

Beyond Likes and Shares: A Structural Model of Social Media Marketing Effects on Trust and Loyalty

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ABSTRACT

As social media becomes a dominant environment for brand–consumer interaction, understanding how social media marketing (SMM) activities shape consumer responses has become increasingly essential. This study examines the impact of five key SMM dimensions—entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization, and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM)—on brand equity, brand loyalty, purchase intention, and consumer satisfaction. Using a validated survey instrument and analyzing responses from 512 consumers, the study employs structural equation modeling (SEM) to test the conceptual framework. The findings reveal that eWOM ($\beta = 0.41$) and interaction ($\beta = 0.36$) are the strongest predictors of brand loyalty, while customization significantly enhances brand equity ($\beta = 0.33$). Trendiness shows a meaningful influence on consumer purchase intention ($\beta = 0.29$), and entertainment contributes positively to consumer satisfaction ($\beta = 0.27$). Overall, the model explains 62% of the variance in loyalty, 58% in brand equity, and 55% in purchase intention, demonstrating robust predictive power. This study provides actionable insights for marketers seeking to strengthen brand relationships in increasingly competitive digital environments. By highlighting the differential effects of SMM activities, the research offers strategic guidance for optimizing social media content to drive stronger consumer responses and long-term loyalty.

Keywords: Social Media Marketing Activities; Brand Loyalty; Brand Equity; Brand Trust; Self–Brand Connection; Digital Marketing; Saudi Arabia; Consumer Behavior.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of social media has reshaped how brands communicate, engage audiences, and cultivate long-term consumer relationships. Unlike traditional one-way marketing channels, social platforms enable interactive, real-time, and personalized exchanges that empower consumers to co-create brand meaning and influence brand narratives (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Deloitte, 2024). Within this digital ecosystem, Social Media Marketing Activities (SMMAs) including interactivity, customization, entertainment, trendiness, and electronic word-of-mouth—have emerged as strategic tools for building strong relational bonds between consumers and brands (Kim & Ko, 2012; Godey et al., 2016; Alalwan, 2018). These activities extend beyond visibility and promotion, contributing to deeper engagement and fostering the relational foundations required for sustainable brand loyalty (Zollo et al., 2020).

Prior research consistently demonstrates that SMMAs influence key psychological and behavioral constructs, including brand equity, brand trust, and self-brand connection. Brands that communicate transparently, consistently, and authentically on social platforms often strengthen consumers' perceptions of brand value and credibility (Bilgin, 2018; Miller, 2024; Laroche et al., 2013; Al-Hawary et al., 2023). Likewise, identity-relevant

interactions and personalized experiences reinforce consumers' emotional and symbolic attachment to brands, deepening self-brand connections and shaping long-term loyalty behaviors (Escalas & Bettman, 2017; Algharabat et al., 2020). Collectively, these relational mechanisms—equity, trust, and identity—form essential pathways through which social media engagement translates into meaningful and enduring loyalty outcomes (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Puspaningrum, 2020).

Despite these advances, several gaps remain unaddressed. Existing studies often examine SMMAAs alongside individual relational constructs, such as brand equity or trust, without integrating the full set of psychological pathways that jointly explain the formation of loyalty (Ebrahim, 2020; Ali, 2025; Hossain & Kibria, 2024). Moreover, most empirical work has been conducted in Western or East Asian markets, overlooking regions where cultural norms, digital adoption patterns, and consumer–brand relationships may operate differently. The Middle East—and Saudi Arabia in particular—represents one of the world's fastest-growing social media environments, with high levels of digital engagement yet limited academic insight into how consumers form loyalty in this context (Alanazi, 2023; Mabasa et al., 2024). Understanding these mechanisms within Saudi Arabia is therefore both timely and theoretically significant.

