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The Influence of Social Media Marketing on Brand Loyalty: Evidence from Malaysian Youth in the Ride-Hailing Sector

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ABSTRACT

Grab, founded in 2012, is a leading multi-service platform in Southeast Asia that actively uses social media to build relationships and foster brand loyalty. This study investigates the influence of social media marketing on brand loyalty among Malaysian youth aged 15–40, emphasizing the mediating role of customer satisfaction. A quantitative approach was employed through an online survey of 119 respondents, and data were analyzed using regression analysis. Results show that brand trust ($\beta = 0.376$, $p < 0.001$), perceived social media interaction quality ($\beta = 0.192$, $p < 0.05$), and loyalty program engagement ($\beta = 0.245$, $p < 0.01$) significantly influence customer satisfaction ($R^2 = 0.608$). Meanwhile, customer satisfaction ($\beta = 0.717$, $p < 0.001$) and loyalty program engagement ($\beta = 0.315$, $p < 0.001$) have significant positive effects on brand loyalty ($R^2 = 0.635$), whereas brand trust and social media interaction quality show no direct influence. These results confirm that customer satisfaction mediates the effects of trust, interaction quality, and loyalty program engagement on loyalty. The study concludes that loyalty programs and customer satisfaction are key drivers of sustained loyalty, highlighting the need for brands like Grab to strengthen personalized engagement and satisfaction-based strategies for young digital consumers.

Keywords: Brand Loyalty; Customer Satisfaction; Loyalty Program Engagement; Malaysian Youth; Social Media Marketing

INTRODUCTION

Today, social media is used by companies as an important way to strengthen brand loyalty by engaging with specific customers. Social media marketing is the concept of using social media platforms to attract attention or gain website traffic. These initiatives usually focus on creating content that attracts attention and encourages readers to share on social networks (Bajpai et. al., 2012). Social media platforms have become an important means of communication and outreach among young consumers. Business messages spread among consumers and can be influential because they appear to come from outsiders who are more credible than the brand or company itself. It creates a new opportunity for businesses by personalizing and authenticating content that resonates with their customers. Many companies are increasingly using these platforms because social media usage is particularly high among young people in Malaysia. The widespread use of social media among Malaysian youth has transformed how brands communicate and build relationships, allowing businesses to strengthen engagement, stimulate trust, and ultimately influence customer satisfaction and loyalty intentions.

Brand loyalty is a behavioral response that develops over time and can be nurtured among young Malaysians through social media marketing. It implies an ongoing pattern of brand repurchase due to favorable brand sentiment (Mellens et. al., 1996). Brand loyalty also refers to a customer's preference for a particular brand within a product line. Brand loyalty tends to occur when consumers believe that a brand provides the right product attributes, image, or quality levels at the appropriate price. This understanding may result in repeated purchases by the consumer, thus creating brand loyalty. Social networking sites allow companies to interact and converse with individual followers. In addition to giving companies a beneficial understanding of how deeply customers are attached to their brand, this one-to-one encounter can develop a sense of loyalty among potential customers and followers. Through this interaction, brand trust can be cultivated, customer satisfaction can be enhanced, and loyalty programs can be made more engaging, all of which are essential drivers of brand loyalty in today's competitive market.

Grab is currently one of the leading super applications in Southeast Asia, which brings many services, including food delivery, parcel delivery, ride-hailing, financial services, grocery delivery, and more, all in one app. Grab uses social media marketing to engage and reach the younger generation in Malaysia. It uses the strategy of multiple social media platforms, including TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook, to raise brand awareness. This is because social media can form a deep emotional bond with consumers to instill brand loyalty. Today, Grab has over 166 million smartphone downloads across 339 cities and 8 countries, using technology to strengthen communities and improve people's quality of life. It has attracted millions of customers in Malaysia, especially in the 18–30 age group. This range is known for the massive increase in consumption of digital content. As per the findings of a worldwide market research agency, TNS found that in comparison to other ride-hailing services, Grab services are utilized most commonly in Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, Singapore, and Thailand. With over 12 megacities and a population of over 640 million, the region offers a very high level of market exposure with the opportunity to strive forward. Hence, that is how Grab was able to achieve its current level of success and popularity. Grab's success also stems from its strong online presence and ability to build customer trust and satisfaction through transparent communication, personalized offers, and a well-integrated loyalty program that rewards frequent users. These approaches reflect how brand trust, satisfaction, and interactive engagement serve as essential pathways to fostering loyalty among youth in the digital economy.

Many companies are realizing the value of retaining existing customers as markets become more competitive, and some have initiated a range of activities to enhance customer loyalty. To achieve a deep commitment, the loyal act of buying or re-using a brand results in the long-term success of a company. The results indicate that acquiring new customers is more expensive than retaining existing customers. Brand loyalty has a great power to drive a strong desire to repurchase or patronize a favored good or service regularly in the future. It can effectively increase their lifetime value and market share. Social media marketing offers unusual possibilities for increasing brand loyalty in terms of behavior and attitude. Grab uses a strategy to build customer loyalty and brand loyalty. For example, it provides frequent interactions and creates personalized environments for customers while fostering their sense of community identity. The purpose of this research is to gain insight into how Grab's social media strategy is helping Malaysian youth increase brand loyalty, with a particular focus on behavioral loyalty as a core engagement mode. This focus aligns with the growing importance of customer satisfaction as a mediating force between trust, social media interaction quality, and loyalty program effectiveness in shaping loyalty outcomes.

