



Maida Shafiq¹, Maryam Saleem², Sadaf Noor³, Riffat Gill⁴ & Aisha Saleem⁵

¹MS (Scholar), National Business School, The University of Faisalabad, Pakistan. Email: maidashafiq8@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor, National Business School, The University of Faisalabad, Pakistan.

Email: maryamsaleem.nbs@tuf.edu.pk, maryamsaleem0888@gmail.com,

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9855-3206>

³MS (Scholar), Riphah International University Lahore. Riphah School of Business & Management (RSBM),

Email: sadaf-noor@outlook.com

⁴Lecturer, Lyallpur Business School, Government College University Faisalabad Pakistan.

Email: riffatgill@gcuf.edu.pk

⁵Assistant Professor, Lyallpur Business School, Government College University Faisalabad Pakistan.

Email: aishasaleem@gcuf.edu.pk

KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Brand Loyalty, Brand Trust, Customer Attitude, Direct-to-Consumer Brands, Theory of Planned Behavior	Direct-to-Consumer brands are using social media as a vital avenue to connect, engage, and create enduring connections with customers in today's quickly changing digital marketplace. This research investigates how consumer's attitude towards direct-to-consumer brands is shaped by social media engagement which therefore affects brand loyalty. Drawing upon, Theory of Planned Behavior this study tests an empirical model in which the relationship between social media engagement and brand loyalty is mediated by attitude towards direct-to-consumer brands, while the relationship between attitude towards direct-to-consumer brand and brand loyalty is moderated by brand trust. An online survey was used to collect primary data (N=337) in three waves from a sample of direct-to-consumer -versed Pakistani social media users. Time-1 respondents were asked to rate their attitude towards direct-to-consumer brands. Social media engagement (mediator) was tapped at time 2 while study's moderator (brand trust) and dependent variable (brand loyalty) were measured at time 3. The PROCESS Macro in SPSS by Hayes was used to examine mediation and moderation effects. The results show that social media engagement influences the consumer's attitude towards direct-to-consumer brand, which results in brand loyalty over time. Furthermore, the relationship between brand trust and loyalty is qualified by brand trust, highlighting the importance of brand trust in sustaining customers' relationship in the direct-to-consumer market. By offering actual data on the behavioral and psychological processes via which social media interaction fosters brand loyalty, this research adds to the expanding corpus of expertise in digital marketing. The findings offer valuable insights for direct-to-consumer marketers aiming to improve customer relationships by targeting engagement strategies and building trust.
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Corresponding Author	Aisha Saleem
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Introduction

The digital age has revolutionised customer engagement with brands, particularly within the direct-to-consumer (DTC) sector. As competition escalates, understanding the impact of social media involvement on customer attitudes and behaviours is crucial for marketers aiming to foster brand loyalty. DTC brands are those that exclusively operate in the digital realm for the goal of selling. They just own physical retail establishments that provide conventional enhancement to clients. The DTC brands are distinguishing themselves on the disruptive virtual platforms and challenging the traditional linear sales patterns (Prasad & Ghosal, 2022). Social media engagement is the degree of connection, participation, and involvement that customers demonstrate with companies on social media platforms. It includes behaviours such as like, commenting, sharing material, following brand pages, and engaging in discussions relevant to the brand. In the digital age, merchants increasingly utilise social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, and YouTube to actively engage consumers. Retailers utilise Social Media Marketing (SMM) to deliver real-time information through newsfeeds, vlogs, tweets, photographs, and posts regarding the advent of emerging items or services (Pentina et al., 2018).

Research indicates that there is a difference in the level of customer interaction on various social media platforms, such as Instagram and Twitter (Godey et al., 2016), Facebook (Wang & Yu, 2017). Using Instagram as an example, the platform, due to its specific properties and functions about superior quality imagery content, appears to be able to engage the user on the deeper level as compared to other types of social networking, such as Facebook or Twitter. It is also more likely to lose against a team based on friendly games (with a 0.286 frequency of loss) rather than one based on official matches (0.263 frequency of loss). Digital marketers therefore need an inclusive understanding of the effects that some of the social media characteristics such as media exposure and trustworthiness could have on changes in consumer engagement behaviour. Consequently, digital marketers need a comprehensive awareness of how social media qualities, including media exposure and trustworthiness, might influence variances in consumer engagement behaviour (Machleit et al., 1993) perceive brand attitude as a singular dimension. For instance, brand attitude differs from the emotions provoked by the brand. Emotions are ephemeral, whereas attitudes are more persistent. Emotions are self-referential; they do not provide information about the external environment; instead, they reflect how the external environment influences us (Batra & Ahtola, 1991). Moreover, emotions are fundamentally distinct from cognitive or evaluative reactions, which encompass a respondent's expressions of approval or disapproval regarding the attributes of the message itself (Breckler, 1984). The former is an assessment, whereas the latter represents a psychological attribute of the individual or a condition elicited in the respondent (Gardner, 1985).

Brand trust refers to the amount of confidence and dependability that people attribute to a brand's ability to meet its commitments, provide excellent products or services, and show integrity. Trust influences customer interactions by enhancing their commitment and propensity to support loyalty despite competing options. Trust is the readiness to depend on another entity despite potential risks. This readiness arises from an appreciation of the other party informed by prior

experience. It entails an anticipation that the other party will yield a favourable result, notwithstanding the potential for an adverse consequence (Worchel, 1979). Within specific contextual boundaries and constraints, trust is an expectation. (Lewis, 1985) contend that trust transcends mere predictability and embodies confidence under uncertainty. In past years, firms in consumer goods marketplaces have seen increased difficulties as a growing number of customers exhibit deal loyalty (Donath, 1994). In order to regain loyalty and replicate the achievements of industrial marketers, consumer marketers started to adopt the concept of cultivating relationships with clients and earning their trust (Bennett, 1996).