To address these gaps, the present study develops and empirically validates an integrated framework in which SMMAAs influence brand loyalty indirectly through brand equity, brand trust, and self-brand connection. By situating the investigation in Saudi Arabia—a digitally dynamic, yet academically underrepresented market—the study contributes three major advancements. Theoretically, it integrates identity-based, value-based, and trust-based perspectives into a unified model explaining how digital interactions foster loyalty. Contextually, it expands empirical insight into consumer behavior in emerging markets with distinct cultural dynamics. Practically, it provides actionable guidance for managers seeking to design social media strategies that build equity, cultivate trust, and strengthen identity-based consumer relationships, ultimately securing competitive advantage in digitally intensive environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media Marketing Activities

Social media marketing activities (SMMAAs) leverage the interactive and participatory affordances of social platforms to enable two-way communication, enhance consumer engagement, and strengthen brand relationships beyond the scope of traditional media. Conceptualized as processes through which firms design, communicate, and deliver online marketing offerings to create stakeholder value (Yadav & Rahman, 2018), SMMAAs facilitate information exchange, personalization, and word of mouth across platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and blogs. Although prior studies have operationalized SMMAAs using different dimensions (e.g., Chen & Lin, 2019; Ebrahim, 2020), this study adopts the framework of Yadav and Rahman (2018), which encompasses interactivity, informativeness, trendiness, personalization, and word of mouth. While Ebrahim (2020) emphasized trendiness, customization, and word of mouth, the broader conceptualization of Yadav and Rahman (2018) offers a more comprehensive lens for capturing the multifaceted nature of SMMAAs and their strategic role in value creation and sustained consumer engagement. Accordingly, this study employs these five dimensions as the analytical foundation for examining the impact of SMMAAs within the proposed research framework.

Social Media Marketing Activities and Brand Equity

Social media marketing activities (SMMAAs) comprising entertainment, interaction, customization, trendiness, and electronic word of mouth (eWOM) have redefined the way firms create consumer value (Kim & Ko, 2012; Godey et al., 2016). By fostering personalization, interactivity, and symbolic brand associations, SMMAAs strengthen consumer-based brand equity (CBBE), which represents the added value consumers ascribe to brands (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). When equity is strong, consumers perceive brands as more salient, credible, and emotionally resonant, ultimately driving preference and differentiation.

Empirical findings confirm these associations. Bilgin (2018) demonstrated that SMMAAs positively influence brand awareness and loyalty by reinforcing consumer perceptions of value. Similarly, Manyanga et al. (2024), in the Zimbabwean hospitality context, found that SMMA engagement significantly enhances brand equity, which in turn acts as a precursor to loyalty. Complementary analyses from SSRN (2022) suggest that SMMAAs strengthen equity by increasing consumer trust, salience, and perceived authenticity in digital environments.

Recent evidence adds further weight to these findings. Ali et al. (2025) empirically validated that SMMAAs have a strong and direct positive effect on brand equity. Importantly, their results showed that brand equity is not only an independent outcome of SMMAAs but also an essential causal condition for achieving high levels of brand loyalty. Configurational analysis revealed that combinations of high SMMA engagement and strong brand equity consistently lead to loyalty outcomes, while low equity undermines the effect of other relational constructs.

Thus, SMAs should be recognized as strategic levers for building brand equity in digital ecosystems. Firms that deploy entertaining, interactive, and identity-relevant SMA strategies can strengthen brand equity, thereby anchoring long-term consumer loyalty and competitive advantage.

H1: Social media marketing activities positively influence brand equity.

Social Media Marketing Activities and Self-Brand Connection

Self-brand connection (SBC) reflects the degree to which consumers integrate a brand into their self-concept, perceiving it as an extension of their personal identity (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). Social media platforms offer fertile ground for this psychological incorporation by enabling consumers to engage in identity expression, co-creation, and symbolic interaction with brands (Dessart et al., 2016). Through personalized, interactive, and expressive social media activities, brands can reinforce their relevance to consumers' identities. Algharabat et al. (2020) demonstrated that SBC mediates the relationship between social commerce interactions and loyalty, while Nguyen et al. (2022) confirmed that personalization embedded in SMAs strengthens identity congruence, thereby deepening consumer-brand ties. Complementary SSRN analyses further emphasize that SMAs enhance the "identity signaling" function of brands, reinforcing emotional ties and self-congruence in digital contexts.