Past studies, such as Adam et al. (2020), have explored various aspects of Grab's operations, including customer satisfaction and brand loyalty, which are vital for understanding the factors that contribute to brand loyalty. Similarly, Kee et al. (2021) highlighted Grab's strategic growth and innovation, which are essential in shaping consumer perceptions and loyalty. Buruhanutheen et al. (2019) analyzed critical operational challenges such as safety and pricing, but none have specifically focused on the impact of social media marketing campaigns in brand promotion. The choice of Grab as a case study is particularly important given Grab's prominent presence in the Southeast Asian market and the company's commitment to leveraging social media to reach a younger consumer base. Grab's aggressive use of various online celebrity partnerships, user-generated content, and GrabRewards loyalty programs also provides a valuable platform to study how these approaches shape consumer behavior and brand dependencies. By delving into various social media-driven strategies, the study aims to highlight how social media can be used to foster a more robust and loyal customer relationship in an increasingly competitive market.

The objective of this study is to examine the influence of social media marketing on brand loyalty among Malaysian youth, focusing on the mediating role of customer satisfaction and the combined effects of brand trust, social media interaction quality, and loyalty program engagement. This study is significant because it provides empirical evidence from Malaysia, a rapidly digitalizing emerging market, where social media engagement among youth has become a defining factor of consumer behavior. The novelty of this research lies in integrating these three key constructs into a single conceptual framework, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of how social media marketing strategies foster brand loyalty in a multi-service platform context like Grab. The study contributes to the growing body of knowledge in digital marketing and consumer behavior by identifying the mechanisms through which social media engagement, trust-building, and loyalty programs jointly enhance satisfaction and loyalty. Practically, the findings offer valuable insights for marketers seeking to design data-driven, interactive, and trust-based social media strategies to strengthen long-term customer relationships in highly competitive digital markets.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media marketing has become one of the tools in shaping consumer behavior, particularly among younger generations, because they have been exposed to more advanced technologies and grown up in a technological age. With the emergence of platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok, businesses leverage these channels to build customer engagement, trust, and loyalty. For companies like Grab, the strategy of using social media is vital to building strong relationships with young consumers.

Brand Trust

Brand trust refers to the confidence that consumers place in a brand's reliability, integrity, and ability to deliver on its promises (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). In the service industry, where offerings are largely intangible, trust plays a crucial role in minimizing perceived risks and shaping long-term relationships between consumers and companies (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Trust is developed when customers believe that a brand consistently delivers quality, communicates transparently, and acts ethically, factors that are increasingly important to socially conscious youth consumers.

Ebrahim (2020) highlights that brand trust significantly enhances customer satisfaction, particularly when supported by effective social media engagement and consistent brand messaging. When consumers perceive a brand as dependable and responsible, they experience greater satisfaction with its services and are more likely to form favorable attitudes toward it. This satisfaction, in turn, becomes a pathway to loyalty. Oliver (1999) also emphasizes that satisfaction mediates the link between trust and loyalty, suggesting that trust establishes the emotional foundation upon which loyalty is built.

In the context of Grab, trust manifests through dependable service delivery, transparent pricing, and proactive customer support. Malaysian youth, as digital-native consumers, are likely to value reliability and ethical practices when forming their perceptions of the brand. A trusted brand not only satisfies customers but also encourages repeat usage and advocacy, reinforcing both emotional and behavioral loyalty.

Therefore, based on these theoretical and empirical insights, this study proposes that brand trust positively influences customer satisfaction and brand loyalty, forming the basis for the following hypotheses:

H1: Brand trust has a positive impact on customer satisfaction.
H2: Brand trust has a positive impact on brand loyalty.

Perceived Social Media Interaction Quality

The perceived quality of social media interaction plays a critical role in shaping consumer satisfaction and brand loyalty, particularly in an era where digital engagement defines brand–consumer relationships. High-quality interactions, characterized by relevance, responsiveness, and authenticity, enable brands to remain visible and connected with their audiences. Wang and Zhang (2023) emphasize that consistent, meaningful interactions on social media strengthen the emotional and relational bond between consumers and brands, thereby increasing their propensity toward loyalty. Similarly, Li and Li (2023) note that when consumers perceive social media interactions as reliable and genuine, they develop stronger feelings of familiarity and trust, both of which are essential for building long-term satisfaction and commitment.

Nevertheless, the quality–frequency balance in social media engagement is crucial. Excessive posting may lead to information overload and social media fatigue, reducing user engagement (Park & Lee, 2023). Conversely, infrequent communication may cause a brand to lose relevance in a competitive digital landscape. Choi et al. (2023) argue that sustained consumer interest depends not merely on frequent posting but on delivering valuable, personalized, and well-curated content that resonates with audience expectations.

For Grab, which relies heavily on social media to connect with Malaysian youth, maintaining this balance is particularly important. The target demographic's high level of digital activity requires consistent yet meaningful interactions that enhance brand presence while preventing audience fatigue. Through interactive campaigns, influencer collaborations, and user-generated content, Grab can cultivate stronger emotional engagement, enhance satisfaction, and encourage continued brand loyalty.