The brand serves as a proxy for interpersonal interaction between the organisation and its consumers, fostering the potential for trust to be established. Brand loyalty denotes a customer's dedication to repurchase or maintain interaction with a brand, typically evidenced by repeat purchases, brand preference, and reluctance to switch despite available alternatives. This is a vital result for sustained brand success and client loyalty. Brand loyalty refers to the consistent repurchase of specific items or services over a defined timeframe (Li et al., 2025). Numerous research have evaluated customers' connections with companies (Ali et al., 2025). Robust consumer-brand relationships are likely to foster increased brand loyalty, characterised by pro-brand behaviours such as good word-of-mouth communication. (Watanuki, 2025). The linking of consumers with brands contributes positively to their reactions with the brand as they build a relationship between the brand and themselves as part of their self-concept. (Joyee De & Chattopadhyay, 2025). Customers are most prone to be very loyal towards a brand that they view as reliable, trustworthy and one that meets their values.

Social media has become a major tool in a digital age where companies build relationships with consumers, develop loyalty and communicate with them. In particular, the Direct-to-Consumer (DTC) brands have used the social media to avoid the usual chains of retail and establish direct connections with their intended group of customers. This paper looks into how social media interaction would influence brand loyalty with an attending mediated influences of attitude towards DTC brands and a moderating role of brand trust. The social media play a vital role in the integration of such brands with the consumers, making them build a trust and achieve loyalty. The role of social media interaction has already been prioritized in prior research to enhance brand awareness and customer satisfaction (Godey et al., 2016). However, mechanisms through which social media engagement results to brand loyalty that is augmented by DTC brands are not clearly analyzed. The research augmented the current corpus of knowledge, as it offers a framework that combines the aspects of social media engagement, the consumer attitudes towards direct-to-consumer brands, the brand trust and the brand loyalty. To the analysis of these interactions, the work seeks to provide unique information to DTC brands that intend to improve their social media digital strategies and build lasting consumer loyalty.

As Direct-to-Consumer (DTC) brands grow, the impact of social media on customer-brand relationships intensifies. Social media allows DTC companies to directly engage with and influence their target consumers cost-effectively, bypassing traditional advertising methods.

While research has highlighted the importance of social media marketing, few studies examine how social media engagement, attitude development, brand trust, and loyalty interconnect within the DTC framework, particularly using the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). The following objectives of the research are as follows:

1. To examine the influence of social media engagement on brand loyalty.
2. To study the relationship between social media engagement and attitude towards direct-to-consumer brands
3. To analyze the impact of attitude towards direct-to-consumer brands on brand loyalty.
4. To empirically investigate the mediating role of attitude towards Direct-to-Consumer brands in the relationship between social media engagement and brand loyalty.
5. To evaluate the moderating role of brand trust in the relationship between Attitude towards Direct-to-Consumer brands and brand loyalty.

Theory and Hypotheses Development

Social Media Engagement and Brand Loyalty

Social media engagement is becoming a critical parameter to brand loyalty to direct-to-consumer brands in the current digital-first marketplace. The scenario is different with the traditional retail models as they main focus is the face-to-face brand experience whereas with the direct-to-customer brands, the relations and loyalty have to be developed and formed online. This has led to the evolution of social media as an important tool in attracting attention of the consumer, building long lasting loyalty and enabling engagement. A growing body of empirical literature supports why brand loyalty is connected to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). With this, loyalty does not only imply intending to buy again, but it should entail a strong emotional attachment towards the brand such that it is evident in the form of advocacy behavior such as referring the brand to others as well as a desire not to defect. (Chatzi et al., 2024). Research has indicated that intense engagement with the brand through social media has a significant influence on the brand attachment and loyalty results (Mobini & Sharbatian, 2024). When people comment under the posts, updates, or live sessions of some brand, they can easily feel connected to such a community. This has the ability to create an emotional commitment that is more reliable indicator of a lasting retention than any transactional source of satisfaction can be. The dynamic is especially utilized by brands that sell directly to the consumer given that their business has a basis on offering customized and one-on-one digital experiences. These moves help to minimize the psychological gap between the brand and the customer and strengthen the position of the brand as an element of the lifestyle of the consumer. Besides, an interpersonal connection between the consumer and the brand is further reinforced due to the mutual exchange of engagement behaviors. In a world of oversaturation with choices, the brands, which fail to participate in the social media in a significant way, often experience problems in attracting and maintaining the interest of consumers. Also longitudinal studies have shown that social media engagement is a predictor of long term behavioral loyalty beyond the short term brand recall and

brand favorability improvements (Singh & Raja). Brands which are doing so will have a larger share of mind, and in the case of follower subscription, will have less fall out. The interaction becomes routine and such routinizing of interactions creates strong brand likings and even buying habits in the long run.

To sum up, brand loyalty and social media activities are interrelated, and this fact is confirmed by both empirical and theoretical evidence. It is not just a marketing operation but a strategy requirement that DTC brands should engage in social media. This is because online environment is the only field of interaction. Promoting meaningful two-way interactions where consistency and meaning are the key factors on the social media tribunes, DTC brands can create the level of loyalty that is beyond the purchase to long-term emotional effect and advocacy.

H1: Social Media Engagement is positively related to Brand Loyalty.

