Social Media Marketing and Brand Loyalty: Analyzing the Mediating Role of Brand Trust

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Abstract

In today's connected world, social media is a sound business strategy that is embedded in an online network. It allows businesses to create customer engagement by helping them develop their brand, enhance their networking capacity, and increase their customer base. Marketers should take advantage of B2C social media's potential to promote high brand awareness by faster realization of the importance of it as a business-to-consumer (B2C) strategy. Though the impact of social media is increasing, marketers appear to have ignored the full influence of social media. Although companies have taken to social media to improve their consumer and brand loyalty, the issue persists as to how to successfully create brand loyalty on social media. The study has investigated the mediating role of Brand Trust (BT) in the relationship between Social Media Marketing (SMM) and Brand Loyalty (BL). Since the SMM is perceived to be the new world concept being adopted mostly by the new generation (young) customers, the study has also investigated whether age moderates the influence of SMM on BL or whether it is indifferent to the age of the users. Data has been collected on social media users and SmartPls has been used to test the model to find out the association between different variables of the study.

Keywords: Social Media, Brand Trust, Social Media Marketing, Brand Loyalty SEM

JEL Classifications: M30, M31

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1. Introduction

For a long time, marketers have concentrated on creating and retaining brand loyalty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Loyalty is created through a significant level of relationship with a brand. People who are well-satisfied and happy with a product do not want to switch to another company (Coelho et al., 2018). A loyal customer is faithful ,spends a large amount of money with the same brand, remains a customer for a long time , and highly recommends others to become the customers of the company (Zeithmal, 2015). Various campaign strategies have been used to preserve consumer brand loyalty, such as brand elements, conventional marketing mixes, and modern methods, such as sponsorship, online marketing, and social media (Keller, 2008).

In today's connected world, social media is a sound business strategy that is embedded in an online network. It allows businesses to create customer engagement by helping them develop their brand, enhance their networking capacity, and increase their customer base (McKee, 2010). Marketers should take advantage of B2C social media's potential to promote high brand awareness by faster realization of the importance of it as a business-to-consumer (B2C) strategy. It can aid the salesforce as various channels impact buying decisions effectively since people communicate about goods and services they like, and the reviews they get from friends and family are the most important when it comes to buying (Puspaningrum, 2020).

Though the impact of social media is increasing, marketers appear to have ignored the full influence of social media (Edelman, 2010). Although companies have taken to social media to improve their consumer and brand loyalty, the issue persists as to how to successfully create brand loyalty on social media. The present study intends to investigate the factors influencing brand loyalty in social media marketing. Social media has gained popularity in recent times and 625 million users are using the internet and social media in India (India Social Media Statistics, 2021). The penetration of social media has led to the wide use of social media marketing by companies across the world, and the present study has been done with the following objectives:
  • To understand the influence of social media marketing on brand loyalty among consumers
  • To examine the mediating role of brand trust in the relationship between social media marketing and brand loyalty.
  • To understand the moderating role of age in the relationship between social media marketing and brand loyalty.

2. Literature review

2.1 Social Media Marketing (SMM) and Consumer Behavior

"Social media are Internet-based, disentrained, and persistent channels of mass personal communication facilitating perceptions of interactions among users, deriving value primarily from user-generated content." (Carr & Hayes, 2015). SMM is defined "as the process that empowers individuals to promote their websites, products, or services through online social channels and tap into a much larger community that may not have been available via traditional channels" (Erdoğmuş & Çiçek, 2012)

Companies cannot ignore the effects of social media on consumer behavior and their subsequent effects on brands and businesses. Development in IT tools and techniques has enhanced consumerism (Palalic et al., 2020). Social media has been found to influence the social interaction of consumers and thus result in enhanced

brand trust and purchase intention.(Hajli, 2014). Consumer attitudes towards social media can influence attitudes towards the brand (Dwivedi et al., 2020). Companies have been using one-to-one marketing, internet marketing and social media marketing to build and maintain brand loyalty of their customers. A study on review of literature in SMM and consumer behavior identified the key focus areas as: the influence of social media on the consumption patterns of consumers; searching and sharing information; and the impact on consumer attitude towards brands (Alves et al., 2016). A recent study on social media marketing has found that SMM activities relate positively and significantly to consumer brand engagement in all age groups. Hence, the study has established that social media marketing influences consumer behavior. (Hazzam, 2021)