Drawing from this theoretical foundation, it is expected that the perceived quality of social media interaction positively influences customer satisfaction and directly strengthens brand loyalty, as expressed in the following hypotheses:

H3: Perceived social media interaction quality has a positive impact on customer satisfaction.
H4: Perceived social media interaction quality has a direct positive impact on brand loyalty.

Loyalty Program Engagement
Loyalty programs are strategic marketing initiatives designed to strengthen consumer commitment by offering rewards to high-value customers. These programs are grounded in the notion that a segment of loyal consumers contributes disproportionately to a company's revenue and profitability. By providing targeted incentives, firms can deepen customer engagement, foster repeat purchases, and stimulate positive word-of-mouth. This reflects the Pareto principle, which suggests that approximately 80% of a company's revenue typically comes from 20% of its core customers (Egan, 2008). Thus, rewarding these key consumers with enhanced value propositions is an effective strategy to increase retention and reinforce long-term brand loyalty.

Despite their popularity, the effectiveness of loyalty programs remains debated. Partch (1994) argues that when such programs become industry norms, they merely escalate operational costs without delivering a sustainable competitive advantage. Similarly, Dowling and Uncles (1997) found that in mature markets, such as the UK grocery sector, loyalty programs have limited influence on fundamental consumer behavior, as customers often view these schemes as standard rather than distinctive.

Conversely, other scholars suggest that loyalty programs can meaningfully enhance brand relationships when strategically designed. Caminal and Matutes (1990) propose that these programs reduce price sensitivity and create switching barriers, thereby reinforcing brand loyalty. Likewise, Kim et al. (1997) note that loyalty initiatives can help manage fluctuations in seasonal demand, such as through airline frequent-flyer programs, by maintaining engagement without increasing marginal costs. Moreover, advanced database technology enables firms to identify and reward their most valuable customers effectively. Bolton et al. (2000) demonstrate that loyalty program members are more resilient to negative perceptions and less likely to switch brands compared to non-members. This indicates that well-structured programs not only incentivize transactions but also cultivate emotional attachment and brand advocacy (O'Brien & Jones, 1995).

For Grab, loyalty programs, such as reward points, cashback offers, or tiered benefits, can serve as strategic tools to enhance satisfaction and long-term commitment among young consumers. By tailoring these programs to user behavior and preferences, Grab can foster both satisfaction and loyalty through personalized value and recognition.
Based on these insights, it is expected that:

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H5: Loyalty program engagement has a positive and significant impact on customer satisfaction.
H6: Loyalty program engagement has a positive and significant impact on brand loyalty.

Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction mediates the relationship between brand trust, social media interaction quality, loyalty program engagement, and brand loyalty. Consumer satisfaction can be defined as the fulfillment of consumer expectations, driven by good service, trust, and engagement levels (Suchánek & Králová, 2015). According to Malik (2012), customer satisfaction consists of both emotional and cognitive aspects. The cognitive aspect involves comparing what customers expect with what they actually experience, while the emotional aspect refers to the positive feelings they associate with the products or services they purchase.

For Grab, satisfaction often stems from dependable services and attractive rewards, which encourage customers to recommend the service to family members and friends. Research shows that satisfied consumers are more likely to return and even recommend the brand to peers due to the element of brand trust (Al-Dmour et al., 2023). This highlights the importance of social media marketing that focuses on building trust, fostering meaningful interactions, and tailoring engagement strategies to enhance brand loyalty.

H7: Customer satisfaction has a positive impact on brand loyalty.

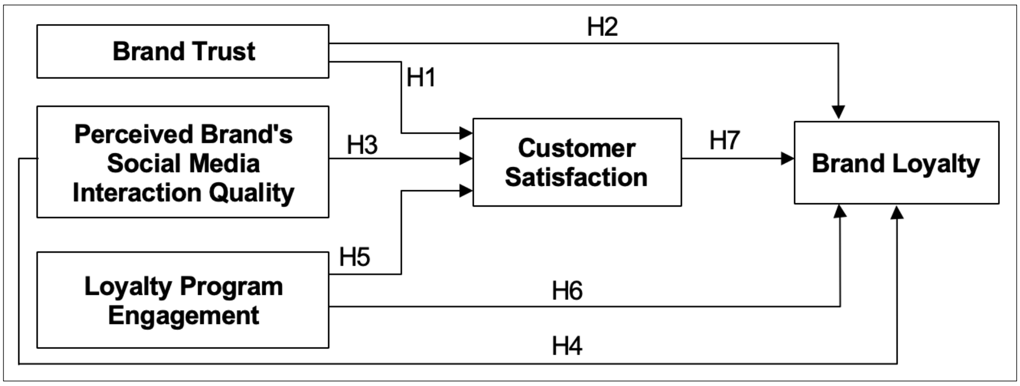
Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty has long been a central topic in marketing research due to its significant implications for business sustainability and competitiveness. According to Oliver (1999), brand loyalty is defined as "a deeply held commitment to re-buy or re-patronize preferred products or services consistently in the future." Similarly, Tabaku and Zerellari (2015) describe brand loyalty as the act of customers repeatedly purchasing the same brand or product, or service category. Both definitions emphasize the concepts of "re-buying" and "repetitive purchasing," indicating that brand loyalty reflects a customer's consistent preference for a particular brand over time.

