement and loyalty formation. Influencers act as intermediaries who humanize brands and create emotional resonance with followers. Research by Ki et al. (2020) demonstrated that influencer credibility and congruence with brand image significantly enhance followers' loyalty intentions. Consumers perceive influencer-endorsed brands as more trustworthy and relatable, particularly when influencers maintain authenticity and transparency.

Engagement Strategies in Fashion Branding

Fashion brands employ multiple strategies to foster engagement and loyalty. Visual storytelling through high-quality imagery, behind-the-scenes videos, and sustainability narratives helps humanize brands. Interactive campaigns such as polls, live sessions, and giveaways increase user participation. According to Godey et al. (2016), fashion consumers respond positively to social media activities that are entertaining, informative, and visually appealing. Moreover, personalization and responsiveness are crucial. Tailored recommendations, acknowledgment of user posts, and prompt responses build emotional connection and signal that the brand values its customers. Continuous engagement sustains loyalty even during competitive market fluctuations (Phua et al., 2020).

Gaps in Existing Literature

Despite extensive research, several gaps remain unaddressed. First, many studies treat engagement as a single construct, ignoring its multidimensional nature. Few have empirically tested how specific engagement dimensions—such as cognitive, emotional, or behavioral—impact loyalty differently. Second, most prior studies focus on Western markets; limited research exists in emerging economies like India, where social media usage patterns differ significantly. Third, the mediating roles of trust and brand experience are underexplored in fashion branding contexts. Addressing these gaps will provide a more nuanced understanding of how engagement fosters loyalty across diverse consumer segments.

4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Based on the reviewed literature, this study proposes a conceptual model where **Social Media Engagement** (independent variable) influences **Brand Loyalty** (dependent variable), mediated by **Customer Trust** and **Brand Experience**. Engagement dimensions—interaction, participation, and emotional connection—collectively shape loyalty outcomes.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Social Media Engagement → Trust & Brand Experience (Mediators) → Brand Loyalty

This framework serves as the basis for the empirical analysis conducted in subsequent sections.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design based on secondary data analysis to investigate the role of social media engagement in building brand loyalty among fashion brands. The research relies on previously published studies, reports, and credible online data sources to explore the theoretical relationships between engagement dimensions (interaction, participation, and emotional connection) and consumer loyalty outcomes (trust, commitment, and advocacy). The purpose of this design is to synthesize existing evidence and identify emerging trends and patterns rather than collecting new primary data.

Data Source and Collection

The study utilizes **secondary data** obtained from a variety of reliable and scholarly sources, including peer-reviewed journals, industry reports, white papers, and online databases such as **Scopus**, **Google Scholar**, **ResearchGate**, **Statista**, and **Emerald Insight**. Preference was given to recent literature (2015–2024) to ensure the inclusion of contemporary perspectives on social media marketing, consumer engagement, and fashion branding. Additionally, industry insights from **Statista (2024)** and **Hootsuite Digital Reports** were reviewed to provide contextual evidence on global and Indian social media usage patterns relevant to fashion consumers.

Data Analysis Approach

The collected secondary data were systematically reviewed and analyzed using a qualitative content analysis approach. Key themes and variables were identified from prior empirical and conceptual studies. Relationships between social media engagement and brand loyalty were mapped to establish conceptual linkages and highlight mediating factors such as customer trust and brand experience. Thematic coding was applied to extract recurring patterns, theoretical propositions, and gaps in existing literature. Findings from different studies were compared and synthesized to arrive at integrated insights that support the study's objectives.

Variables and Framework

Based on secondary evidence, the study conceptualizes **social media engagement** as the independent variable and **brand loyalty** as the dependent variable. **Customer trust** and **brand experience** are considered mediating factors. The framework emphasizes how engagement practices—such as interactivity, content relevance, and community participation—enhance consumer trust and brand experience, ultimately leading to long-term loyalty.

Limitations of the Methodology

Since the study relies exclusively on secondary data, its findings are dependent on the accuracy and relevance of existing literature. The absence of primary data restricts empirical validation and may limit generalizability. However, the comprehensive review of diverse sources provides a strong theoretical foundation for understanding the engagement–loyalty relationship in the fashion industry.

6. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Overview of Data Analysis

The analysis of secondary data was conducted using a **qualitative synthesis approach**, drawing insights from published journal articles, industry reports, and market analyses related to social media marketing and consumer loyalty in the fashion sector. The objective was to identify consistent patterns, relationships, and emerging trends that demonstrate how social media engagement influences brand loyalty. Key themes—such as emotional engagement, interactivity, trust-building, and experiential content—were coded and analyzed across various studies.

The analysis revealed that **social media engagement is a critical driver of both attitudinal and behavioral brand loyalty**. Consumers who actively interact with brand content, participate in online communities, and perceive brands as authentic tend to display stronger loyalty intentions, repeat purchase behavior, and advocacy tendencies.

Patterns and Trends Identified from Literature

1. Emotional and Visual Engagement Drives Loyalty in Fashion

Data from multiple studies (e.g., Godey et al., 2016; Islam & Rahman, 2016; Kim & Ko, 2012) highlight that visual appeal and emotional resonance play a vital role in engagement for fashion brands. Instagram, in particular, emerged as the most influential platform, where aesthetic visuals and storytelling foster strong emotional connections. Emotional engagement not only increases attachment but also enhances brand identification, leading to higher loyalty levels.

2. Interactive and Two-Way Communication Builds Trust

Findings from Alalwan (2021) and Hajli (2014) emphasize that social media's interactive features—such as real-time comments, polls, and brand responses—establish trust between consumers and brands. When consumers feel heard and acknowledged, they perceive the brand as transparent and reliable. This trust acts as a mediating variable between engagement and loyalty, strengthening relational bonds.

3. User-Generated Content and Peer Influence Strengthen Loyalty

Studies reviewed by Popp and Woratschek (2017) and Ki et al. (2020) indicate that user-generated content (UGC) significantly enhances authenticity and credibility. When customers post reviews or share fashion styling ideas featuring a brand, it reinforces trust among peers. This peer validation encourages others to adopt the brand, thereby increasing both emotional and behavioral loyalty.

4. Influencer Marketing as a Strategic Engagement Tool

Secondary data analysis from recent industry reports (Statista, 2024) and research (Ki et al., 2020) shows that influencer collaborations remain one of the most effective engagement strategies in the fashion sector. Influencers create relatable, aspirational content that humanizes brands. Their credibility directly impacts follower trust and, consequently, loyalty. Brands that collaborate with micro-influencers, in particular, achieve deeper audience engagement and higher retention rates.

5. Brand Experience as a Mediating Factor

Evidence from Brakus et al. (2009) and Iglesias et al. (2019) confirms that engaging brand experiences—whether through virtual try-ons, live fashion shows, or interactive campaigns—enhance emotional attachment and perceived brand value. Social media engagement contributes to this experience by offering sensory and emotional stimulation, reinforcing long-term loyalty.

Comparative Insights: Global vs. Indian Context

Secondary data indicate notable regional differences in engagement and loyalty patterns. In **Western markets**, brand loyalty is often built through authenticity, sustainability messaging, and influencer transparency (Dwivedi et al., 2021). In contrast, in **India**, engagement is more entertainment-driven, with consumers responding positively to interactive campaigns, celebrity endorsements, and discount-driven posts (Hootsuite, 2024). However, across both contexts, emotional storytelling and consistent brand communication remain central to maintaining loyalty.

Key Findings

The synthesis of secondary data yielded several key findings:

- **Engagement quality** (depth of interaction) is more influential than **engagement quantity** (number of likes or followers).
- **Emotional connection and trust** are consistent mediators between engagement and loyalty.
- **Visual content, influencer collaborations, and authenticity** are primary engagement drivers in the fashion industry.
- **Brand communities** on social media enhance a sense of belonging, thereby fostering attitudinal and behavioral loyalty.
- **Personalized and interactive engagement** strategies yield higher retention compared to one-way promotional content.

7. DISCUSSION

The findings from the secondary data analysis provide robust evidence that **social media engagement is a critical determinant of brand loyalty** in the fashion industry. Consistent with prior research (Barger et al., 2016; Hollebeek et al., 2019), engagement fosters emotional connections, cognitive involvement, and interactive behaviors that collectively enhance attitudinal and behavioral loyalty.

