

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54663/2182-9306.2025.v.13.n.25.204-234>

Research Paper

The Role of Customer Participation and Interactivity in Creating Brand Loyalty.

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the role of customer participation and social interactivity in fostering brand loyalty within social media environments. Focusing on consumers in Turkey, it addresses a critical gap in the marketing literature by exploring how interactive and participatory behaviors shape long-term consumer–brand relationships in the digital context of an emerging market. A quantitative research design was adopted, employing a survey administered to 349 active social media users in Turkey who had previously interacted with brands online. Structural equation modeling (SEM) and Hayes Model 6 were applied to test the research hypotheses and investigate the mediating roles of customer participation and customer-brand identification. The empirical findings demonstrate that social interactivity positively influences brand loyalty both directly and indirectly through customer participation and customer-brand identification. In particular, the mediating role of customer-brand identification emerged as the strongest pathway, emphasizing the psychological bond between consumers and brands. This research highlights the strategic importance of fostering interactive, two-way communication and encouraging active customer participation to build enduring brand loyalty in the digital age. The study offers valuable theoretical contributions by integrating Uses and Gratifications Theory with interactivity and identity frameworks, and provides practical recommendations for brand managers seeking to strengthen consumer loyalty through participatory digital experiences.

Keywords: Social Interactivity, Customer Participation, Customer-Brand Identification, Brand Loyalty

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Received on: 2025.07.11

Approved on: 2025.10.19

Evaluated by a double-blind review system

1. INTRODUCTION

The internet plays a pivotal role in both everyday life and the business environment. Individuals use the Internet for many reasons, from entertainment to shopping, and companies use the Internet for sales to advertising. The internet brings individuals and companies together.

Social media platforms act as the key to understanding the foundations of relationships created with customers (Labrecque, 2014). The rapid expansion of these platforms has significantly altered the dynamics of brand-customer interactions. Brands are communicating with customers at every time and every place. Communication has changed from one-way to two-way communication, more interactive than before (Kim and Ko, 2012).

The digital world was created to bring people together, not for brands to market. Despite all the negativities, the prices of traditional media have increased significantly, and social media was a cheaper and easier option (Fournier and Avery, 2011). Social media can exert a more immediate and pronounced impact on brand performance compared to conventional marketing approaches (Kumar et al., 2016).

Brands should respond to the messages and comments sent by consumers, which enables them to improve their relationships with customers (Ting et al., 2021). Consumers now expect to be responded to more quickly, and a lack of response is rarely considered normal.

Interactivity is an inherent characteristic of talking to each other. It is also one of the defining characteristics of electronic systems, for example, interactive video games, and a buzzword that is used for two-way televisions, computers, audio conferencing systems, view data, teletext, and videotext. (Rafaeli, 1988). It is possible to talk about the concept of interaction wherever mutual communication is involved.

According to previous research, customers expect the sayings to be listened to and their comments to be replied to by brands on social media (Shao et al., 2015). All the developments taking place in the world reveal that social media interactions between brands and customers should be addressed in more research (Baumöl et al., 2016).

Today, brands that want to be interactive must interact with their customers. In other words, a post that does not benefit the customer, does not receive a response from the customer as a like,

comment, or private message or e-mail, does not mobilize the customer, or even receives negative feedback, complaints, or criticism, means that there is no interaction.

Interactivity theory says that the most important thing about interactivity is the quality of communication (Rafaeli, 1988). Brands must provide true information to consumers promptly, and information that will create satisfaction and delight should be shared to establish an emotional bond between consumers and the brand (Ting et al., 2021). The quality perceived by consumers will enable them to respond to brands' messages, thus increasing interaction.

Brands that take advantage of the interactivity of social media can observe high levels of customer participation (Liu et al., 2021). Brands gain a lot if they actively use customer participation. We can define it as allowing customers to share their suggestions and ideas about products and services. The return on participation is higher than many managers think (Merlo et al., 2014).

Customers sometimes see themselves as stakeholders of some brands and can make suggestions in line with this attitude. Nowadays, customers have moved beyond the classical consumer roles of purchasing products or services and are trying to create value by interacting with businesses. Therefore, customer participation not only creates customer loyalty but also affects purchasing behavior (Taşkıran et al., 2024).

If consumers know and believe the brand's identity well, if they perceive the identity to be trustworthy, they are more likely to find similarity (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). Consumers shop more from brands they feel close to, recommend those brands to others more, and defend the brand as if they were an employee when something negative happens.

Brands that want to retain their existing customers or gain new customers should be interactive in order to create loyalty and should also encourage and guide their customers by ensuring their participation. This research has revealed that customer participation is so important in creating brand loyalty and also has a major role in the brand interactivity.

In order to understand the processes of increasing customer participation and loyalty of brands in social media environments, Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) (Katz et al., 1974) was adopted as a theoretical framework. According to UGT, individuals consciously use media tools to meet their specific needs (Ruggiero, 2000). In this context, the motivations underlying social media users' interaction with the brand and their effects on brand loyalty were evaluated in the study.

This study aims to understand the role of customer participation in building brand loyalty and how brands can strengthen this loyalty by using interactive communication. In the digital age, the

interactive relationships that brands establish with their customers are becoming increasingly important. Social media platforms allow brands not only to share content but also to engage consumers directly and ensure their engagement. Customer participation stands out as a powerful factor that not only creates customer loyalty but also affects purchasing behavior. In this context, brands' effective communication with their customers and collecting their opinions and suggestions play a critical role in the loyalty creation process. The primary objective of this study is to explore the strategies through which brands can optimize customer participation and to evaluate their influence on the formation and reinforcement of brand loyalty. This research emphasizes the importance of brand participation in building loyalty while also providing valuable insight into the future of digital marketing strategies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Social Interactivity

Brands' social interaction is not widely covered in academic studies, and this gap, coupled with its growing importance, is the fundamental starting point for this research. The relevance of scientific research to daily life and the academic focus on current social trends have positioned this topic as a critical variable in a wide range of empirical research in the field of marketing.

While interaction encompasses the brand's response to the consumer, participation is the customer's response to the brand. This fundamental difference between them leads brands to the same outcome, ensuring interaction under all circumstances. While interactivity refers to a two-way interaction between a consumer and a brand, participation is just the psychological and emotional attachment that a consumer feels towards a brand.

The existence of effective and continuous communication between the brand and the consumer is crucial in brand communication processes. Therefore, it is possible to say that all elements involved in the digital communication process take brand communication activities with consumers to a different level (Çiftçi, 2018, 1537).