Loyalty is considered one of the most valuable assets for a firm (Aaker & McLoughlin, 2010). For most organizations, achieving and maintaining brand loyalty represents a major accomplishment that should be integrated into their overall marketing strategy. Strong brand loyalty not only enhances customer retention and satisfaction but also contributes to lower operational costs and increased market leverage. Research has demonstrated that acquiring new customers is substantially more expensive than retaining existing ones, costing approximately five times more (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012). This underscores the strategic importance of focusing on customer retention and loyalty as a means to improve profitability and ensure long-term business success. Moreover, firms that successfully cultivate brand loyalty gain a sustainable competitive advantage, enabling them to outperform competitors and maintain a loyal customer base even in highly competitive markets (Tabaku & Zerellari, 2015).

Based on the theoretical foundations discussed above, Figure 1 presents the conceptual research framework for this study.

Figure 1. Research Framework



RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research design to examine the impact of social media marketing on brand loyalty among Malaysian youth. The quantitative approach was deemed appropriate as it enables the testing of hypotheses and the assessment of structured relationships among variables. Surveys were utilized as the primary tool for systematically and efficiently gathering large volumes of data. Quantitative research is particularly effective for investigating measurable constructs such as trust, engagement, satisfaction, and loyalty, which form the basis of this study's conceptual framework (Creswell, 2014).

Data were collected using an online questionnaire administered via Google Forms, selected for its accessibility and ease of use. The questionnaire link was distributed through widely used social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and Instagram, ensuring effective reach and improved response rates among the target population. This approach aligns with Bryman's (2012) recommendation that online surveys are a practical method for collecting data from geographically dispersed populations while maintaining cost and time efficiency.

Target Population and Sampling

The study targeted Malaysian youth aged 15 to 40 who are active users of Grab and regular participants in social media activities. A non-probability convenience sampling method was employed due to its suitability for exploratory and context-specific research where accessibility is a key consideration. According to Etikan et al. (2016), convenience sampling involves selecting participants based on their availability and relevance to the research objectives. To further refine the selection, a purposive element was applied, ensuring that only respondents who met the criteria of being active Grab users and social media participants were included. This combination allowed for the recruitment of respondents most representative of the study's target demographic and behavioral characteristics.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through a structured online questionnaire distributed across various social media channels, including WhatsApp, Telegram, and Instagram. The questionnaire comprised six key sections: (1) demographic information, (2) brand trust, (3) perceived social media interaction quality, (4) loyalty program engagement, (5) customer satisfaction, and (6) brand loyalty.

Most items employed a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). In addition, multiple-choice questions were included to identify respondents' preferred social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, X, Facebook, Threads, YouTube, TikTok) and content types (e.g., short videos, humorous videos, influencer marketing, user-generated content). A total of 119 valid responses were collected for analysis.

Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data were analyzed using IBM SPSS software to evaluate the relationships among the study variables and test the proposed hypotheses. Descriptive statistics were first employed to summarize demographic characteristics and identify general patterns within the dataset. Subsequent analyses were conducted to assess correlations and regression models, providing insights into how brand trust, social media interaction quality, and loyalty program engagement influence customer satisfaction and brand loyalty. This analytical approach ensured a systematic and reliable examination of the social media marketing factors contributing to Grab's brand loyalty among Malaysian youth.

RESULTS

Table 1. Summary of Respondents' Demographic Profiles (N=119)

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	64	53.8
Female	55	46.2
Age		
15-20 years old	19	16.0
21-25 years old	32	26.9
26-30 years old	31	26.1
31-35 years old	25	21.0
35-40 years old	12	10.1
Occupation		
Public sector	17	14.3
Private sector	33	27.7
Self-employed	25	21.0
Student	30	25.2
Retired/ Homemaker	14	11.8
Monthly income		
Below RM1,500	20	16.8
Do not have income	11	9.2
RM1,500 - RM2,999	25	21.0
RM3,000 - RM4,999	26	21.8
RM5,000 - RM6,999	21	17.6
RM7,000 and above	16	13.4
Average hour on social media		
Less than 1 hour	14	11.8
1-2 hours	36	30.3
3-4 hours	29	24.4
5-6 hours	26	21.8
More than 6 hours	14	11.8

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of respondents, revealing a fairly balanced gender distribution, with males representing 53.8% and females 46.2% of the sample. In terms of age, the majority of participants fall within the 21–25 years old (26.9%) and 26–30 years old (26.1%) categories, indicating that most users are young adults who are likely active technology users. This is followed by respondents aged 31–35 years old

(21.0%), while only 10.1% are aged 35–40, and 16.0% are between 15–20 years old, showing limited participation from teenagers. Regarding occupation, the largest groups are those employed in the private sector (27.7%) and students (25.2%), followed by self-employed individuals (21.0%), indicating diverse employment backgrounds among participants.