Social media creates different values for companies. It helps in sharing information with the consumers (Baruah, 2012), increasing brand popularity (Al-Sheikh & Hasanat, 2018; Bélanger et al., 2014), increasing sales (Agnihotri et al., 2012), and enhancing trust (Habibi et al., 2014). Since consumers are spending a lot of time on social media and engaging in one-to-one communication with their peers, it has been observed that they engage in enhanced electronic word-of-mouth communication (e-WOM). Customer-other customers' relationships can positively or negatively influence brand trust and may have serious implications for the business activities of companies. A study conducted on Indonesian youths proved that e-WOM, not only has a positive and significant effect on the brand image, but also on brand loyalty. It is also established that the online community also positively and significantly affects brand image and brand loyalty (Budiman, 2021)

2.2 SMM and Brand Loyalty (BL)

Loyalty has been defined as "a deeply held commitment to rebuy or re-patronize a preferred product or service consistently in the future" (Oliver, 1999). Social media provides a unique opportunity for brands to foster their relationships with customers. Studies have shown that social media enhances brand loyalty (Laroche et al., 2013). Laroche et al. (2013) further concluded that brand communities on social media have positive effects on customer- brand relationships. A study done on undergraduate students at Malaysian universities has concluded that online marketing communications, specifically, E- WOM, online communities and online advertisements are effective in promoting brand loyalty and product purchase intention through company websites and social media platforms (Balakrishnan et al., 2014). In a study on social media-based brand communities, it was found that members' active participation significantly influenced brand loyalty directly and indirectly via brand commitment (Kamboj & Rahman, 2016). In Puspaningrum (2020) study on McDonald's consumers in Indonesia, he concluded that social media marketing had an impact on increasing McDonald's brand trust and brand loyalty. Social media marketing elements like brand communities, entertainment, interaction, and customization features have a significant and positive relationship with brand loyalty (Sohail et al., 2020).

Changing consumer behaviour effects brand loyalty and it is pertinent for businesses to consider the impact of social media usage by consumers and the SMM efforts of companies on building brand loyalty. In recent times, SMM has gained the interest of researchers and numerous studies have been conducted on the role of SMM in enhancing brand loyalty (Sohail et al., 2020 ; Puspaningrum, 2020 ; Kamboj & Rahman, 2016). However, the above studies have been done in a limited context and have not studied the mediating role of trust between SMM and BL or the moderating effect of age on the relationship between SMM and BL. The present study will add to the existing body of knowledge in SMM and BL.

2.3 SMM and Brand Trust (BT)

Brand trust is defined as "The confident expectations of the brand's reliability and intentions". (Delgado et al., 2003). The definition was further studied by Delgado & Luis, (2005) and they found that the first dimension of the definition involved the ability of a brand to keep the promises made, and the second dimension addressed the good intentions of the brand towards consumers. Brand and trust elements can't be seen in isolation, and they are comprehended together by the consumers. Companies strive to enhance the trust level of consumers with their brands by working on the brand's reliability and good intentions towards the consumers. There are a number of studies done which establish a positive relationship between SMM and brand trust (Sohail et al., 2020; Ebrahim, 2019; Sanny et al., 2020)

Social media marketing elements like brand communities, entertainment, interaction, and customization features have a significant and positive relationship with brand trust (Sohail et al., 2020). A study done on 287 users who follow telecommunications companies on social media in Egypt revealed that "SMM activities comprise only three dimensions; trendiness, customization and word-of-mouth" (Ebrahim, 2019).

3. Model Development and Hypotheses Formulation

Review of the previous studies provided sufficient literature support to explore the relationship between SMM and BL. Several studies have explored this relationship and suggested that SMM influences the BL (Laroche et al., 2013; Balakrishnan et al., 2014; Sohail et al., 2020). Alternatively, there are a few studies which suggest otherwise and provide evidence highlighting the non-significant influence of SMM on BL. This implies that there remains a gap in understanding this unidirectional relationship, and hence there is a need to further explore the relationship. Hence, our proposed model primarily investigates the total impact of SMM on BL.

Further, it has been observed that the SMM assists in building the Brand Trust (Habibi et al., 2014). This brand trust further influences the brand's loyalty. Hence, SMM has not only direct impact on brand loyalty but also has an indirect effect on it. The proposed model has adapted this concept and has made an effort to investigate the mediating role of BT in the relationship of SMM and BL. Lastly, since the SMM is perceived to be the new world concept being adopted mostly by the new generation (young) customers, it becomes imperative to find out whether age moderates the influence of SMM on BL or whether it is indifferent to the age of the users. For this, the model provides for the moderate impact of age on the direct relationship between SM and BL.