Social media environments are inherently less costly communication environments that are inherently location and boundary-free, enabling two-way communication, where both brands and consumers can create content, and where brands can interact with consumers. In this new communication environment, brands can establish two-way, simultaneous, and effective communication with their target audience, i.e., their followers, without distance or barriers (Ulaş,

2020, 275). In this communication process, the communication brands establish with their followers, and the communication tools they choose are also undergoing change and development (Ulaş and Alkan, 2020, 109).

Big data can be used to understand customer participation on social media and develop more effective strategies. Brands must understand what customers value on social media and make effective decisions about using their resources to best manage social media (Liu et al., 2021).

As brands continue to increase their use of social media and invest in these channels, consumers' expectations from brands have increased, and it has become more important for brands to understand the psychological foundations of their relationship with consumers and how they can meet consumers' expectations (Labrecque, 2014).

When the features of a product or a brand are related to consumers' needs and values, participation levels are observed to be high. Previous studies have shown that customers with high levels of participation are more interested in products, their features, and usage stages (Gbadamosi, 2013, 238). Consumers share their experiences with brands on social media platforms, writing their stories with brands. Brands should prioritize these stories and give these stories the attention they deserve (Gensler et al., 2013).

As crises in society and concerns about the accuracy of information increase, the issue of trust in social media has gained importance. At this point, the reliability of the people sharing information has become important. These people are called gatekeepers (Westerman, Spence, and Van Der Heide, 2014, 172). The posts of a trusted and well-liked person can influence consumer trust in a brand, prompting consumers to try the product, i.e., to purchase it. Both positive and negative comments from influential individuals have a greater impact on consumers than the product or brand image itself (Efe & Ventura, 2020, 551).

Ting et al. (2021) found in their study that social interaction affects brand loyalty, while customer participation behavior affects both social interaction and brand loyalty. Furthermore, social interaction and customer participation behavior have a mediating role on brand loyalty. Customer participation behavior also has a mediating role in social interaction and brand loyalty. Furthermore, social interaction plays a mediating role in customer participation behavior and brand loyalty. Samarah et al. (2022) found that social media customer-brand interaction is positively related to both brand trust and brand loyalty, and brand trust is positively related to brand loyalty. Furthermore, brand trust has a mediating role in this relationship.

It is important for brands to give importance to social interaction as citizens become “Netizens”. Today, individuals who spend most of their time on the internet, especially on social media platforms, expect brands to respond to them without remaining insensitive. Therefore, interaction must be kept high.

Consistent with the earlier arguments linking social interactivity, we explore the following:

H1: Social interactivity is expected to have an impact on brand loyalty.

H2: Social interactivity is expected to have a serial mediating role in the effect of customer participation and customer-brand identification on brand loyalty.

2.2. Customer Participation

Consumers base their brand preferences on various reasons. Because of these reasons, they embrace the brands they prefer, see them as distinct from others, and consider that brand a part of their lives. Customer participation involves consumers' desire to be involved with the brands they patronize.

Customer participation encompasses the behavioral involvement of customers at any point in the marketing process, customer engagement encompasses the emotional and mental commitment of the customer to the brand, and co-creation encompasses the customer creating new value together with the brand.

Chang and Taylor (2014) found that customer participation directly and indirectly improves financial performance by accelerating time to market for a new product, while during the development phase, it slows time to market and worsens financial performance. This study offers several theoretical and managerial insights into when customers should be involved in the innovation process.

Eisingerich et al. (2014) argue that customer participation is crucial for ensuring repeat purchases. They present a model that predicts that word-of-mouth and customer participation drive repeat purchases. Their findings show that customer participation is more important than word-of-mouth communication for future sales.

Customer participation is divided into three categories: “mandatory,” “modifiable,” and “voluntary” (Dong and Sivakumar, 2017). Examples of voluntary participation include not eating ready-made soups without cooking them; mandatory participation is having both cashiers and self-payment machines in supermarkets; and participating in brands’ loyalty programs, surveys, events, etc.

Auh et al. (2019) attempted to explain the link between customer participation and bank branch performance by developing a parallel mediation model between customer empowerment and customer satisfaction. The research indicates that customer empowerment and satisfaction have a mediating effect on branch performance. They found that when participation and context are congruent, customer participation leads to greater customer empowerment and satisfaction. They found that customer participation had no significant impact on profitability, sales growth, or customer loyalty. Both empowerment and satisfaction mediate the effect of customer participation on branch performance.

Customer participation is critical to strengthening the relationship established with a customer. Moreover, the longer the relationship with the brand, the more interested and engaged customers will be (Revilla-Camacho et al., 2015).

Although customer participation is a new concept, it is an inherently existing phenomenon that has not yet been conceptually incorporated into the nature of marketing. It has been considered an important variable in many studies, but it remains largely untouched in many contexts.

In line with our above arguments associating customer participation, we investigate the following:

H3: Customer participation is expected to have an impact on brand loyalty.

2.3. Customer-Brand identification

As it is known, everyone who consumes is a consumer, and those who prefer a brand are customers for that brand. The fine line between consumer-brand identification and customer-brand identification should be evaluated in line with this difference. Consumer-brand identification is a psychological bond based on the symbolic similarity between an individual's self and the brand's identity, whereas customer-brand identification is an emotional attachment grounded in direct experience and relationship with the brand. Identification can be explained as the consumer finding himself in that brand and resembling his personality traits to the personality traits of that brand.

Similar to "Social Identity Theory" (Tajfel and Turner 1985), some research suggests that customers can identify themselves with brands (Escalas & Bettman 2005; Donavan et al. 2006; Kuenzel & Halliday 2008).

Consumers' self-identification needs can be partially met by the brands they choose. Customer-brand identification helps consumers clearly convey their self-identity to others (Homburg et al., 2019). Customer-brand identification plays a significant role in investigating why brands help consumers to express their identities, how they make his and when (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012).

Consumers evaluate a brand's identity appeal based on their perception of the company's corporate identity. A brand's identity appeal depends on whether consumers perceive its identity as similar to their own and whether the brand differentiates itself from others in terms of the attributes and prestige they value. Consumers have three fundamental self-definition needs: self-continuity, self-differentiation, and self-enhancement (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Consumers want to continue to reflect their current state and differentiate themselves from others or evolve to reflect the ideal identity they want to be.

The purpose of customer-brand identification is to ensure and increase customer loyalty. Homburg et al. (2009) observed in their research that higher customer-brand identification increases customer loyalty.