In terms of income, respondents are fairly distributed, with 21.8% earning RM3,000–RM4,999, followed closely by 21.0% earning RM1,500–RM2,999, and 17.6% earning RM5,000–RM6,999. Meanwhile, 16.8% earn below RM1,500, and 9.2% report having no income, suggesting a mix of working professionals and students. Regarding social media activity, most respondents spend 1–2 hours daily (30.3%), followed by 3–4 hours (24.4%) and 5–6 hours (21.8%), indicating that a majority of participants are moderately active social media users, while only 11.8% use it for more than six hours daily.

Table 2. Correlation Matrix and Cronbach's Alpha of all study variables

	Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1	Brand Trust	3.94	0.80	0.84				
2	Perceived Brand's Social Media Interaction Quality	4.10	0.74	0.593***	0.84			
3	Loyalty Program Engagement	3.88	0.85	0.715***	0.642***	0.87		
4	Customer Satisfaction	4.07	0.74	0.723***	0.615***	0.696***	0.80	
5	Brand Loyalty	4.12	0.82	0.548***	0.530***	0.671***	0.767***	0.85

Note. N = 119. *** $p < 0.001$

Table 2 shows the results of the correlation and reliability analysis, demonstrating strong and positive relationships among all key variables, indicating that each construct is conceptually consistent and statistically reliable. The mean scores range from 3.88 to 4.12, suggesting that respondents generally expressed high agreement toward all measured factors, particularly brand loyalty (M = 4.12, SD = 0.82) and perceived brand's social media interaction quality (M = 4.10, SD = 0.74). All constructs exhibit satisfactory internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients above 0.80, confirming the reliability of the measurement items.

Correlation results show that brand trust is strongly associated with customer satisfaction ($r = 0.723$, $p < 0.001$) and loyalty program engagement ($r = 0.715$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that customers who trust a brand tend to be more engaged and satisfied. Similarly, customer satisfaction demonstrates the highest correlation with brand loyalty ($r = 0.767$, $p < 0.001$), emphasizing its critical role as a determinant of loyalty. Furthermore, loyalty program engagement also correlates strongly with brand loyalty ($r = 0.671$, $p < 0.001$), implying that active participation in loyalty programs reinforces consumers' attachment to the brand. Overall, these results confirm that trust, interaction quality, and satisfaction work synergistically to strengthen brand loyalty in a social media–driven marketing environment.

Table 3. Regression Analysis Result

	Variables	Customer Satisfaction	Brand Loyalty
1	Brand Trust	0.376***	-0.168

2	Perceived Brand's Social Media Interaction Quality	0.192*	0.024
3	Loyalty Program Engagement	0.245**	0.315***
4	Customer Satisfaction		0.717***
R^2		0.608	0.635
F value		59.501	49.673

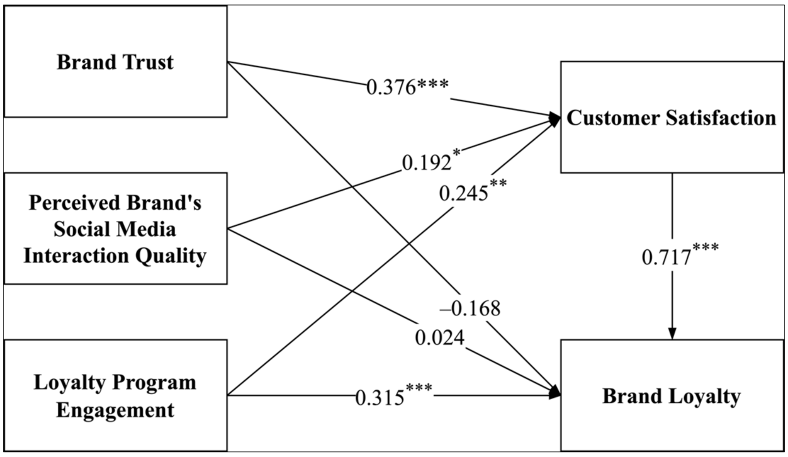
Note. N = 119. * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

The regression analysis presented in Table 3 reveals the relationships among brand trust, perceived brand's social media interaction quality, loyalty program engagement, customer satisfaction, and brand loyalty. The first regression model shows that brand trust, perceived social media interaction quality, and loyalty program engagement significantly influence customer satisfaction, with an R^2 value of 0.608, indicating that 60.8% of the variance in customer satisfaction is explained by these variables. Among them, brand trust demonstrates the strongest positive effect ($\beta = 0.376$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that higher levels of trust in the brand substantially enhance customers' satisfaction. Perceived brand's social media interaction quality also shows a positive and significant impact on customer satisfaction ($\beta = 0.192$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that the quality of a brand's interactions through social media platforms contributes to how satisfied customers feel. Similarly, loyalty program engagement exerts a significant positive influence on customer satisfaction ($\beta = 0.245$, $p < 0.01$), implying that active participation in loyalty programs leads to greater satisfaction among customers.