Social Media Engagement and Attitude towards Direct-to-Consumer Brands

Social media engagement (SME) has emerged as a crucial tool for businesses in the rapidly changing world of digital marketing, especially those using direct-to-consumer (DTC) business models (Dessart, 2017; Muntinga et al., 2011). SME is the extent to which customers interact with brand content on social media sites like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. Likes, comments, shares, story viewing, and brand-led discussions are a few examples of these interactions. Since social media is frequently the main channel of customer interaction for DTC brands which do not have typical retail interfaces interaction on social media is a crucial factor in determining consumer sentiment.

Ajzen (1991) defined attitude toward a brand as a person's favorable or negative assessment of the brand in the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). Social media involvement facilitates trust, emotional connection, and repeated positive exposure to company messaging, all of which help to build a positive mindset. Social media, in contrast to traditional advertising, enables feedback and two-way connection, which improves the customization of the customer experience. Social media, in response to traditional advertising, enables real-time feedback and two-way connection, which improves the customization of the customer experience. The relationship between SMEs and favorable customer perceptions is strongly supported by recent research from academia and business. Consumer views of brand value and trustworthiness are greatly influenced by social media material that seems genuine and reliable, particularly when it is provided by influencers, claim. Since DTC businesses focus on establishing reputation through digital storytelling rather than in-person interactions, this is especially pertinent to them.

Likewise, Unilever highlights in its consumer behavior research 2025, how much better the perception of a brand is with social-first marketing approaches. Brands that communicate with customers and respond to their inquiries and offer values that resonate with them are perceived as more authentic and reliable, leading to more favorable feelings.

To summarize, studies continue to demonstrate SMEs' importance in shaping consumer perceptions about direct-to-consumer (DTC) companies. Brands can exploit consumers' feelings about them through emotionally powerful storytelling, real engagement, and personalized interactions. Based on the presented information and the theoretical aspects of the Theory of Planned Behavior, the following hypothesis is presented:

H2: Social media engagement is positively related to attitude towards direct-to-consumer brands.

Attitude Towards Direct-to-Consumer Brands and Brand Loyalty

The overall evaluation of a behavior in this case, which involves ongoing engagement and repeat purchases from a DTC brand, is indicated by attitude, a core component of the Theory of Planned Behavior. Consumers positive perception on the brand contributes largely to their intention to repurchase and remain committed to such a brand when the same is not subjected to external pressures or constraints (Peter & Olson, 2010). Having this mind with a positive expectation will result into the development of successful and sustainable brand loyalty behaviors. Several things can contribute towards a positive perception including quality of the product offered, clarity of brand values, availability of good digital channels, and fulfilling customer service. These are critical components of DTC model. For instance, a study (Ali et al., 2025) discovered that amongst digitally native settings, the attitude towards a brand has great implications on attitudinal brand loyalty together with behavioral brand loyalty whereby attitudinal brand loyalty could be characterized as a precursor to behavioral brand loyalty. Further, this is especially so where the brands develop engaging customized and engaging social media marketing. This is significantly important in direct-to consumer context where digital communication may be the main means through which the brand communicates. The consumer attitude has a direct impact on loyalty in the online fashion retailing industry, which is highly dominated by DTC organizations, whereas satisfaction and emotional connection were used as mediators.

The results indicate that when consumers maintain strong and positive perceptions, they have a very high level of intention of connection, as well as brand advocacy as long as they continuously interact with the brand, even in a very competitive environment. Such positive attitudes are representations of the internal forces that reinforce behavioral intentions, including word-of-mouth advocacy, zone purchases, considered within the frame of the Theory of Planned Behavior. The attitudes that resonate with sustainability and social consciousness, as brand values, have been found to have a strong positive impact on brand commitment. When finding themselves in such cases, the people perceive the brand as part of themselves, not merely as providers of things. This relationship between mind and heart binds them even stronger. In the environment where the cost of customer acquisition is high and the satisfaction or trust of the brand is determined majorly by online interactions; positive brand perceptions are necessary in the case of DTC brands. The attitudes in the present case are critical in determining not only short-run consumption decisions, but also the precondition of long-term brand connectedness as evidenced through repetitive use, word of mouth and immune response to competing offers. This means that positive attitude

towards the brand has a significant impact on making the intention to remain loyal and then this intention forecaster actual loyalty behaviour as part of the TPB. Hence, it has been theoretically as well as empirically supported to state that brand loyalty has a positive relationship with attitudes toward DTC brands.

The TPB framework is also good evidence of this relationship as it emphasizes the role attitude has in influencing behavioral intention eventually resulting in loyalty. Building long-term consumer loyalty will depend on the measures to be adopted in building and enhancing positive brand perceptions in direct-to-consumer brands that intend to develop sustainable consumer supports.

H3: Attitude towards direct-to-consumer brands is positively related to brand loyalty.

Mediating Role of Attitude Towards Direct-to-consumer Brands

Within the context of the current direct-to-consumer (DTC) brand market, consumer attitude as a mediating variable between social media use and brand loyalty has come to occupy a rather significant level of importance. Such attitude will in turn make the consumer remain loyal to the brand. Thus, one can say that the particular relationship between brand loyalty and engagement with social media is beyond direct, being highly affected by the perception of the consumer towards DTC brand. Consumers are likely to develop a positive attitude towards a brand when they find the content of the brand authentic, interactive, informational, and lean towards the values. This positive attitude that has been described by TPB then determines the intention of the consumer to do certain activities such as a repeat purchase or referring the brand to other shoppers and these have been the main focus of brand loyalty. Engagement essentially results into cognitive and emotional evaluation of the brand which consequently forms the foundation upon which action behavior is categorized. The mediating role of attitude is well evidenced due to the current empirical results. Based on the findings of the research by Ali et al. (2025), social media marketing campaigns impact positively on the attitude toward a brand by increasing consumer involvement to a significant extent. The research also identified that brand attitude is a major mediational factor that helps in converting digital engagement in brand loyalty outcomes. According to the authors, alone, engagement initiatives may not achieve long-term loyalty unless the attitudinal response is a positive one. In accordance with their findings, the suggestion that engagement may result into loyalty holds true provided that it results in positive attitudinal changes.