The results of the research conducted by Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012), which examined consumer-brand identification within a holistic theoretical framework, show that brand-self similarity, brand distinctiveness, brand social benefits, brand warmth, brand experience, brand loyalty and brand advocacy are effective variables.

In one of the first studies to conceptualize consumer-brand identification as a process, Lam et al. (2012) report on the dynamics and antecedents of consumer-brand identification, considering new brands. They reveal the impact of identity from brand introduction to growth. The study's findings demonstrate how brands can best allocate their brand investments by achieving different effects through the use of functional and symbolic brand associations.

Haumann et al. (2014) conducted a comparative analysis of the effectiveness of customer satisfaction and customer-company identification. The study's findings indicate that customer satisfaction and customer-company identification have positive effects on customer loyalty and willingness to pay, but these effects vary over time. While the effects of customer satisfaction were observed to decrease rapidly, the effects of customer-company identification were found to continue.

Davvetas and Diamantopoulos (2017) aimed in their research to determine the role of consumer-brand identification in consumers' regretful purchasing decisions. According to the results of the research, consumer-brand identification protects consumers from the negative consequences of purchase regret.

Although customer-brand identification is a very new topic in the literature, the concept of brand personality with which it is associated is a widely used variable and is a phenomenon that brands have considered important in their marketing activities for years before the birth of the concept.

Following the earlier theoretical reasons about customer-brand identification, we investigate:

H4: Customer-brand identification is expected to have an impact on brand loyalty.

2.4. Brand Loyalty

If brands consistently reflect their core values in a way that meets consumers' social expectations, consumers will develop positive thoughts and feelings toward those brands and become loyal customers (Janonis & Dovaliené, 2007). Brands leverage brand loyalty in various ways to gain market share, gain new customers, and cope with competition (Bushara et al., 2023). Brand loyalty has become increasingly important for brands.

Brand loyalty is explained in various terms as "The degree of consumer loyalty regardless of brands' marketing strategies" (Fetais et al., 2023; Ibrahim, 2022), "Customers' psychological attachment to the brand" (Rehman et al., 2012), and "Continuing to repurchase a product in the future even when situational and marketing influences cause customers to abandon the brand" (Oliver, 2015). Therefore, the reasons for consumers' repurchasing behavior should be investigated. Repurchasing is the most important indicator of brand loyalty (Liu et al., 2023).

According to Khan (2010), brand loyalty has two dimensions: "Attitudinal Loyalty" and "Behavioral Loyalty." Attitudinal loyalty involves customers' attitudes and feelings toward the brand (Arens et al., 2011); behavioral loyalty involves customers' repeat purchases (Bennett and Bove, 2002).

Customers' brand loyalty will be high towards brands that uphold their values and principles and implement social and ethical values (Hidayanti & Nuryakin, 2018). On the other hand, when brands compromise product and service quality and deviate from their core values to reduce costs and generate more profit, customers lose brand loyalty (Deng et al., 2024).

Brands need to develop relationships with their existing customers because this plays an important role in customer satisfaction (Grégoire et al., 2009; Mafael et al., 2022). To ensure a steady increase in customer satisfaction, brands are researching alternatives that will increase customer loyalty. Customers are satisfied when their expectations are met. Stronger loyalty and satisfaction are observed in customers who have a longer-term relationship with a brand (Homburg et al., 2009).

To foster brand loyalty, brands engage in various consumer-focused activities on social media (Shanahan et al., 2019; Zarei et al., 2022). However, it's necessary to offer different values to customers with different levels of brand loyalty (Ramesh Kumar & Advani, 2005). These activities could include live broadcasts, live concerts, raffles, giveaways, coupons, influencer advertising, and more.

Brand loyalty is one of the most frequently used concepts in the literature and one of the most important issues for brands. Therefore, it is an important variable in academic studies in marketing. It is a natural consequence of this to investigate a customer's loyalty to a brand they interact with and identify with.

Figure 1 depicts the full conceptual framework presented for this research. As shown, social interaction and customer-brand identification are assumed to have effects on brand involvement.

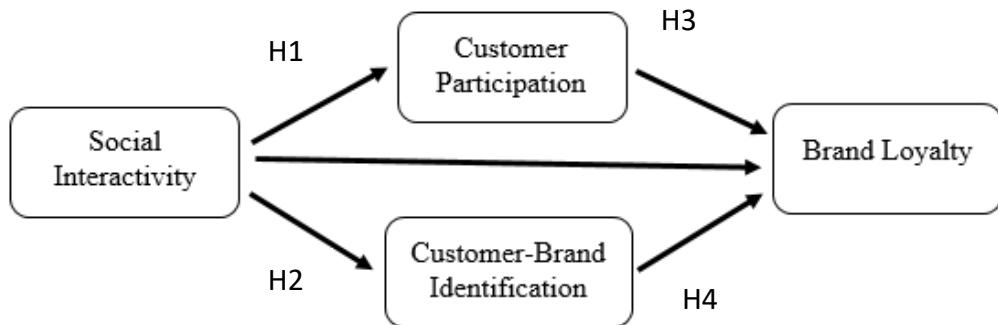


Figure 1. Conceptual Model

3. METHOD

3.1 Sampling and data collection process

The sample of the study consists of individuals who actively interact with brands on social media platforms. A convenience sampling method was used in sample selection, and participants were reached through an online survey via social media. The sample frame was determined as individuals who interacted with at least one brand via social media. The following criteria were taken into consideration in determining the participants:

- Being 18 years of age and above,
- Being an active user on at least one social media platform;
- Having interacted with a brand via likes, comments, shares, or private messages.

An online survey was applied to the participants during the data collection process. The sample size was determined as 349 people.

While the use of a convenience sampling method facilitated efficient access to participants who actively engage with brands on social media, this non-probability technique inherently constrains the representativeness of the broader population of social media users. Consequently, the results should be interpreted with due caution, and future research is advised to adopt probability-based sampling strategies to enhance the external validity and generalizability of the findings.

The final sample of 349 respondents satisfies the recommended sample size thresholds for structural equation modeling (SEM). According to Hair et al. (2010), sample sizes between 200 and 400 are considered adequate for models involving multiple latent constructs and observed variables. Consistent with this, Stevens (2002) suggests a minimum ratio of ten observations per estimated parameter, a condition that is clearly met in this study. Therefore, the sample size ensures sufficient statistical power for model estimation.