In the second regression model, the predictors of brand loyalty include brand trust, perceived social media interaction quality, loyalty program engagement, and customer satisfaction, yielding an R^2 value of 0.635. This indicates that 63.5% of the variance in brand loyalty is explained by these variables. Among these predictors, customer satisfaction exhibits the strongest positive and significant influence on brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.717$, $p < 0.001$), demonstrating that satisfied customers are more likely to develop loyalty toward the brand. Loyalty program engagement also shows a significant and positive effect on brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.315$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that involvement in loyalty programs directly strengthens customer commitment to the brand. In contrast, brand trust ($\beta = -0.168$, not significant) and perceived social media interaction quality ($\beta = 0.024$, not significant) do not have significant direct effects on brand loyalty, indicating that their influence on loyalty may be indirect, primarily operating through customer satisfaction.

Based on these results, hypotheses H1, H3, H5, H6, and H7 are supported, while H2 and H4 are rejected. Overall, the findings highlight the central role of customer satisfaction as both an outcome of trust, social media engagement, and loyalty programs, and as a key driver of brand loyalty among Malaysian youth. This suggests that companies aiming to foster long-term loyalty should focus on enhancing customer satisfaction through effective relationship-building strategies, interactive social media communication, and engaging loyalty initiatives rather than relying solely on brand trust or social media presence. The overall results can be seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Theoretical Framework and Path Coefficients



DISCUSSION

Brand Trust as a Foundation for Satisfaction

The findings of this study reinforce the hypothesis that brand trust has a positive and significant influence on customer satisfaction (H1 supported). This outcome is consistent with Ebrahim (2020), who emphasizes that brand trust serves as a central pillar in cultivating satisfaction, particularly in service contexts where interactions are intangible and relational. Trust reduces consumers' perceived uncertainty and enhances their sense of security in engaging with a brand, allowing satisfaction to develop through feelings of reliability and assurance. In the context of service-based industries, trust reflects customers' willingness to depend on the brand's integrity and competence (Lau & Lee, 1999; Moorman et al., 1992), and this reliance becomes the foundation upon which satisfaction is built.

However, the results indicate that brand trust does not directly predict brand loyalty (H2 rejected). This aligns with previous studies suggesting that while trust fosters positive evaluations, it may not automatically translate into behavioral loyalty without the mediating effect of satisfaction (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Oliver, 1999). In other words, customers who trust a brand may feel reassured and content, but loyalty emerges only when that trust evolves into emotional attachment through repeated satisfying experiences. This mediating role of satisfaction highlights the indirect but vital contribution of brand trust to loyalty development.

For brands operating in competitive, service-driven markets such as ride-hailing, establishing and maintaining trust among young consumers is therefore indispensable. Trust can be strengthened through consistent service reliability, transparent communication, and adherence to ethical business practices, all of which signal authenticity and dependability. These elements not only elevate satisfaction but also serve as the emotional and cognitive groundwork for sustained loyalty. Thus, in the Malaysian youth market, brand trust operates less as a direct determinant of loyalty and more as a foundational element that nurtures satisfaction, which subsequently transforms into enduring brand commitment.

The Role of Social Media Interaction Quality

The findings of this study indicate that perceived social media interaction quality significantly enhances customer satisfaction (H3 supported) but does not directly influence brand loyalty (H4 rejected). This pattern underscores that social media interactions, while effective in shaping customers' immediate experiences and perceptions, primarily contribute to loyalty through the mediating role of satisfaction. This aligns with Brodie et al. (2013), who argue that customer engagement through social media enhances experiential value, leading to satisfaction, which subsequently fosters long-term loyalty. High-quality interactions, those perceived as responsive, relevant, and authentic, help consumers feel acknowledged and valued, thereby strengthening their satisfaction with the brand.

In the context of digital service brands, the quality of social media engagement is central to creating meaningful relationships with young consumers. Through interactive campaigns such as polls, hashtag challenges, and real-time responses, brands can cultivate two-way communication that deepens customer involvement. Collaborations with local influencers further enhance this dynamic, as relatable voices can increase credibility and emotional connection among Malaysian youth. However, prior research cautions that over-reliance on influencer marketing may undermine authenticity if audiences perceive endorsements as overly commercial or insincere (Susetyo & Hasan, 2025). Thus, authenticity and transparency remain critical components of social media trust-building efforts.

User-generated content (UGC) also serves as an essential element in fostering engagement quality. Customer reviews, testimonials, and organic posts act as peer endorsements, reinforcing perceived credibility and emotional attachment to the brand (Filleri et al., 2023; Krisprimandoyo et al., 2024). These interactions enable customers to co-create brand meaning, a process that enriches satisfaction and enhances perceived relational value. Nonetheless, brands must balance engagement intensity, as excessive posting or low-quality content may result in social media fatigue, diminishing user enthusiasm and engagement. Maintaining consistency in posting frequency and message quality ensures that social media interactions remain meaningful rather than overwhelming.

Ultimately, the results emphasize that social media's power lies in its ability to shape customer experiences and satisfaction rather than in directly cultivating loyalty. Brands that strategically manage their digital interactions by ensuring authenticity, encouraging user participation, and fostering emotional resonance are more likely to translate engagement into sustained satisfaction, which in turn becomes the foundation of enduring brand loyalty.