Recent empirical research advances this line of thought. Ali et al. (2025) demonstrated that SMAs exert a strong positive influence on SBC. Their findings revealed that interactive and entertaining social media content provides consumers with opportunities for identity reinforcement and self-expression, leading to stronger connections with brands. Moreover, configurational evidence showed that high levels of SBC, when combined with brand trust and brand equity, form critical pathways to brand loyalty, whereas weak SBC constrains loyalty outcomes even in the presence of other positive brand attributes.

These insights underline SBC as a pivotal relational outcome of SMAs and a strategic mechanism linking digital marketing practices to enduring consumer loyalty. Firms that deploy personalized, engaging, and identity-relevant SMAs are better positioned to cultivate SBCs that anchor emotional commitment and long-term advocacy.

H2: Social media marketing activities positively influence self-brand connection.

Self-Brand Connection and Brand Loyalty

When consumers perceive that a brand reflects their identity, aspirations, and values, they are more likely to exhibit both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty (Park et al., 2010; Algharabat et al., 2020). This bond extends beyond repeat purchases to include advocacy behaviors and resistance to competitors' offerings. In digital environments, self-brand connection (SBC) assumes heightened importance as consumers actively construct and express identity through their brand affiliations. Nguyen et al. (2022) empirically validated that SBC strengthens loyalty in online markets, while evidence from the hospitality sector in Zimbabwe confirmed that alignment between self-concept and brand image remains a powerful driver of loyalty even in emerging economies (Manyanga et al., 2024).

Recent work reinforces these insights by examining SBC within the broader framework of social media marketing activities (SMAs). Ali et al. (2025) demonstrated through structural equation modeling and fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) that SBC significantly enhances brand loyalty and, in some causal configurations, operates as a necessary condition for achieving high loyalty outcomes.

Their findings reveal that consumers who integrate brands into their self-concept are more resistant to competitive offerings and more inclined toward advocacy behaviors, particularly when supported by interactive and personalized social media engagement. This evidence underscores SBC's role as both a direct predictor and a key relational pathway linking digital marketing strategies to sustained consumer loyalty.

In sum, SBC is not merely a psychological construct but a strategic mechanism that strengthens relational bonds and ensures continuity of consumer-brand engagement. Firms that leverage personalized, identity-relevant, and interactive social media strategies are more likely to cultivate strong SBCs that translate into enduring loyalty.

H3: Self-brand connection positively influences brand loyalty.

Brand Equity and Brand Loyalty

Brand equity, conceptualized as the incremental value a brand adds to consumer perception, is a critical determinant of loyalty because it fosters differentiation, trust, and preference (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). Strong brand equity enhances not only purchase intentions but also consumers' willingness to resist competitors' offerings. Bilgin (2018) highlights the capacity of brand equity to increase purchase intent, while Miller (2024) emphasizes its mediating role between digital social media marketing activities (SMAs) and loyalty. In hospitality contexts,

Manyanga et al. (2024) provide evidence that high levels of brand equity translate into stronger switching resistance and more enduring loyalty outcomes.

Recent findings extend these insights by empirically validating the role of brand equity within digital ecosystems. Ali et al. (2025) and Albarq (2024) confirmed through both partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) that brand equity is positively influenced by SMMAAs and, in turn, exerts a strong positive effect on brand loyalty. Their study demonstrated that equity functions not only as a standalone predictor but also as a necessary component in causal configurations that lead to high loyalty outcomes. Specifically, the analysis revealed that high brand equity, when combined with trust and self-brand connection, consistently yields the most robust loyalty pathways, whereas low equity severely constrains the capacity of other factors to generate loyalty.