The measurement scales employed in this study were adapted from well-established instruments in the literature with demonstrated validity and reliability. The Social Interactivity construct was measured using the scale developed by Ting et al. (2021). To assess participants' active involvement in their interactions with brands, the Customer Participation scale proposed by Auh et al. (2019) was utilized. Similarly, the Customer–Brand Identification construct was measured based on the scale developed by Auh et al. (2019). Finally, to evaluate participants' level of attachment and commitment to a brand, the Brand Loyalty scale developed by Ting et al. (2021) was adopted.

3.2 Data analysis methods

The data collected for the study were analyzed using SPSS 24.0 and AMOS 23 statistical software packages. In the initial phase, descriptive statistics including mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentage distributions were employed to summarize the demographic characteristics of the sample. A two-stage analytical approach was adopted to assess the validity of the measurement instruments:

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA): EFA was conducted to identify the underlying factor structures of the scales. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) values obtained confirmed the adequacy of the data for factor analysis (Hair et al., 2010).

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA): To verify the construct validity of the scales, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was applied through CFA. The goodness-of-fit indices for the proposed model were found to fall within acceptable thresholds (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

To test the proposed hypotheses and examine mediation effects, regression analysis and Hayes' PROCESS macro Model 6 were employed. The level of statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$ and $p < 0.01$.

This methodological framework allowed for a comprehensive analysis of the effects of social media interaction on brand loyalty.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Distribution of demographic characteristics

Table 1 shows the distribution of the sociodemographic characteristics of the sample, providing an overview of the profile of the study participants. There is a predominance of females (65.3%), as well as a higher concentration of individuals in the 31-43 age group (57.6%), indicating a predominantly adult and working-age group. Most participants are married (67.9%), and the most frequent level of education corresponds to undergraduate degrees (49.9%), followed by master's degrees (23.5%), which shows a high level of academic training in the sample. In terms of income, there is a relatively balanced distribution between the groups of 30,001 TL to 60,000 TL (33.2%) and 90,001 TL or more (33.8%), suggesting socioeconomic diversity among respondents.

Table 1. Demographic Information

		n	%
<i>Gender</i>	<i>Female</i>	228	65,3
	<i>Male</i>	121	34,7
<i>Age</i>	<i>18-30</i>	72	20,6
	<i>31-43</i>	201	57,6
	<i>44-56</i>	67	19,2
	<i>57 and above</i>	9	2,6

<i>Marital Status</i>	<i>Single</i>	112	32,1
	<i>Married</i>	237	67,9
<i>Graduation</i>	<i>Primary School</i>	2	0,6
	<i>High School</i>	37	10,6
<i>Income Status</i>	<i>Vocational School</i>	27	7,7
	<i>Undergraduate</i>	174	49,9
	<i>Master's Degree</i>	82	23,5
	<i>PhD</i>	27	7,7
	<i>30.000 TL and below</i>	48	13,8
	<i>30.001 TL – 60.000 TL</i>	116	33,2
	<i>60.001 TL – 90.000 TL</i>	67	19,2
	<i>90.001 TL and above</i>	118	33,8

4.2. Explanatory factor analysis results

Before conducting factor analysis, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) statistic and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity were applied to determine the adequacy of the sampling and the factorability of the correlation matrix. A KMO value approaching 1 indicates a stronger justification for applying factor analysis to the given dataset (Živadinović, 2004). In this study, the KMO values were calculated as 0.771 for the social interactivity scale, 0.705 for the customer participation scale, 0.783 for the brand loyalty scale, and 0.730 for the customer-brand identification scale. Based on these results, the data were considered appropriate for conducting factor analysis.

Table 2. KMO and Bartlett's Test Results of Scales

Social Interactivity Scale	Customer Participation Scale	Brand Scale	Loyalty Scale	Customer- Brand Identification Scale
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin				
Measure of Sampling	0,771		0,705	0,783
Adequacy.				
Chi-Square	773,724	345,830	559,081	553,544
Df	6	3	3	3

Sig.	<0.000	<0.000	<0.000	<0.000
Explained Variance Ratio	72,839	72,123	78,021	80,305
Cronbach's Alpha	0,874	0,806	0,853	0,876

Based on the results of the exploratory factor analysis, the total variance explained by the social interactivity scale was found to be 72.839%, while the customer participation scale explained 72.123% of the variance. The brand loyalty scale accounted for 78.021% of the total variance, and the customer-brand identification scale explained 80.035%. It is recognized that higher variance explanation percentages indicate a more robust factor structure, and in social sciences, values between 40% and 60% are generally considered acceptable (Karagöz, 2017). Furthermore, Cronbach's Alpha coefficients ranging from 0.70 to 0.99 suggest that the scales demonstrate satisfactory reliability (Tavakol and Dennick, 2011). The scales and their respective sub-dimensions employed in this study were also confirmed to be reliable.

4.3. Confirmatory factor analysis results

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted to evaluate the structural validity of the measurement scales employed in the study, and the resulting goodness-of-fit indices are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Fit Values

Fit Criteria	χ^2/df	RMSEA	SRMR	NFI	CFI	GFI
Social Interactivity Scale	2,38	0,099	0,056	0,94	0,94	0,93
Customer Participation Scale	3,35	0,099	0,045	0,97	0,98	0,96
Customer-Brand Identification Scale	2,82	0,098	0,039	0,95	0,98	0,97
Brand Loyalty Scale	4,37	0,098	0,076	0,95	0,95	0,92

The standardized factor loadings for all items were above 0.70, indicating strong convergent validity (Hair et al., 2010). For the social interactivity construct, loadings ranged from 0.72 to 0.86, demonstrating that each item substantially contributed to the latent variable. Similarly, customer participation items loaded between 0.68 and 0.83, and customer-brand identification between 0.75 and 0.89. The brand loyalty items also showed high loadings (0.73–0.88), confirming the reliability

of the scale. These results collectively support the unidimensionality and construct validity of all four measurement models.

The results of the analysis indicate that the RMSEA, SRMR, NFI, CFI, and GFI indices fall within acceptable fit thresholds. These findings suggest that the model demonstrates an adequate to good fit with the data, confirming the statistical significance and validity of the confirmatory factor analysis (Erkorkmaz et al., 2013).