Loyalty Program Engagement as a Primary Driver

The results of this study affirm that loyalty program engagement plays a central role in shaping both customer satisfaction and brand loyalty (H5 and H6 supported). This finding underscores the strategic importance of loyalty initiatives as mechanisms for deepening customer–brand relationships, particularly in highly competitive service industries. Consistent with Dowling and Uncles (1997), loyalty programs foster loyalty by offering tangible rewards and symbolic recognition that reinforce the customer's sense of value and belonging. Such programs not only incentivize repeat purchases but also create psychological and emotional bonds that strengthen customers' attachment to the brand. When customers feel acknowledged and rewarded for their engagement, satisfaction naturally increases, and this satisfaction subsequently translates into stronger loyalty intentions.

In the context of ride-hailing services, effective loyalty program engagement can serve as a key differentiator in markets where service offerings are largely homogenous. By providing meaningful incentives, such as exclusive discounts, priority services, or personalized rewards, brands can motivate users to remain active and committed. Beyond transactional benefits, loyalty programs also foster a sense of appreciation and emotional reciprocity, which enhances perceived relationship quality. Studies by Kim et al. (2021) and Kwiatek et al. (2020) further support this, emphasizing that successful loyalty programs build long-term relationships by rewarding engagement behaviors that go beyond mere purchase frequency, such as app usage, referrals, and feedback participation.

Moreover, the integration of data analytics and digital technologies allows brands to personalize loyalty offerings based on customers' preferences and behavioral patterns. By leveraging big data insights, companies can identify high-value customer segments and tailor rewards that align with their motivations and consumption habits. Personalization enhances both the effectiveness and cost efficiency of loyalty programs, ensuring that rewards resonate with users rather than appearing generic. For a brand like Grab, such data-driven strategies can strengthen customer retention without relying on aggressive price competition, helping to sustain profitability while reinforcing long-term loyalty.

Ultimately, the findings highlight that loyalty program engagement functions not only as a transactional mechanism but also as a relational tool that deepens satisfaction and loyalty simultaneously. Through well-designed, data-informed, and emotionally engaging loyalty programs, service brands can cultivate committed customers who remain loyal not because of price advantages, but because they perceive a sustained and personalized relationship with the brand.

Customer Satisfaction as a Mediator of Loyalty

The findings of this study confirm that customer satisfaction plays a pivotal mediating role between various loyalty drivers, such as brand trust, social media interaction quality, and loyalty program engagement, and overall brand loyalty (H7 supported). This aligns with well-established theoretical perspectives, notably Oliver's (1999) model of customer loyalty, which posits satisfaction as a key antecedent that transforms positive perceptions and experiences into enduring loyalty behaviors. Satisfied customers are more likely to develop favorable attitudes, recommend the brand to others, and continue using its services, thereby reinforcing both behavioral and attitudinal loyalty.

In the context of service brands such as Grab, customer satisfaction functions as the emotional and cognitive bridge connecting marketing efforts with actual loyalty outcomes. When customers perceive value through relevant promotions, timely discounts, and context-specific offers, such as festive-season rewards or student exam-period discounts, their satisfaction with the brand experience increases. These initiatives not only enhance perceived fairness and value-for-money but also signal that the brand understands and anticipates customers' situational needs. Likewise, engaging social media campaigns characterized by interactive and entertaining content contribute to emotional satisfaction by fostering a sense of community and connection with the brand.

To sustain and deepen customer satisfaction, personalization and participation are critical. Introducing features such as personalized recommendations and exclusive deals can strengthen customers' sense of being individually valued, which enhances satisfaction and, consequently, loyalty. Moreover, integrating systematic feedback loops, where customers are encouraged to share suggestions and ideas, enables the company to align its services with evolving preferences. This participatory approach not only strengthens satisfaction but also enhances perceived co-creation, a factor that has been shown to reinforce long-term loyalty.

In essence, satisfaction serves as both a psychological outcome and a strategic mechanism through which other marketing efforts exert their influence on loyalty. When customers consistently experience reliability, engagement, and recognition, their satisfaction becomes deeply rooted, transforming transactional interactions into meaningful brand relationships (Somani et al., 2025). For Grab and similar service-oriented brands, investing in continuous satisfaction-building practices ensures that customers remain not only content but also emotionally connected and loyal over time.

Managerial Implications

The findings of this study provide several important managerial insights for service-oriented companies, particularly those operating in the digital and ride-hailing sectors, such as Grab. First and foremost, the results highlight that brand trust is a fundamental driver of customer satisfaction, which in turn fuels brand loyalty. Managers should therefore prioritize initiatives that build and maintain trust through transparent communication, consistent service delivery, and ethical business practices. This could include clear policies regarding pricing, safety, and customer data privacy, factors that are particularly important for digital-native consumers such as Malaysian youth. By demonstrating reliability and integrity, the brand can strengthen satisfaction levels, which eventually translate into loyalty and advocacy.

Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of social media interaction quality as a key determinant of satisfaction. Managers should focus on developing engaging, authentic, and responsive online communication strategies rather than relying solely on promotional content. Social media should be used as a platform for two-way interaction, where customers feel heard, valued, and involved in the brand's narrative. Collaborations with local influencers, when executed authentically, can enhance brand relatability, while user-generated content such as customer reviews and testimonials can foster credibility. However, maintaining authenticity is crucial; over-commercialized or insincere influencer partnerships may erode trust. Companies should also manage posting frequency and ensure content relevance to prevent social media fatigue while maintaining meaningful engagement.