This intermediary role is particularly significant in the world of the DTC brands, where digital interaction is the most common, and sometimes the only, source of contact with the brand. This is because social media is the primary platform that customers use to cultivate attitude in the event that they do not have physical experiences and intra-store relationships. This mediating pathway is affirmed under the theory of planned behavior which opines that behavior does not only emerge because of exposure or interaction but also due to inner evaluations and intentions. Attitudinal component of the TPB is used as a perception means of explaining behaviors such as engagement. Consumer loyalty can't be built only by content interaction. The establishment of

loyalty happens when that involvement influences the activities of their mind to their emotions concerning the brand. In this regard, the influence of the social media on brand loyalty is dependent on the fact that the usage of social media has a potentially great and enduring influence on the positive attitude toward the brand.

A comprehensive argument is presented that psychological ownership depends on the attitude of consumers due to strong and consistent brand-related interactions on the web, thus, promoting the intention to preserve the loyal position. The results show that positive attitude is a psychological connection which becomes means by which interaction turns into behavior as opposed to being a reaction to involvement. The combination of theoretical grounds and empirical data states that the attitude towards the DTC brands is one of the great mediating variables explaining the relationship between social media engagement and brand loyalty. Without the change of consumer perceptions engagement activities may lack the substance of emotion and thinking that is needed to promote loyalty. To empower a long-term loyalty, direct-to-consumer (DTC) brands must not only settle on the creation of engagement but also work towards the creation of brand experiences that influence the thoughts and emotions of consumers about the brand.

H4: Attitude towards direct-to-consumer brands mediates the relationship between social media engagement and brand loyalty.

Moderating Role of Brand Trust

For a long time, trust has been understood to be essential to the establishment and upkeep of strong customer-brand connections. In the context of digitally native direct-to-consumer (DTC) brands, brand trust is even more important because the consumer's relationship with the company is often built entirely through online channels. The consumer's conviction that a brand is trustworthy, acts with integrity, and consistently fulfills its commitments is embodied by trust. The initial touchpoint between a DTC brand and its consumer base is typically social media engagement. Consumers develop impressions of the brand through the consumption of content, likes, shares, remarks, and user-generated content. Nevertheless, the degree to which this engagement results in loyalty is significantly influenced by the presence of brand trust. Regardless of the frequency of their interactions with content, consumers who lack trust in a brand are less likely to convert engagement into meaningful commitment. Conversely, individuals who have confidence in the brand are more inclined to interpret their engagement favorably and to fortify their emotional and behavioral loyalty over time. Consequently, trust serves as a moderator by increasing the impact of engagement on loyalty outcomes. Whereas it does not have physical stores, physical service, and tangible assessment of products, in the case of DTC brands perceived trust is more important.

When trust has been created, then the consumers have greater likelihood of implementing the intentions that are generated by the engagement activities because they have greater confidence in their conclusions.. In their analysis of e-commerce websites, consumers more likely to transform their social media use to brand advocacy and repeat purchase. To some degree, participatory

consumers are likely to advocate for reassurance and repetitive-type brand responding. The authors concluded that unless based on trust, engagement tends to be shallow and never grows into loyalty. The finding also supports the idea that the level of the relationship between loyalty and engagement depends on the trust.

The moderating role of trust is particularly important in the DTC settings, where the customers have to decide the buying decisions based only on the digital representations of the brand. Kim and Ko (2021) found that the loyalty intentions of digital consumers were resoundingly improved through their confidence in the mobile interface, brand communication, and on-line reviews. Their argument is that trust reduces the perceived risk of risk, the perceived risk of risk online engagements, so reduces the propensity of the consumer to be committed. This proves that Theory of Planned Behavior presents people as having a higher participation rate in actions that are acted upon when they feel safe and comfortable with an exchange of the brand due to positive attitude and active involvement. In addition, in the digital context of content overload and general mistrust in brand claims, trust becomes one of the cutting-edge factors. In their proposal, trust can be seen as a filter, which can be used when identifying which brands are to be given long-term loyalty in the face of the massive increase in the number of different choices which consumers can select.

Consequently, this hypothesis has empirical findings and is based on theories. It adds to current knowledge regarding such consumer-brand relations by naming brand trust as a crucial mitigating variable between the processes of social media engagement and brand loyalty. Trust is one of the major contributors when it comes to the long-term relations with building brand loyalty, favorable attitude to engagement, and openness to the communications of the brand. Building trust lies as a necessity in the path of DTC brands through competition in digital environments. It does not only belong to the results of the relations, but also as a strategic weapon, which intensifies the quality of the social media interaction performance of consumer loyalty development.

H5: Brand trust moderates the relationship between social media engagement and brand loyalty, such that the relationship is stronger when brand trust is high.