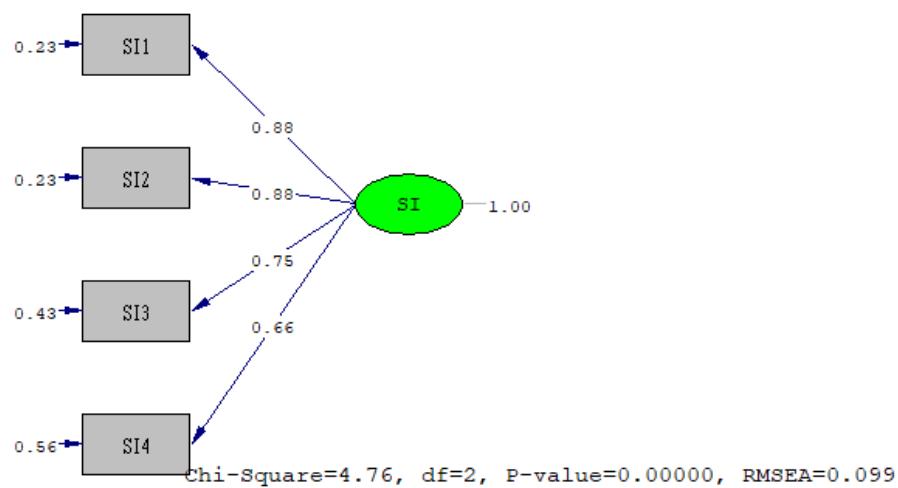


Figure 2. Social Interactivity Scale Standardized Model Outputs

The results of the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) for the **Social Interactivity** scale are presented in Figure 2. According to the analysis, the standardized factor loadings of the four items comprising the scale were calculated as 0.86 for SI1, 0.89 for SI2, 0.77 for SI3, and 0.66 for SI4. All factor loadings exceeded the threshold value of 0.60, indicating that the items strongly represent the underlying construct. The highest factor loading was observed for item SI2 ($\lambda = 0.89$), while the lowest loading was found for item SI4 ($\lambda = 0.66$); however, this value still exceeds the commonly accepted cutoff point of 0.50 in the literature. Examination of the error variances revealed values of 0.26, 0.21, 0.41, and 0.56 for items SI1, SI2, SI3, and SI4, respectively. The relatively low error variances indicate that the items are well explained by the latent variable. The model fit indices ($\chi^2/df = 2.38$, RMSEA = 0.099, SRMR = 0.056, NFI = 0.94, CFI = 0.94, GFI = 0.93) demonstrate that the scale exhibits acceptable and good fit values. These findings confirm

the construct validity of the Social Interactivity scale and support the one-factor structure of the scale within the Turkish sample.

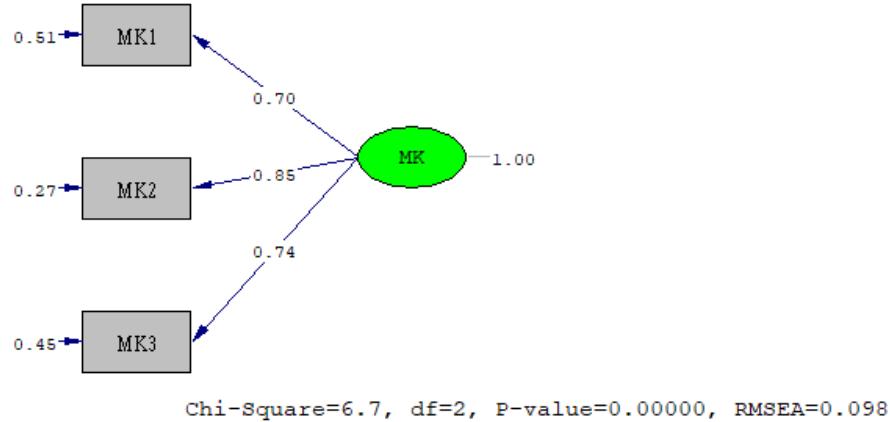


Figure 3. Customer Participation Scale Standardized Model Outputs

The results of the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) for the Customer Participation scale are presented in Figure 3. The standardized factor loadings for the three items comprising the scale were found to be 0.79 for MK1, 0.88 for MK2, and 0.87 for MK3. The fact that all three items have factor loadings above 0.70 indicates that they represent the customer participation construct very well. The highest factor loading was observed for item MK2 ($\lambda = 0.88$), suggesting that this item is the strongest indicator explaining the latent variable. Although item MK1 had the lowest factor loading ($\lambda = 0.79$), it still reflects a strong representation power.

An examination of the error variances revealed values of 0.37, 0.22, and 0.24 for items MK1, MK2, and MK3, respectively. These low error variances, particularly for MK2 and MK3, demonstrate that the measured construct is largely explained by these items. The model fit indices ($\chi^2/df = 3.35$, RMSEA = 0.099, SRMR = 0.045, NFI = 0.97, CFI = 0.98, GFI = 0.96) indicate an excellent model fit. In particular, the very low SRMR value (0.045) shows that the model fits the observed correlation matrix exceptionally well.

Overall, these findings confirm the strong validity of the three-item structure of the Customer Participation scale and demonstrate that its construct validity is well established.

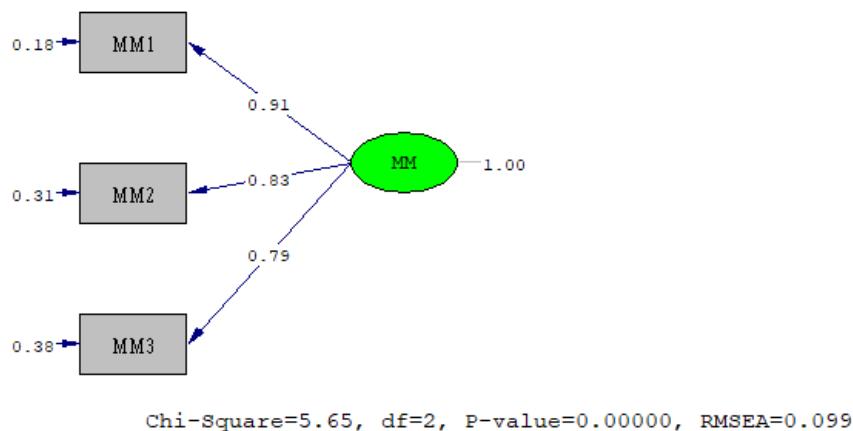


Figure 4. Customer-Brand Identification Scale Standardized Model Outputs

The results of the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) for the Customer-Brand Identification scale are presented in Figure 4. The standardized factor loadings for the three items of the scale were calculated as 0.91 for MMT1, 0.89 for MMT2, and 0.89 for MMT3. The fact that all three items have factor loadings of 0.89 or higher indicates that this scale exhibits the strongest factor structure among the constructs. The item MMT1, with the highest loading ($\lambda = 0.91$), serves as the best indicator representing the customer-brand identification construct. The equal factor loadings of MMT2 and MMT3 ($\lambda = 0.89$) show that both items contribute to the construct with similar strength. An examination of the error variances revealed values of 0.17, 0.21, and 0.21 for MMT1, MMT2, and MMT3, respectively. These very low error variances, particularly for MMT1 (0.17), indicate that the item is almost entirely explained by the latent variable. The model fit indices ($\chi^2/df = 2.82$, RMSEA = 0.098, SRMR = 0.039, NFI = 0.95, CFI = 0.98, GFI = 0.97) demonstrate acceptable to excellent fit values. Notably, the very low SRMR value (0.039) highlights the strong consistency of the model with the observed correlation matrix.