Taken together, this evidence underscores that brand equity is more than a perceptual construct; it is a strategic mechanism linking marketing activities to durable consumer-brand relationships. By investing in brand-building initiatives on social media, firms strengthen the equity that anchors loyalty and enhances long-term competitive advantage.

H4: Brand equity positively influences brand loyalty.

Social Media Marketing Activities and Brand Trust

Brand trust—defined as consumers' confidence in a brand's integrity, reliability, and benevolence—is a critical outcome of effective social media marketing activities (SMMAAs) (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Trust serves to mitigate perceived risk, reduce relational uncertainty, and provide a foundation for sustained consumer-brand relationships. Transparent, responsive, and authentic engagement on social media platforms fosters this trust by signaling credibility and consistency (Laroche et al., 2013). Haudi et al. (2022) found that consistent delivery of engaging social media content enhances consumer trust in online contexts, while evidence from the Zimbabwe hospitality sector (Manyanga et al., 2024) confirmed that SMMAAs play a central role in cultivating trust, particularly among digitally native consumer cohorts. Complementary evidence from SSRN (2022) also demonstrates that openness and interactivity in digital communication positively shape consumer perceptions of trustworthiness.

Recent advances extend this understanding further. Ali et al. (2025) empirically established, using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) and fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA), that SMMAAs significantly and positively influence brand trust. Their results confirmed that trust acts not only as an independent outcome of effective SMMAAs but also as a crucial mediating mechanism connecting digital engagement with long-term loyalty. Importantly, their configurational analysis revealed that combinations of high SMMA engagement and brand trust are necessary causal pathways for achieving elevated brand loyalty, highlighting the indispensable role of trust within integrated branding frameworks.

In sum, literature positions brand trust as a strategic consequence of SMMAAs, essential for converting digital interactions into enduring relational outcomes. By demonstrating reliability, authenticity, and responsiveness in online environments, firms can build trust capital that sustains competitive advantage.

H5: Social media marketing activities positively influence brand trust.

Brand Trust and Brand Loyalty

Trust has long been established as a central antecedent of loyalty, providing the relational glue that reduces uncertainty, enhances commitment, and promotes advocacy behaviors (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In digital contexts, trust assumes even greater importance, where the absence of physical interaction intensifies perceived risks. Recent studies confirm its pivotal role: Al-Hawary et al. (2023) identified trust as a significant mediator in digital engagement frameworks, while large-scale online behavioral analyses (SSRN, 2022) emphasized trust's indispensability for sustaining long-term consumer-brand relationships. Within the hospitality sector, Manyanga et al. (2024) provided empirical evidence that trust strongly predicts loyalty, consolidating its role as a mechanism of enduring brand commitment.

Extending this foundation, Ali et al. (2025) and Albarq (2024) demonstrated that social media marketing activities (SMMAAs) significantly foster brand trust, which in turn exerts a positive influence on loyalty. Their study, employing both symmetric and asymmetric modeling approaches, revealed that trust not only functions as a direct driver of loyalty but also interacts synergistically with other constructs such as brand equity and self-brand connection to produce higher-order loyalty outcomes. Their fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis further highlighted that configurations combining strong trust with high self-brand connection are necessary for sustaining brand loyalty, whereas low trust often undermines loyalty regardless of other favorable brand attributes. These findings underscore that trust is not merely an isolated construct but a critical node in the SMMA-loyalty framework.

Accordingly, brand trust should be treated as a strategic imperative for firms operating in highly digitalized markets. By cultivating transparency, responsiveness, and authenticity in their social media presence, brands can establish a reliable trust base that fosters repeat patronage, emotional commitment, and consumer advocacy.

H6. Brand trust exerts a positive and significant influence on brand loyalty.