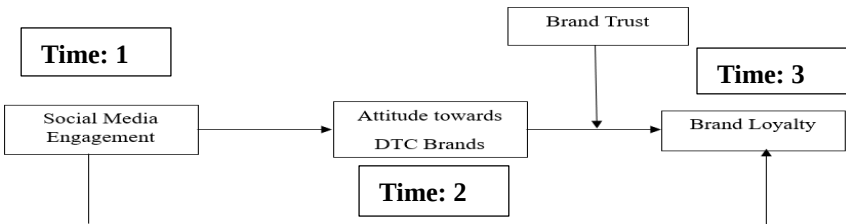


Fig. 1: Research Model

Methods

Demographic Profile of Participants

Table 1. Demographics

Sample characteristics have been reported in Tabel1.

Demographics		
Gender	N	%
Male	158	46.9
Female	179	53.1
Age	N	%
18-24	242	71.8
25-34	90	26.7
35-44	5	1.5
Qualification	N	%
Undergraduate	198	58.8
Graduate	90	26.7
Master/MPhil	48	14.2
PHD	1	0.3
Income	N	%
Less than 35000 PKR	181	53.7
36000-40000 PKR	26	7.7
41000-45000 PKR	36	10.7
46000 PKR or above	94	27.9

N=337

Study Participants and Procedure

The research focuses on individuals who engage with direct-to-consumer (DTC) brands via social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, and brand websites. Participants must possess prior experience with DTC brands to effectively assess psychological aspects like engagement, brand trust, and loyalty. A purposive sampling method yielded a sample of 337 respondents for the study. Three waves of surveys were conducted using a time-lag methodology to gather primary data and address reverse causality in causal investigations. The study took place in a natural environment with minimal researcher involvement, focusing on consumers of direct-to-consumer (DTC) brands. Data were collected through online platforms including email and social media. At Time-1, attitudes towards DTC brands were assessed, social media engagement was measured at Time-2, and brand trust and brand loyalty were evaluated at Time-3.

Measurement Scales

All Responses for all variables were obtained on a 5-point Likert scale. *Social media engagement.* This construct is assessed with the instrument given by Baldus et al. (2015) and Lamberton and Rose (2012). The participants were requested to examine their interactions with DTC brands through analyzing such activities as viewing, enjoyment, sharing, comments on posts, and brand content creation. *Attitude towards DTC Brands.* This construct is measured using items adapted from Ajzen (1991). Participants were asked to evaluate their overall feelings and evaluations toward DTC brands, including perceptions of favorability, positivity, and desirability. *Brand Trust:* The items of brand trust is measured with the help of a comprehensive scale, developed based on the ideas of Chaudhuri, Delgado-Ballester et al. (2003). This scale measures the perception of consumers on the reliability, honesty and ability to deliver on a promise of a brand. The items evaluate what the respondents think about the brand that it is providing the quality consistently, acts in the best interest of the respondent and is reliable both in communications and performance. *Brand Loyalty:* The tool established by Bennett and Rundle- Attitudinal loyalty reflects emotional and psychological commitment, while behavioral loyalty indicates the intent to make future purchases, remain engaged, and refer the brand to others. Respondents were asked about their likelihood of remaining loyal to a direct-to-consumer (DTC) brand despite alternatives, as well as their sense of community with the brand.

Analytical Method

The research utilizes regression analysis to validate hypotheses regarding social media engagement's effect on brand loyalty, mediated by attitude towards DTC brands and moderated by brand trust. The PROCESS macro facilitated the analysis, employing Model 4 for mediation testing and Model 1 for moderation evaluation

Results

Descriptives

Descriptive statistics were calculated for key variables in this research. The reliability analysis was also performed to check the internal consistency of the measurement scales employed in this research. Results have been provided in table 2.

Table.2 Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations

Sr #	Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1	Social Media Engagement	3.8	0.78	0.85			
2	Attitude towards DTC Brands	4.1	0.67	0.40**	0.82		
3	Brand Trust	3.9	0.80	0.24**	0.46**	0.84	
4	Brand Loyalty	4.1	0.57	0.36**	0.59**	0.37**	0.83

N=337,DTC=direct-to-consumer brands, **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). Bold values show reliabilities.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

The measurement model's appropriateness was verified through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) in AMOS. All factor loadings were significantly higher than the prescribed threshold of 0.50 (Hair, Black, Babin & Anderson, 2010). The basic goal of doing confirmatory factor analyses was to examine the convergent and discriminant validity of the variables under research.

Convergent and Discriminant Validity

Table 3 shows the construct validity. Convergent validity is accessed through measuring Average Variance Extracted (AVE). In accordance with the guidelines given by (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), the AVE values of all study variables meet or exceeded the threshold of 0.5, and the Composite Reliability (CR) values surpass 0.7. Consequently, this shows that convergent validity has been successfully established. The square root of a construct's AVE must surpass the correlation between that construct and any other construct, as per this criterion. When the condition is met, discriminant validity is confirmed. In this research square root of AVE is bigger than the correlations among variables hence discriminant validity was achieved.

Table 3. Composite Reliability, Average Variance Extracted and Discriminant Validity

Sr#	Variables	CR	AVE	MSV	MaxR(H)	1	2	3	4
1	Social Media Engagement	0.859	0.515	0.140	0.902	0.718			
2	Brand Loyalty	0.838	0.564	0.056	0.845	0.185	0.751		
3	Attitude towards DTC Brands	0.810	0.522	0.159	0.852	0.374	0.192	0.723	
4	Brand Trust	0.839	0.565	0.159	0.839	0.226	0.236	0.399	0.752

N=337, bold values show discriminant validity i.e. square root of AVE is >AVE

Full Measurement Model

The model's fit was examined using a variety of goodness-of-fit indices. The Chi-square/df (CMIN/DF) value of 2.48, as illustrated below, is within the recommended range (< 3), indicating a satisfactory model fit. The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) was 0.06, which is less than threshold value of 0.08. These values represent an appropriate approximation of the model to the population data.