Overall, these findings confirm that the Customer-Brand Identification scale has a robust one-factor structure and that its items provide highly reliable and valid measurements of the construct.

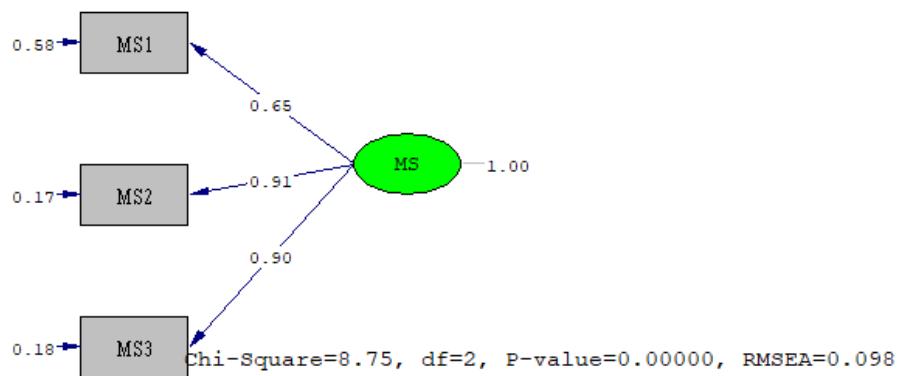


Figure 5. Brand Loyalty Scale Standardized Model Outputs

The standardized factor loadings for the three items comprising the scale were found to be 0.88 for MS1, 0.91 for MS2, and 0.85 for MS3. The fact that all factor loadings exceed 0.85 indicates that the items strongly represent the brand loyalty construct. The highest factor loading was observed for item MS2 ($\lambda = 0.91$), suggesting that it is the best indicator of the brand loyalty construct. While item MS1, with a loading of 0.88, demonstrates strong representational power, item MS3, with the lowest loading ($\lambda = 0.85$), still reflects a very high level of construct representation.

An examination of the error variances revealed values of 0.23, 0.17, and 0.27 for items MS1, MS2, and MS3, respectively. The particularly low error variance for MS2 (0.17) indicates that this item is the most strongly explained by the latent variable. The model fit indices ($\chi^2/df = 4.37$, RMSEA = 0.098, SRMR = 0.076, NFI = 0.95, CFI = 0.95, GFI = 0.92) show acceptable fit values. Although the χ^2/df ratio (4.37) is relatively higher compared to the other scales, suggesting a more sensitive model structure, the remaining fit indices fall within acceptable thresholds, confirming the overall construct validity of the scale.

In conclusion, these findings verify the one-factor structure of the Brand Loyalty scale and demonstrate that the scale provides reliable and valid measurements of the construct.

4.4. Hypothesis results

The results of the research hypotheses are shown below.

H1: Social interactivity is expected to have an impact on brand loyalty.

The simple linear regression model between “Social Interactivity”, considered as the independent variable, and “Brand Loyalty”, considered as the dependent variable, was found to be significant

($p=0.001$; <0.01 ; Adjusted R^2 : 0,390). It can be expressed as follows: 1 unit increase in social interactivity will create a 0.653 unit increase in brand loyalty. The hypothesis was accepted.

Table 4. Regression Analysis Results to Determine the Effect of Social Interactivity on Brand Loyalty

Coefficient	B	S.H.	t	p
Constant	1,010	0,169	5,992	0,001**
Social Interactivity	0,653	0,044	14,946	0,001**

y = Brand Loyalty

** $p<0,01$

H2: Social interactivity is expected to have a serial mediating role in the effect of customer participation and customer-brand identification on brand loyalty.

The results of the serial mediation analysis, conducted using PROCESS Macro Model 6 developed by Hayes (2013), reveal the mediating roles of customer participation and customer-brand identification in the relationship between social interactivity and brand loyalty.

Serial mediation analysis findings

The results of the serial mediation analysis, conducted using PROCESS Macro Model 6 developed by Hayes (2013), reveal the mediating roles of customer participation and customer-brand identification in the relationship between social interactivity and brand loyalty.

Direct effects

The analysis results indicate that the direct effect of social interactivity on brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.169$, $p = 0.001$) is positive and statistically significant. This finding suggests that interactive features offered by brands on social media platforms have the power to directly influence brand loyalty, independent of the mediating variables. However, the relatively modest magnitude of this effect implies that the influence of social interactivity on brand loyalty largely operates through indirect mechanisms.

The effect of social interactivity on the first mediator, customer participation, was found to be both strong and positive ($\beta = 0.774$, $p = 0.001$). This high coefficient indicates that interactive social media practices—such as responding to comments, organizing polls, and sharing user-generated content—significantly enhance customers' active engagement with the brand.

Furthermore, the direct effect of social interactivity on the second mediator, customer-brand identification, was also positive and significant ($\beta = 0.369$, $p = 0.001$). This finding demonstrates

that interactive experiences strengthen customers' sense of identification and emotional connection with the brand.

Effects of the mediating variables

The effect of the first mediating variable, customer participation, on the dependent variable brand loyalty was found to be positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.222$, $p = 0.001$). This result provides evidence that customers' active participation behaviors toward the brand—such as liking, commenting, and sharing content—strengthen their brand loyalty.

Moreover, the effect of customer participation on the second mediating variable, customer–brand identification, was also found to be positive and significant ($\beta = 0.444$, $p = 0.001$). This finding indicates that customers' active engagement with the brand contributes to the development of a psychological connection over time, leading them to perceive themselves as an integral part of the brand.

The effect of the second mediating variable, customer–brand identification, on brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.633$, $p = 0.001$) is positive, statistically significant, and represents the highest coefficient among all direct effects. This strong effect indicates that the degree to which customers identify with a brand is one of the most critical determinants of brand loyalty. The more customers perceive themselves as identified with the brand, the stronger their emotional attachment and long-term commitment to it become.