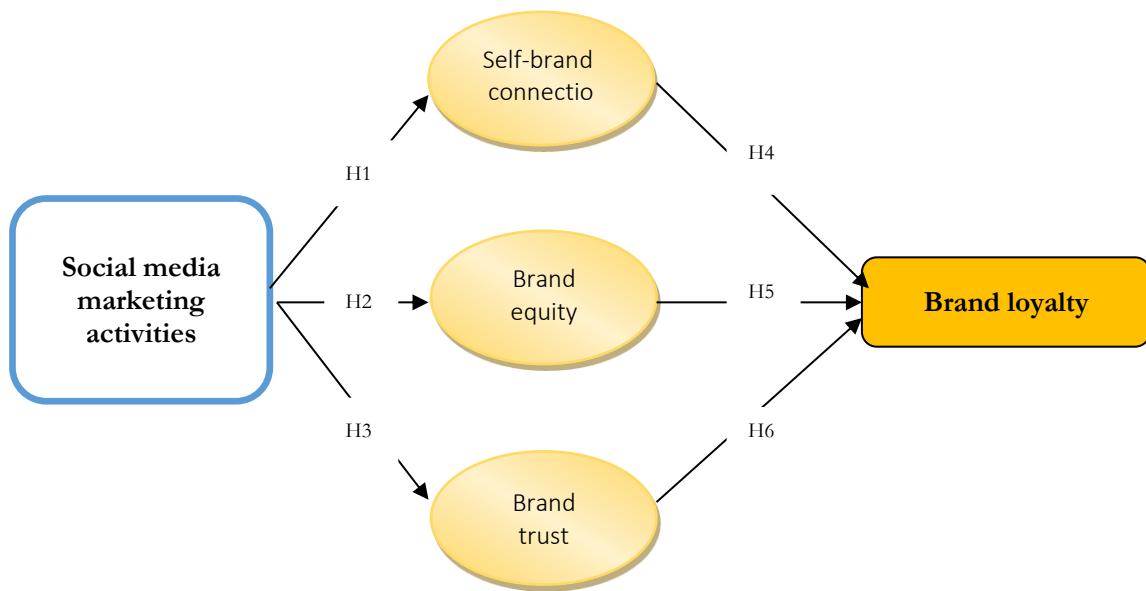


Figure 2. Research Framework

Table 1. Summary of Key Studies on SMMA and Related Constructs

Study	Context / Sector	Theoretical Lens / Model	Key Constructs / Dimensions	Primary Findings
Kim & Ko (2012)	Luxury fashion brands	Value creation in digital marketing	Entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization, eWOM	Identified five core SMMA dimensions; showed positive effects on consumer value creation.
Godey et al. (2016)	International luxury brands	Consumer-based brand equity (CBBE)	SMMA, brand equity, brand image	Demonstrated that SMMA enhance brand equity and brand image globally.
Bilgin (2018)	Turkish consumers	CBBE framework	SMMA, brand awareness, loyalty	Found that SMMA strengthens brand awareness and loyalty, validating brand equity as a mediator.
Algharabat et al. (2020)	Social commerce (Jordan)	Identity-based marketing	Self-brand connection, loyalty	Confirmed that SBC mediates between social commerce engagement and loyalty.
Nguyen et al. (2022)	Digital personalization	Identity congruence	SMMA, personalization, SBC	Showed that personalized SMMA strengthens identity alignment and foster loyalty.
Haudi et al. (2022)	Online retail	Trust-based engagement models	SMMA, brand trust	Consistent SMMA delivery enhances online consumer trust.

SSRN (2022)	Cross-sector digital brands	Consumer engagement	Openness, interactivity, brand trust/equity	Brands demonstrating transparency and interactivity online are more likely to build trust and equity.
Manyanga et al. (2024)	Zimbabwe hospitality	Relationship marketing theory	SMMA, brand equity, brand trust, SBC	SMMA significantly enhance trust and equity, which predict loyalty, especially among digital natives.
Miller (2024)	Digital ecosystems	Mediation framework	SMMA, brand equity, loyalty	Confirmed that brand equity mediates the relationship between SMMA and loyalty.
Ali et al. (2025)	Multi-industry (digital brands)	PLS-SEM & fsQCA	SMMA, brand equity, brand trust, SBC, loyalty	Validated that SMMA positively influence equity, trust, and SBC; identified equity, trust, and SBC as necessary causal pathways to loyalty.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study followed the principles of the hypothetical-deductive method to empirically test the proposed conceptual model. A cross-sectional survey design was adopted, as it enables systematic data collection from a target population within a defined timeframe to test causal relationships among latent constructs.