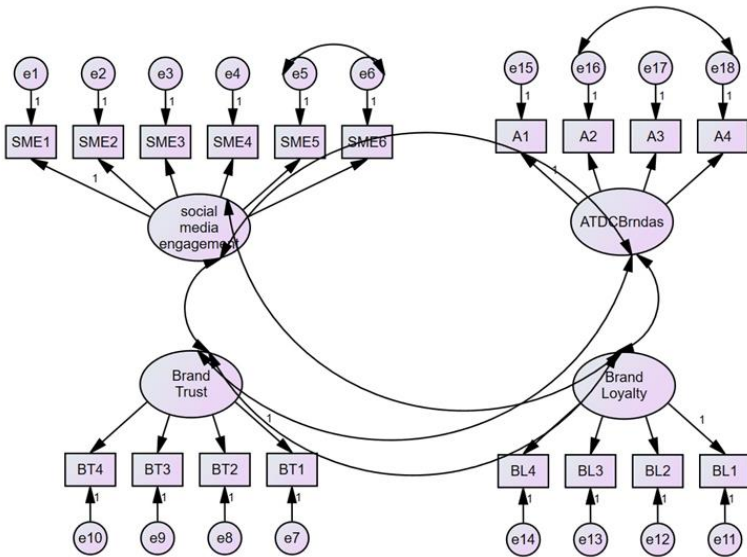


Figure 1.Full Measurement Model

χ^2	df	χ^2/df	CFI	GFI	IFI	TLI	REMSA
314.96	127	2.48	0.93	0.90	0.93	0.91	0.06

Full Measurement Model Fit Statistics

Regression Analysis

The statistical validity of the hypotheses proposed in this research is ascertained through regression analysis. This study empirically examines the impact of social media engagement on brand loyalty, with attitude towards DTC brands serving as a mediator and brand trust serving as a moderator. Regression techniques, specifically the PROCESS macro devised were employed to conduct the analysis. The mediation effect were tested using Model 4, and the moderation was evaluated using Model 1.

Regression Result of Direct Relationship between Social Media Engagement and Brand Loyalty

The results presented in table 4 reveal that social media engagement has significant and positive impact on brand loyalty (without including mediator) at 1% level of significance ($\beta=0.26^{***}$, p value<0.001) which leads to support our hypothesis 1(a) which states that social media engagement is positively associated with brand loyalty.

Table 4 Regression Results of Direct Effect

Direct Path	β	SE	t	p
Social Media Engagement $\longrightarrow$ Brand Loyalty	0.26	0.03	7.08	0.00

Meditation Analysis

We examined the mediating impact of attitude towards DTC Brands in the relationship between social media engagement and brand loyalty. The regression analysis demonstrated that social media engagement has a positive and significant impact on attitude towards DTC brands, with a beta value of 0.34***. This data supports the initial step of mediation. The second stage of the mediation procedure investigated the impact of attitude towards DTC brands on brand loyalty. The findings indicated a significant effect, with a beta value of 0.46*** a standard error (SE) of 0.04. The direct effect of social media engagement on brand loyalty decreased when mediator was incorporated into the model between social media engagement and brand loyalty. However, the effect remained significant (p=0.00), suggesting partial mediation. The indirect effect of social media engagement on brand loyalty via attitude towards direct-to-consumer brands was 0.16, with a bootstrap standard error of 0.03 and a 95% confidence interval of [0.10, 0.22], which excludes zero. Consequently, this corroborates the mediation effect's significance, affirming hypothesis 4.

Table 5, Mediated Regression Results

Brand Loyalty						
Variable	R	R ²	β	SE	t	p
Effect of social media engagement on attitude towards direct-to consumer Brands	0.40	0.16	0.34	0.04	8.10	0.00
Effect of social media engagement on Brand loyalty	0.61	0.37	0.10	0.03	3.00	0.00
Effect of attitude towards direct-to-consumer brand on brand loyalty			0.46	0.04	11.4	0.00

Bootstrap Results of Indirect Effect				
	Effect	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
Indirect effect of social media engagement on brand loyalty via attitude towards direct-to-consumer brands	0.16	0.03	0.10	0.22

N=337, ***p<0.001, **p<0.01, * <0.05LLCI(lower limit confidence interval),ULCI(upper limit confident interval, SE(standard error) Bootstrap Sample size=5000,SE(standard error)

Table 6. Direct, Indirect & Total Effects

	Effect	SE	LL 95%CI	UL95%CI
Total Effect	0.26***	0.04	0.19	0.33
Direct Effect	0.10**	0.03	0.03	0.17
Indirect Effect	0.16	0.03	0.10	0.22

N=337, *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Moderation Analysis

Using PROCESS Model 1, the moderation analysis evaluated the influence of brand trust i.e., moderator on the relationship between ATT and BL. The interaction effect is significant, as given the beta value of 0.09** (LLCI=0.02, ULCI=0.17), the standard error of 0.03, and the p-value of 0.01. Additionally, the conditional effects were investigated at various levels of the moderator. These findings indicate that the relationship between attitude towards direct-to-consumer brands and brand loyalty is fortified by brand trust. Consequently, Hypothesis H4 is substantiated. The relationship between Attitude Toward DTC Brands and Brand Trust is significant. The impact of attitude towards direct-to consumer brands on brand loyalty is exacerbated as brand trust increases. Consequently, Hypothesis H4 is supported, and the moderating role of Brand Trust is confirmed. The conditional effects show that the effect of attitude towards direct-to-consumer brands on brand loyalty is highly significant at high value of moderator ($\beta=0.56^{***}$ LLCI=0.44, ULCI=0.68), while it becomes weak at lower value of moderator.