Indirect effects and serial mediation

The analysis revealed a total effect value of 0.654, a direct effect value of 0.169, and a total indirect effect value of 0.484. The fact that the total indirect effect (0.484) is approximately 2.86 times greater than the direct effect (0.169) indicates that the impact of social interactivity on brand loyalty primarily operates through mediating mechanisms. This finding highlights the critical roles of customer participation and customer–brand identification in the process through which social interactivity translates into brand loyalty.

First indirect effect (SI → MK → MS): The indirect effect of **social interactivity** on **brand loyalty** through **customer participation** was found to be **0.241**. This coefficient indicates that social interactivity primarily triggers customer participation, which in turn transforms into brand loyalty. Interactive content offered by brands on social media, such as engaging posts, surveys, and comment responses, encourages customers' active participation, and these engagement behaviors subsequently contribute to the development of brand loyalty over time.

Second indirect effect (SI → MMT → MS): The indirect effect of **social interactivity on brand loyalty** through **customer–brand identification** was found to be **0.243**. This value is very close in magnitude to the first indirect effect (0.241 vs. 0.243), indicating that both mediation paths exhibit comparable strength. This finding demonstrates that social interactivity enhances customers' identification with the brand, and this identification, in turn, directly fosters brand loyalty. When customers perceive the brand as part of their own identity through interactive experiences, their loyalty to the brand becomes significantly stronger.

Serial Indirect Effect (SI → MK → MMT → MS)

The sequential indirect effect of **social interactivity on brand loyalty** through **customer participation** and **customer–brand identification** was calculated as **0.218** ($0.774 \times 0.444 \times 0.633$). This serial mediation pathway reveals a three-stage process in the transformation of social interactivity into brand loyalty:

- (1) Social interactivity first enhances customer participation;
- (2) Increased customer participation strengthens customer–brand identification, and
- (3) Stronger customer–brand identification ultimately leads to greater brand loyalty.

This sequential mechanism demonstrates that the transformation of social interactivity into brand loyalty operates through a **complex and multi-stage process**, emphasizing the dynamic interconnection among participation, identification, and loyalty within the customer–brand relationship.

Overall evaluation

The total indirect effect value (0.484) is observed to be the sum of three distinct indirect pathways ($0.241 + 0.243 + 0.218 \approx 0.702$; note: slight variations may occur due to the use of bootstrap confidence intervals in the Hayes model). The fact that all indirect effects were found to be statistically significant underscores the importance of both customer participation and customer–brand identification as independent and sequential mediators in the relationship between social interactivity and brand loyalty.

In particular, the significance of the serial mediation model ($\beta = 0.218$, $p = 0.001$) provides empirical support for the theoretically proposed causal chain of “social interactivity → customer participation → customer–brand identification → brand loyalty.” These findings indicate that in social media strategies, it is not sufficient for brands to merely offer interactive features; rather,

these interactive experiences must be designed to stimulate customer participation and foster brand identification, which together serve as the key mechanisms driving the formation of brand loyalty.

H3: Customer participation is expected to have an impact on brand loyalty.

The simple linear regression model between "Customer Participation", considered as the independent variable, and "Brand Loyalty", considered as the dependent variable, was found to be significant ($p=0.001; <0.01$; Adjusted $R^2: 0,365$). It can be expressed as follows: 1 unit increase in customer participation will create a 0.585 unit increase in brand loyalty. The hypothesis is accepted.

Table 5. Regression Analysis Results to Determine the Effect of Customer Participation on Brand Loyalty

Coefficient	B	S.H.	t	p
Constant	1,491	0,144	10,321	0,001**
Customer Participation	0,585	0,041	14,194	0,001**
<i>y= Brand Loyalty</i>		<i>**p<0,01</i>		

H4: Customer-brand identification is expected to have an impact on brand loyalty.

The simple linear regression model between "Customer-Brand Identification" considered as the independent variable and "Brand Loyalty" considered as the dependent variable was found to be significant ($p=0.001; <0.01$; Adjusted $R^2: 0,666$). It can be expressed as follows: 1 unit increase in customer-brand identification will create a 0.765 unit increase in brand loyalty. Hypothesis accepted.

Table 6. Regression Analysis Results to Determine the Effect of Customer-Brand Identification on Brand Loyalty

Coefficient	B	S.H.	t	p
Constant	0,906	0,101	8,935	0,001**
Customer-Brand Identification	0,765	0,029	26,352	0,001**
<i>y= Brand Loyalty</i>		<i>**p<0,01</i>		

The model in Figure 6 summarizes the tested relationships and results, providing a clear overview of the variables' behavior in the context of this study. Thus, this revised model not only reaffirms

the theoretical framework that underpinned the research but also empirically reflects the observed interactions, serving as a bridge between the theoretical basis and the study's conclusions and facilitating the overall interpretation of the results.

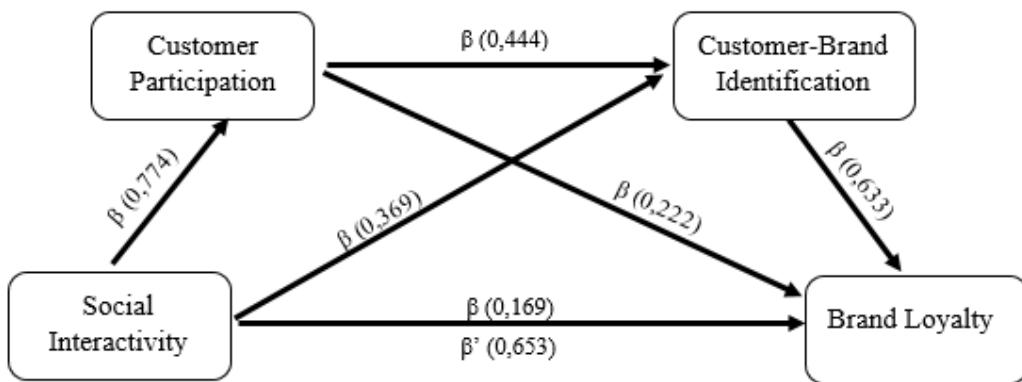


Figure 6. Conceptual Model with Empirical Results

5. DISCUSSION

This study offers a comprehensive theoretical contribution to the digital marketing literature by integrating the concepts of social interaction, customer participation, and customer–brand identification into a unified framework to explain brand loyalty. While previous research has typically examined these constructs separately or through dyadic relationships, the present investigation simultaneously tests them within a serial mediation model, thereby offering a more holistic explanation of how interactive and participatory behaviors translate into long-term brand commitment.