Another critical implication is the significant role of loyalty program engagement in driving both satisfaction and loyalty. Managers should view loyalty programs not merely as discount mechanisms but as relational tools for deepening emotional connections with customers. By leveraging data analytics and customer relationship management (CRM) systems, companies can personalize rewards and experiences according to user preferences, usage frequency, and value contribution. Tailored incentives, such as exclusive access, recognition tiers, or milestone rewards, can reinforce customers' sense of belonging while differentiating the brand from competitors without resorting to price wars. A well-designed, data-driven loyalty program can also optimize resource allocation by focusing on high-value customer segments, ensuring cost efficiency and effectiveness.

Lastly, the results reinforce that customer satisfaction is the central mechanism linking all other factors to loyalty. Managers should therefore adopt a holistic satisfaction-driven strategy that integrates trust-building, meaningful social interactions, and personalized loyalty programs. Practical steps include offering personalized recommendations, providing timely promotional offers aligned with customers' lifestyles or seasons, and establishing active feedback channels that allow customers to suggest improvements. These actions not only enhance satisfaction but also communicate responsiveness and customer-centricity, further solidifying loyalty over time.

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study offer several theoretical contributions to the understanding of customer satisfaction and brand loyalty in digital service contexts. First, the results reaffirm that brand trust serves as a fundamental antecedent of customer satisfaction, highlighting its role as a psychological foundation upon which loyalty is built. Trust does not directly lead to loyalty but operates indirectly through satisfaction, emphasizing that emotional assurance and perceived reliability are precursors to sustained commitment.

Second, the study clarifies the role of social media interaction quality as an experiential construct that influences satisfaction rather than directly driving loyalty. This finding extends the theoretical understanding of customer engagement by showing that interactive and authentic social media experiences primarily enhance satisfaction, which then acts as the pathway toward loyalty.

Third, the significant effect of loyalty program engagement on both satisfaction and loyalty strengthens theoretical perspectives that view loyalty as both behavioral and attitudinal. Loyalty programs contribute not only by offering tangible rewards but also by fostering emotional connection and perceived appreciation, thereby reinforcing relational bonds with customers.

Finally, the confirmation of customer satisfaction as a key mediating variable provides theoretical evidence that satisfaction acts as the central mechanism linking trust, engagement quality, and program participation to loyalty. This positions satisfaction as the critical bridge between marketing activities and long-term customer commitment. Collectively, these findings enrich existing loyalty and relationship marketing frameworks by emphasizing that sustainable loyalty is achieved through trust-based relationships, meaningful engagement experiences, and satisfaction-driven interactions.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the influence of social media marketing on brand loyalty among Malaysian youth, focusing on the roles of brand trust, social media interaction quality, loyalty program engagement, and customer satisfaction. The results revealed that loyalty program engagement emerged as the strongest direct predictor of brand loyalty, while brand trust and social media interaction quality influenced loyalty indirectly through customer satisfaction. These findings highlight that loyalty among young consumers is shaped by a blend of emotional assurance, experiential engagement, and reward-driven motivation.

Brand trust was found to enhance customer satisfaction, demonstrating that when consumers perceive Grab as dependable and transparent, they develop positive evaluations of their experiences. However, trust alone did not directly translate into loyalty, emphasizing the need for consistent satisfaction to bridge this relationship. Social media interaction quality positively affected satisfaction but showed no direct effect on loyalty, suggesting that engaging, authentic, and well-managed social media interactions enhance users' satisfaction, which subsequently strengthens their commitment to the brand.

Loyalty program engagement played a dual role, significantly influencing both satisfaction and loyalty. Personalized incentives and meaningful rewards in GrabRewards effectively increase users' perceived value and encourage repeat usage, while simultaneously creating psychological and financial switching barriers that deter customers from turning to competitors. Meanwhile, customer satisfaction emerged as the strongest mediator, connecting all other variables to brand loyalty and confirming its central role in transforming positive perceptions into long-term behavioral commitment.

Overall, these findings indicate that sustained brand loyalty is built through a combination of trust-based relationships, satisfying user experiences, and incentive-driven engagement. For Grab, maintaining dependable service, fostering interactive and authentic social media engagement, and continuously innovating loyalty programs are key to enhancing customer satisfaction and securing long-term loyalty among Malaysian youth.

From a managerial standpoint, the study suggests that Grab should prioritize trust-building initiatives, strengthen customer feedback mechanisms, and leverage data analytics to personalize rewards and experiences. By integrating trust, engagement, and satisfaction into its strategic approach, Grab can continue to deepen customer relationships and maintain a competitive edge in Malaysia's dynamic digital service landscape.

LIMITATION

It is important to acknowledge the numerous limitations of the current study. To begin with, the sample size was relatively modest. Most of the respondents were young with similar backgrounds. Because the participants were mostly university students, the sample may not represent all Malaysian youth, which could restrict the applicability of the findings to a larger community. Besides, the research relied on self-reported data, which is prone to biases. Deeper insights could be obtained by combining surveys with qualitative observations or interviews. Additionally, this study only focused on delivery services platforms, and the findings may not be generalizable to different industries. Further research can explore the other demographics, target audience, and cultural factors to enrich the understanding of the dynamics of social media marketing and customer loyalty.

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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