Sample and Data Collection

The study focused on active social media users in Saudi Arabia aged 18 to 40 years, as this demographic is most engaged with digital platforms for brand interactions. Data were collected between April and July 2025 using both online and offline channels. A convenience sampling strategy was employed due to its efficiency in accessing relevant respondents, while participation was strictly voluntary, and informed consent was secured prior to involvement.

A pilot study with 30 students was conducted to test the clarity, reliability, and validity of the questionnaire. Based on feedback, minor revisions were implemented before launching the full survey. A total of 615 individuals were invited; after excluding incomplete and invalid responses, 508 usable questionnaires were retained, representing a response rate of 83.38%. Only participants who met the eligibility criteria (active users, within the specified age range, and engaged with brand-related social media) were included in the final dataset.

Measurement Instruments

The questionnaire comprised 27 items adapted from well-established scales to ensure validity. Social media marketing activities (entertainment, customization, interaction, word of mouth, and trendiness) were measured using the items developed by Kim and Ko (2012). Brand equity was assessed following Ebrahim (2020). Brand trust and brand loyalty items were adapted from Tran and Strutton (2020), while self-brand connection was measured using the validated scale of Thomas and Jewell (2019).

All constructs were measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The brevity of the questionnaire was intentional, designed to minimize fatigue and cognitive overload, thereby improving response quality.

Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded in two stages. First, SPSS was employed to conduct descriptive statistics, preliminary screening, and reliability testing. Second, the structural model was evaluated using SmartPLS with Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). PLS-SEM was selected for its robustness in analyzing complex models with multiple mediators and latent constructs. Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples was applied to assess the significance of path coefficients.

Common Method Bias and Data Quality Checks

To address common method bias (CMB), several procedural and statistical remedies were employed. Procedurally, the survey guaranteed respondent anonymity, randomized item order, and varied scale anchors to reduce consistency artifacts and evaluation apprehension.

Statistically, Harman's single-factor test indicated that no single factor explained more than 40% of the total variance, suggesting that CMB was not a serious concern. Furthermore, variance inflation factor (VIF) values for

all constructs were below the conservative threshold of 3.3, confirming the absence of problematic multicollinearity and CMB.

Data quality was additionally ensured by monitoring completion times and excluding responses with abnormally short durations. Attention-check items and reverse-coded statements were incorporated to filter inattentive respondents. After applying these screening measures, the final sample of 508 valid responses was retained for analysis, ensuring robust and reliable empirical insights.

RESULTS

First the data set was subject to multivariate data normality using Mardia's coefficients. Results indicated that data was not normally distributed. As such, partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was chosen as the preferred method for this study. Ali et al. (2018) suggested that reflective constructs were validated through composite reliability (>0.70), Cronbach's alpha (>0.70) and average variance extracted (AVE > 0.50). All the values passed the recommended thresholds, and each construct's reliability and validity were established (see Table 1).