Table 7. Moderated Regression Analysis

Variables	B	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	4.08	0.26	153.93	0.00	4.02	4.13
Attitude towards direct-to-consumer brands	0.48	0.04	11.34	0.00	0.40	0.57
Brand Trust (Moderator)	0.12	0.03	3.33	0.00	0.05	0.19
ATT * BT (Interaction)	0.09	0.03	2.52	0.01	0.02	0.17
ΔR^2 due to interaction	0.011*					
F	6.33					
Conditional Effects						
Brand Trust	Effect	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
-0.80	0.40	0.04	8.82	0.00	0.31	0.49
0.00	0.48	0.04	11.34	0.00	0.40	0.57
0.80	0.56	0.05	9.59	0.00	0.44	0.68

Note. N=337, Attitude towards direct-to-consumer brands and brand trust mean centered. (5,000 bootstrap sample size) LLCI (lower limit confidence interval) ULCI (upper limit confidence interval), SE (standard error) *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

Figure 3 illustrates the graphical representation of moderation effect at both high and low values. The interaction plot shows that the relationship between attitude towards direct-to-consumer brands and brand loyalty gets stronger at the high value of brand trust.

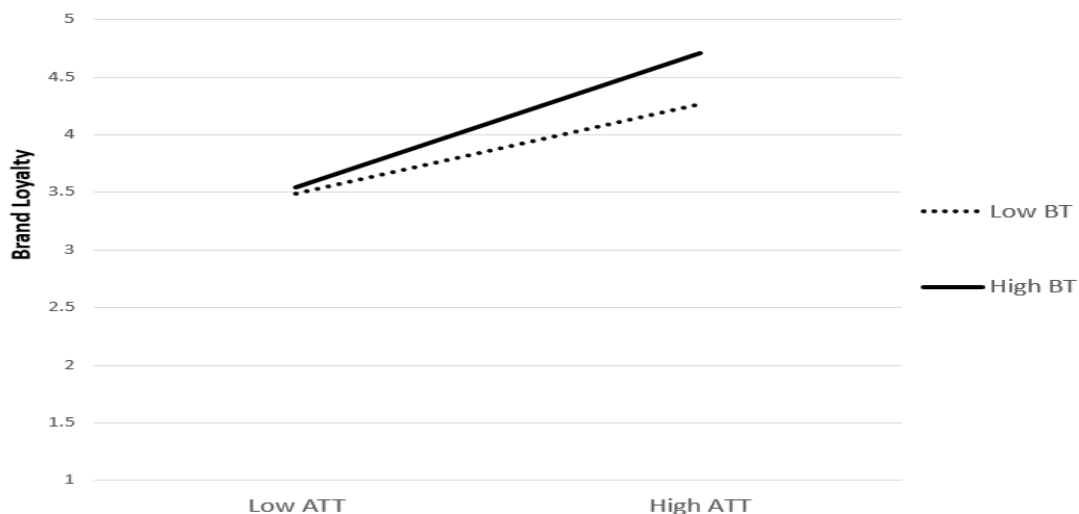


Figure 3. The Interactive Effects of Attitude towards Direct-to-Consumer Brands and Brand Trust on Brand Loyalty

Discussion

The ultimate aim of this research is to investigate and elucidate the correlation among brand loyalty and social media engagement in context of DTC brands. The primary focus will be on the mediating role of consumer attitude and the moderating role of brand trust. This study is predicated on the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), which underscores the influence of subjective norms, attitudes, and perceived behavioral control on individual behavior. In the context of DTC branding and digital consumer behavior, this study adapts the TPB framework to evaluate the process by which social media behaviors transform into brand loyalty through attitudinal and trust-related mechanisms

This study confirm that brand loyalty is significantly predicted by social media engagement. This confirms that online consumer interactions, whether passive, such as viewing or favoring content, or active, such as remarking or sharing, significantly accord to the progress of long-term consumer-brand relationships. These findings validate the current corpus of research that posits

that consumer loyalty is no longer solely determined by product satisfaction or traditional advertising, but is instead increasingly influenced by interactive and participatory digital experiences. As an example, DTC brands' social media interactions are typically the only touch points with consumers in their domain, as many of these brands do not have a physical store presence. It is important to emphasize that the findings also reveal how consumer attitudes towards direct-to-consumer (DTC) brands also have a strong impact on the link between social media engagement and brand loyalty. This means that consumer engagement does not directly and linearly translate to loyalty, but rather, directly and indirectly affects the consumer's attitudinal disposition toward the brand, both cognitively and emotionally, which can foster loyalty behavior. Favorable attitudes are formed when consumers' engagement experiences are genuine and rewarding and align with their values. These attitudes are indicative of emotional attachments and symbolic associations, in addition to assessments of brand functionality. This finding confirms the TPB's claim that attitude is an important antecedent to the intention to engage in a behavior, in this case, to act in a brand loyalty way.

In conclusion, these insights enable brand managers to approach digital interaction with greater emotional intelligence. In this setting, loyalty is not the result of discrete marketing strategies but rather of meaningful connections, emotional alignment, and long-term trust, all of which need to be carefully fostered in a digital economy that is becoming more and more competitive and value driven.