The analysis demonstrates that **emotional engagement**, driven by visually appealing content, storytelling, and identity-related messaging, has the strongest impact on consumer loyalty. Fashion brands that leverage aesthetics, trends, and aspirational narratives elicit emotional attachment, which translates into repeat purchases and advocacy.

Trust and brand experience emerged as essential mediators in the engagement–loyalty relationship. Consumers tend to remain loyal to brands that demonstrate authenticity, transparency, and responsiveness on social media. Similarly, immersive brand experiences—facilitated by interactive campaigns, influencer collaborations, and user-generated content—strengthen consumer attachment and brand preference.

The review also highlighted **regional and cultural differences**. While Western consumers prioritize sustainability and ethical branding, Indian consumers are more responsive to entertainment-driven content, influencer engagement, and interactive promotions. This underscores the importance of context-specific social media strategies in fostering loyalty.

Overall, the findings reinforce the **theoretical framework**: social media engagement, when effectively implemented, leads to enhanced trust and brand experience, which subsequently drives stronger brand loyalty.

8. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study contributes to the academic literature in several ways:

- 1. Integration of Engagement Dimensions:** By synthesizing secondary data, the study emphasizes the multidimensional nature of social media engagement (cognitive, emotional, and behavioral), providing a nuanced understanding of its impact on loyalty.
- 2. Mediating Roles:** The study reinforces the mediating influence of **trust** and **brand experience** in the digital marketing–loyalty relationship, extending prior conceptual models (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Brakus et al., 2009).
- 3. Industry-Specific Insights:** The findings offer a focused perspective on the **fashion sector**, addressing a gap in existing research where sector-specific insights are limited, particularly for emerging markets like India.
- 4. Digital Marketing Theory:** By combining social identity theory with engagement frameworks, the study provides a theoretical lens for understanding how online communities and interactive content influence loyalty behavior.

9. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The research offers actionable insights for marketing practitioners in the fashion industry:

- 1. Prioritize Quality Engagement:** Brands should focus on meaningful, high-quality interactions rather than superficial metrics like post likes or follower counts. Emotional resonance and cognitive involvement are key drivers of loyalty.
- 2. Build Trust Through Transparency:** Prompt responses, authentic communication, and ethical influencer collaborations enhance consumer trust, which is critical for loyalty.
- 3. Leverage Influencer and User-Generated Content:** Influencer partnerships and UGC campaigns increase authenticity and peer validation, resulting in stronger brand-community connections.
- 4. Invest in Experiential Marketing:** Interactive campaigns, live sessions, virtual try-ons, and visually immersive content contribute to positive brand experiences and long-term loyalty.
- 5. Customize Strategies by Market:** Brands operating in diverse regions should adapt engagement strategies to local consumer preferences, balancing entertainment, aesthetics, and value-driven messaging.

10. LIMITATIONS

While secondary data synthesis provides valuable insights, the study has several limitations:

- Reliance on secondary data limits empirical validation; findings are contingent upon the quality and relevance of existing literature.
- The study cannot capture real-time engagement metrics or dynamic consumer behavior on social media platforms.
- Regional generalizations (e.g., Indian vs. Western markets) may not fully account for intra-regional diversity in consumer preferences.

Future research should incorporate **primary data** through surveys, experiments, or social media analytics to empirically test the conceptual framework and validate the proposed relationships.

11. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study highlights the pivotal role of social media engagement in building brand loyalty within the fashion industry. Emotional, cognitive, and behavioral interactions on digital platforms significantly influence loyalty by fostering trust and enhancing brand experience. Fashion brands that implement strategic engagement initiatives—leveraging visual storytelling, influencer partnerships, and interactive campaigns—can strengthen consumer attachment, drive repeat purchases, and cultivate brand advocates.

The study offers both theoretical contributions to digital marketing and consumer engagement literature, as well as practical guidance for fashion marketers seeking to enhance loyalty in an increasingly competitive and digitally mediated environment. By prioritizing meaningful engagement and experiential content, fashion brands can secure sustainable, long-term consumer relationships.

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