Grounded in the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), adopted throughout the study, the analyses reveal that users' interactive and participatory behaviors are shaped by their social and psychological needs for gratification, such as identity expression and relationship building, and that this process culminates in strong brand loyalty. The findings also demonstrate that social interaction exerts both a direct effect on brand loyalty and indirect effects through customer participation and customer–brand identification. This framework supports both Rafaeli's (1988) theory of interactivity and the Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1974; Ruggiero, 2000), showing that users consciously utilize social media platforms not merely for content consumption but also to achieve cognitive, social, and emotional gratifications. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel

and Turner, 1985), which relates to consumers choosing brands to reflect themselves, also supports this.

Notably, social interaction was found to positively influence both customer–brand identification and direct brand loyalty. These results align with previous studies such as Hollebeek et al. (2014) and Dessart et al. (2015). Furthermore, while customer participation showed a significant direct effect on brand loyalty, this relationship was found to be even stronger indirectly through identification, confirming the pivotal role of psychological identification in brand relationships as emphasized by Brodie et al. (2013).

In particular, the finding that the effect of customer–brand identification ($\beta = 0.765$) is stronger than that of the other variables supports Bhattacharya and Sen's (2003) model based on social identity theory. It indicates that customers form stronger bonds with brands that reflect their own values and identities, and that these bonds foster loyalty at an emotional level. Thus, the study proposes a novel integrative framework that embeds psychological identity constructs within digital interaction models, contributing to a multidimensional understanding of digital brand relationships.

Empirically, this study validates the proposed framework using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and Hayes' PROCESS Macro (Model 6). The results confirm that social interactivity exerts both direct and indirect effects on brand loyalty, mediated sequentially by customer participation and customer–brand identification. These findings reinforce the argument that psychological identification plays a more dominant mediating role than participation alone, highlighting the importance of emotional bonding in sustaining consumer loyalty.

By providing empirical evidence from an emerging market (Turkey), this study also addresses the limited research exploring participation –loyalty mechanisms beyond Western contexts. The validation of the model in this context extends the applicability of UGT and interactivity frameworks to non-Western cultures, thereby enhancing the cross-cultural generalizability of digital participation theories. Consequently, the study makes a multidimensional contribution not only to digital marketing, but also to relationship marketing, brand identity, and consumer behavior fields by providing a culturally grounded and empirically validated understanding of the participation –loyalty relationship in the digital age.

Finally, this research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of consumer–brand relationships by emphasizing that customer participation and social interaction are critical

determinants of brand loyalty, further strengthened through customer–brand identification. These findings provide valuable insights for brands seeking to design more participatory and interactive digital experiences that cultivate long-term loyalty.

This study provides several practical insights for brand managers and digital marketers seeking to enhance brand loyalty through social interactivity and customer participation. The findings emphasize that brands should move beyond one-way communication and instead focus on creating interactive environments that allow consumers to engage, express themselves, and co-create value with the brand.

To achieve this, brands can design interactive and personalized content strategies that foster dialogue and emotional connection. Tools such as interactive polls, stories, and live sessions can be used to make consumers feel involved and valued, strengthening their perception of interactivity and participation. In addition, communication strategies should be adapted to the specific characteristics of each digital platform—such as using visual storytelling on Instagram, discussion-based interaction on X (Twitter), and community-focused engagement on Facebook—to ensure that brand messages align with user expectations and platform culture.

Encouraging consumers to take an active role in brand-related processes is equally important. Companies can invite their audiences to participate in idea generation, content creation, or product feedback through surveys, online challenges, or brand community discussions. Incorporating gamified elements such as recognition badges, point systems, or exclusive rewards can further enhance engagement by appealing to consumers' intrinsic motivations for achievement, belonging, and recognition. These strategies create a sense of ownership among consumers, which in turn deepens their emotional attachment to the brand and reinforces loyalty.

At the same time, managers should utilize data analytics and customer relationship management (CRM) systems to monitor consumer participation, identify loyal segments, and personalize communication. Data-driven personalization allows brands to deliver relevant content and experiences that match consumers' needs and preferences, ultimately strengthening relational bonds. However, it is equally essential that brands handle user data ethically and transparently to maintain consumer trust in digital environments.

In summary, the results of this study suggest that building brand loyalty in the digital era requires a balanced integration of interactive content, participatory opportunities, and data-informed relationship management. Brands that successfully implement these strategies can transform

consumer engagement into enduring loyalty based on trust, emotional connection, and identification with the brand.

6. CONCLUSION

This study directly addresses the theoretical gaps identified in the introduction concerning the limited understanding of how social interactivity and customer participation jointly influence brand loyalty, particularly in emerging market contexts. While prior research has often examined these constructs in isolation or within Western settings, the current findings empirically demonstrate their interconnected effects and underlying psychological mechanisms in a non-Western context. By doing so, the study extends existing theories, particularly the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and social identity theory, to a broader cultural domain and provides a more comprehensive explanation of how interactive and participatory experiences foster enduring brand loyalty.

Despite its theoretical and practical contributions, this study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the use of a convenience sampling method may limit the generalizability of the findings, as the sample might not fully represent the broader population of social media users. Future studies could employ more diverse and representative samples to validate the model across different demographic and cultural groups. Second, as the data were collected at a single point in time, the results reflect associations rather than causal relationships. Conducting longitudinal studies could help to observe how social interactivity and customer participation influence brand loyalty over time, while qualitative methods such as interviews or focus groups could provide deeper insights into consumers' perceptions and motivations underlying these relationships.

In addition, future research could examine cross-cultural or generational differences in digital engagement and loyalty formation. For instance, comparing Generation Z and Baby Boomers may reveal how distinct value orientations and digital habits affect the strength of interactive and participatory relationships with brands. Such comparisons would enrich the understanding of how age and cultural context moderate the interactivity–loyalty mechanism. Moreover, platform-specific investigations could offer valuable insights into how different social media environments—such as Instagram, TikTok, or LinkedIn—shape engagement dynamics and brand loyalty. Each platform fosters unique user behaviors, interaction patterns, and identity expressions,

which may differentially impact how consumers form emotional and psychological bonds with brands.

Overall, these future directions would not only enhance the external validity of the proposed framework but also deepen the theoretical understanding of how digital interactivity and customer participation operate across varying cultural, demographic, and technological contexts.

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How to cite this article:

Derinolzu, E. & Pir, E. O. (2025). The Role of Customer Participation and Interactivity in Creating Brand Loyalty. *International Journal of Marketing, Communication and New Media*, Vol 13, Nº 25, pp. 204-234.
<https://doi.org/10.54663/2182-9306.2025.v.13.n.25.204-234>