Theoretical Contributions

There are numerous considerable contributions to the existing literature. For one, it gives a modernization of (TPB) that incorporates digital marketing and direct to client (DTC) brand strategies. Secondly, attitude is a mediating variable, which adds to the complexity of the current engagement-loyalty models. Thirdly, the theoretical contribution of brand trust as a moderator is very wide. The study brings another factor into the relationship between engagement and loyalty: the strength of the engagement-loyalty relationship is contingent upon the level of trust that the consumer has in the brand. Moreover, the study lays the foundation for ongoing investigations of how social and cognitive aspects interact in algorithm-based contexts such as social media. Moreover, the study can aid in advancing current theories and can motivate further research in the fields of psychological constructs that impact brand loyalty in the digital era.

Managerial Implications

The research is very helpful to marketers and brand managers operating in the direct-to-consumer (DTC) field. DTC brands must understand that the practice of social media engagement is not just a vanity metric. The state of engagement must not be discussed in the context of likes, shares, or the number of followers; engagement should be perceived and used as a strategic tool on the quest to build stronger relationships with consumers. The brands should target producing interactive and high-value content that makes an impression on their clients based on the emotional and intellectual levels. Second, brand perceptions are also of high importance as far as

the development and maintenance of the positive ones is concerned. Marketers must maintain consistency in the delivery of brands messages, be transparent in communicating, and must also be relevant in the offerings that they provide. Stories can significantly influence perceptions that work well with their values- authenticity, inclusiveness, and sustainability- as consumers. These results depict the psychological bridge connecting engagement and loyalty as these attitudes.

Third, active nurturing of trust also needs to be practiced. In direct-to-consumer relationships, building trust is an important responsibility of the brand since in this case brand is likely to deal with consumers without dealing with an intermediary. This also entails the ability to handle issues as soon as they arise, ensuring integrity of data, and a regular adherence to brand promise, in addition to the provision of high-quality goods and services. It is something that cannot be achieved in a short time; trust must be nurtured by means of ethical actions, reputation, and consistency. Finally, direct-to-consumer brands are advised to split their audience based on the levels of trust and adjust their engagement strategies based on the obtained results. As an example, those who demonstrate a strong interest to it but are characterized by low scores in terms of trust can also be interested in re-assurance campaigns, product guarantees, or those aimed at increasing the level of transparency behind the curtains. Alternatively, members that possess some loyalty and trustworthiness may become the best actors of programs designed to promote community involvement. Additionally, marketers should use data analytics to continuously assess how social media involvement affects their clientele's attitudes and behaviors. Brands can quickly adjust their strategy with the use of sentiment analysis, behavioral tracking, and real-time monitoring of consumer responses. Purchasing technologies that enable A/B testing of content can provide information on the kinds of postings that foster greater trust and engagement. Additionally, including consumer input into company decision-making procedures may empower customers, increasing their advocacy and loyalty. In order to humanize their brand and demonstrate transparency, particularly to groups who lack trust, brands should also prioritize instructional material and behind-the-scenes narrative.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The results of the study show validity but one should note a few limitations. Initially, the study employs non-probability purposive sampling, which may restrict the generalizability of the results beyond the defined sample. Future studies might use random sampling in various cultural settings and geographic areas to improve external validity. Secondly, the study is cross-sectional as it does not track real behavior over time, even though it uses a three-wave time-lagged data collection methodology. To measure the changes in engagement, attitudes, and loyalty when there are changes in brand strategy or market conditions, longitudinal studies could be used.

Thirdly, this study focuses solely on social media engagement, but consumers also interact with DTC brands via other digital channels such as websites, email, influencers and mobile apps. These channels can be included in the future research to establish Omni-channel engagement-loyalty model. In addition, emotional branding, perceived value and brand authenticity can be used as

alternative mediator and/or moderator. Moreover, the research of the present study is limited to the market in Pakistan. Consumer attitudes and behaviors can be shaped differently in other countries due to the cultural differences, digital adoption rates and maturity of brands. Comparative studies done in developed and emerging markets can provide a more holistic picture of how the loyalty models based on engagement can be applied around the world. Moreover, relying on self-reported data could lead to social desirable bias or common method bias that could impact validity. Although future research could employ multi-source data gathering (behavioural monitoring or observational analytics), the use of temporal separation and anonymity as procedures has helped reduce these biases. Last, although this study provides primary focus on the planned behavior approach, the findings may be complemented with other theories such as the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and/or the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), to gain a deeper understanding of the motivational process that leads to customer loyalty and engagement in the digital era.

Conclusion

In the context of direct-to-consumer (DTC) brands, the results of this study indicate the substantial impact of social media involvement on brand loyalty, offering empirical support for the suggested model. The findings show that consumers' perceptions of direct-to-consumer (DTC) brands are positively and statistically significantly impacted by social media engagement. This suggests that more positive customer impressions of the brand result from more engagement with brand material on social media platforms, including like, commenting, reading stories or postings, and sharing content. These favorable opinions, in turn, strongly predict brand loyalty, indicating that customers who have a positive opinion of a direct-to-consumer (DTC) brand are more likely to stick with it, buy from it again, and refer it to others. Additionally, the mediation analysis shows that brand loyalty and social media engagement are mediated by attitudes toward DTC brands. This suggests that social media use affects customer views, which in turn affects loyalty both directly and indirectly. As a result, interesting brand content influences consumers' perceptions of a company and increases the possibility that they will stick with it over time.

The association between attitude toward DTC brands and brand loyalty is considerably moderated by brand trust, according to the moderation research. In particular, the beneficial effect of attitude on loyalty increases with brand trust. This implies that when consumers believe a brand to be reliable, consistent, and credible, they are more likely to achieve a positive attitude into devoted behavior. All things considered, these results are consistent with the Theory of Planned Behavior, which indicates how attitude and trust influence customer behavior.

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