Table 1. Validity and Reliability

Constructs	Items	Loadings	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE
Interaction	INT 1	0.822	0.913	0.931	0.698
	INT 2	0.862			
	INT 3	0.865			
	Entertainment	ENT 1	0.832	0.898	0.923
		ENT 2	0.921		
		ENT 3	0.896		
		ENT 4	0.864		
	Trendlines	TRE 1	0.895	0.907	0.941
		TRE 2	0.923		
		TRE 3	0.934		
	Word of mouth	COM 1	0.930	0.851	0.930
		COM 2	0.932		
		COM 3	0.897		
	Customization	CUS 1	0.876	0.823	0.894
		CUS 2	0.853		
		CUS 3	0.839		
		CUS 4	0.848		
Brand Equity (BE)	BE 1	0.914	0.703	0.854	0.746
	BE 2	0.813			
	BE 3	0.835			
	BE 4	0.876			
Brand Trust (BT)	BT 1	0.820	0.891	0.920	0.753
	BT 2	0.918			
	BT 3	0.894			
	BT 4	0.859			
Self-brand connections (SBC)	SBC 1	0.901	0.821	0.901	0.850
	SBC 2	0.904			
	SBC 3	0.856			
	SBC 4	0.896			
Brand loyalty (BL)	BL 1	0.855	0.903	0.912	0.677
	BL 2	0.843			
	BL 3	0.812			

Additionally, for the model fit assessment, the SRMR value was used. A value of less than 0.08 is considered a good fit. The SRMR value for both the saturated and estimated models in this study was 0.051, indicating that the proposed model has an excellent fit to the data. After the overall measurement model was acceptable, the structural model was tested. Initially, all variance inflation factor values were calculated and found to be less than

5; thus, no multicollinearity issues were found in the structural model. Next, R-square, path estimates, and corresponding t-values were calculated using a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 subsamples.

Furthermore, the constructs' discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell–Larcker criterion. Table 2 shows that the square roots of the AVE (values in bold, off-diagonal) are all greater than the correlations in the respective columns and rows. As a result, the measurement model exhibited adequate discriminant validity.

Table 2. Discriminant Validity

	1	2	3	4	5
F&L criterion					
Social media marketing activities	0.917				
Brand Equity (BE)	0.564	0.941			
Brand Trust (BT)	0.869	0.576	0.861		
Self-brand connections (SBC)	0.762	0.538	0.801	0.826	
Brand loyalty (BL)	0.084	0.584	0.543	0.621	0.824

Note: F&L = Fornell and Larcker

The relationships hypothesized in the structural model were tested using bootstrapping procedures, and the results are summarized in Table 2.

The results are shown in Table 2. SMMA was found to have a strong and positive influence on the self-brand connection ($b = 0.141$, $p < 0.05$), brand equity ($b = 0.773$, $p < 0.05$) and brand trust ($b = 0.799$, $p < 0.05$). Thus, H1 to H3 were supported. Moreover, brand loyalty was found to be strong and positive.

The analysis indicates that loyalty is positively and significantly influenced by self-brand connection ($\beta = 0.548$, $p < 0.05$), brand equity ($\beta = 0.178$, $p < 0.05$), and brand trust ($\beta = 0.107$, $p < 0.05$). Accordingly, hypotheses H4 through H6 are supported. Furthermore, SMMA explains 19.8% of the variance in self-brand connection, 58.9% in brand equity, and 63.7% in brand trust. Collectively, these three constructs account for 41.8% of the variance in loyalty.

Table 3. Hypotheses testing

Hypotheses		Beta	T-value	p-values	Significant
H_1	Social media marketing activities → Self-brand connection	0.141	2.384	0.050	Asserted
H_2	Social media marketing activities → Brand equity	0.773	29.32	0.000	Asserted
H_3	Social media marketing activities → Brand trust	0.799	35.01	0.000	Asserted
H_4	Self-brand connection → Brand loyalty	0.548	14.99	0.000	Asserted
H_5	Brand equity → Brand loyalty	0.178	2.79	0.050	Asserted
H_6	Brand trust → Brand loyalty	0.107	2.04	0.050	Asserted

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that social media marketing activities (SMMA) are significant antecedents of self-brand connection, brand equity, and brand trust, which in turn strongly predict brand loyalty. This responds to ongoing debates in the literature regarding the mechanisms through which SMMA foster consumer-brand relationships (Panigyrakis et al., 2020; VanMeter et al., 2018). By empirically validating these links in the Saudi Arabian context, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how digital marketing drives loyalty in culturally specific markets.

The results confirmed that SMMA positively influence self-brand connection, consistent with prior work (Panigyrakis et al., 2020), and in line with recent evidence that interactive experiences amplify identity-based connections (Ibrahim & Aljarah, 2023). The significant effect of self-brand connection on loyalty provides rare empirical support for a relationship often theorized but underexplored (Escalas & Bettman, 2017). Similarly, the positive relationship between SMMA and brand equity aligns with earlier studies (Felix et al., 2017; Kim & Ko, 2012; Zollo et al., 2020), while contradicting findings that suggest weaker links (Ebrahim, 2020; Hafez, 2021). This divergence underscores the potential role of cultural and demographic factors, supported by Manyanga et al. (2024), who demonstrated that age moderates the SMMA–loyalty relationship.

The link between SMMA and brand trust was also validated, echoing earlier findings (Habibi et al., 2014; Tatar & Eren-Erdogmus, 2016). Trust in this study appears to result from transparency, consistency, and responsiveness in online communication, consistent with Koay et al. (2021) and Salem and Salem (2021). The

findings also reinforce those of Ali, Suveatwatanakul, Nanu, Ali, and Terrah (2025), who, using symmetrical and asymmetrical modeling, found that SMMAAs collectively explained 41.8% of the variance in brand loyalty.

Theoretical Implications

This study advances literature in several ways. Integration of Identity-Based and Relational Mechanisms: By testing self-brand connection, brand equity, and brand trust together, the study demonstrates that loyalty is not a direct consequence of SMMAAs but emerges through the interplay of identity-driven and relational pathways (Ali et al., 2025). Validation of Self-Brand Connection as a Predictor: While prior studies have largely theorized this relationship (Escalas & Bettman, 2017), this research empirically confirms that self-brand connection significantly influences brand loyalty, adding value to branding theory. Contextual Moderation of SMMA Effects: Divergent findings in prior literature regarding SMMA-equity links (Felix et al., 2017; Ebrahim, 2020) are explained here through cultural and demographic considerations, consistent with Manyanga et al. (2024), who showed that generational differences moderate loyalty outcomes. Advancement in Analytical Approaches: By aligning with recent studies employing symmetrical and asymmetrical techniques (Ali et al., 2025), the research reinforces the methodological need to account for both linear and configurational relationships in consumer-brand dynamics. Extension of Trust-Based Theories: The findings strengthen relational marketing frameworks (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) by confirming that trust in digital contexts arises not only from transactional reliability but also from transparent communication and consumer interaction on social media platforms (Koay et al., 2021; Salem & Salem, 2021).

Managerial Implications

Invest in Interactive and Identity-Relevant Content: Brands should design engaging social media activities, such as storytelling and interactive campaigns, to build self-brand connections (Ibrahim & Aljarah, 2023; Krowinska, 2025). Leverage Social Media to Reinforce Brand Equity: Firms should use social media to consistently communicate brand value propositions, as equity outcomes contribute directly to loyalty and performance (Laradi et al., 2024). Build Trust Through Transparency and Responsiveness: Practitioners should maintain authentic communication and proactive responses, mirroring successful examples such as Southwest Airlines' transparent updates, to cultivate consumer trust (Koay et al., 2021; Salem & Salem, 2021). Tailor Strategies to Demographic Segments: Since age and cultural differences shape the effectiveness of SMMAAs (Manyanga et al., 2024), brands should adapt their content strategies to specific cohorts for maximum impact.

Limitations and Future Research Suggestions

This study is not without limitations. Its cross-sectional design limits the ability to capture changes in constructs over time; longitudinal studies are recommended to assess dynamic consumer-brand interactions. Moreover, this research treats social media platforms as a homogeneous entity, despite variations in usage, purpose, and user demographics. Future studies should consider platform-specific effects and explore additional post-purchase constructs such as advocacy, word-of-mouth, and brand evangelism. Expanding research to different cultural and industry contexts would also enhance the generalizability of findings and deepen understanding of the evolving role of SMMAAs in consumer-brand relationships.

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