Based on the literature review done in the area of SMM, BT and BL the following hypotheses are proposed for the study:

H1: Social media marketing has a positive influence on brand loyalty among consumers

H2: There is a mediating role of brand trust in the relationship between social media marketing and brand loyalty.

H3: There is a moderating role of age in the relationship between social media marketing and brand loyalty.

The conceptual model, thus framed, is depicted as follows:

Figure 1: Conceptual model
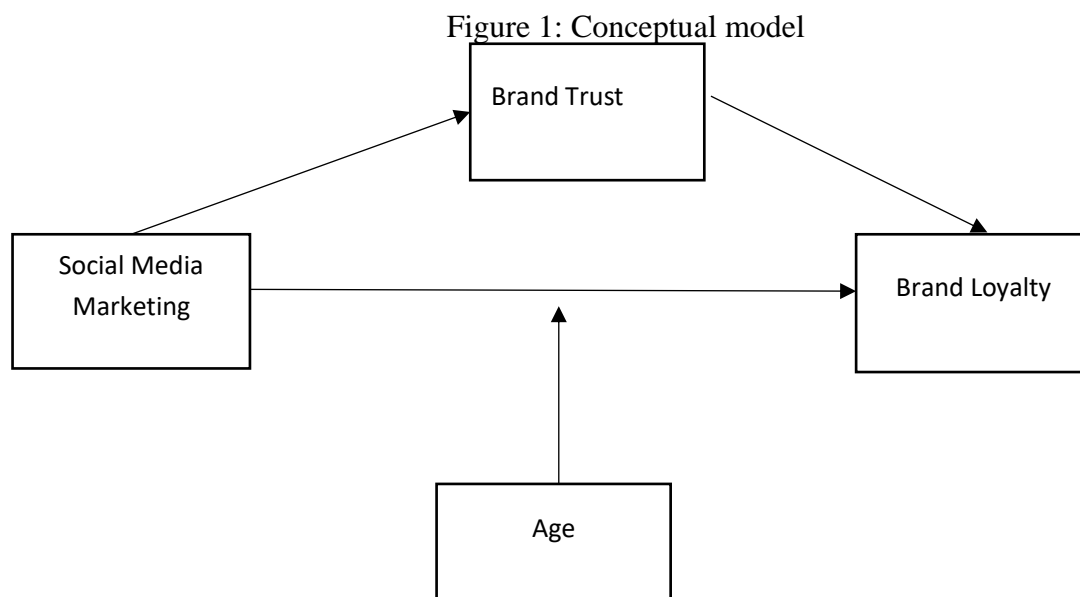
Source: Author's Own Work

4. Methods

This study forms an exploratory study as the investigations are still in the early stages. The study is based on descriptive design, as it tends to analyze the behavior of the consumers. The constructs in the study are Social Media Marketing (SMM), Brand Loyalty (BL), Brand Trust (BT) ,and Age. The four indicators for SMM are SMM1, SMM2, SMM3 & SMM4 which have been adopted from the study of Erdoğmuş & Çiçek, (2012) . Indicators BL1, BL2, BL3, BL4, BL5 and BL6 for the construct Brand Loyalty have been adopted from the study of Sohail et al., (2019); Yoo et al., (2000). Three indicators of Brand Trust i.e., BT1, BT2 & BT3 have been adopted from the study of Chaudhuri & Holbrook, (2001). Therefore, the proposed model with its indicators is depicted in Figure 2. 400 questionnaires were distributed in selected cities of India, and 350 responses were analyzed after filtering out incomplete responses. The sampling technique used was non-probability (convenience sampling) technique. The procedures used to analyse the data for the purposes of addressing and answering the research hypotheses were : Preliminary Data Screening based on univariate statistical analysis; Cronbach alpha for test of reliability; Structural Equation Modeling using SmartPLS (Used for PLS path modeling). Demographic variables such as age, gender, and education were subject to descriptive analysis in terms of understanding the demographic details of survey participants. The Cronbach alpha coefficient was used to assess the reliability of the instruments adopted in this research. Cronbach's (1951) coefficient alpha is a formula which examines the internal consistency of a multi-item measure using the split-halves method and incorporates all possible ways of splitting a sample in half. A low coefficient alpha indicates that the combination of items did not capture the construct well and did not share the common core of the construct (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). PLS path modeling is widely applied in business and social sciences in order to predict the likely behavior of endogenous "latent variables and to estimate and test relationships between latent variables (causal analysis)" (Hair et al., 2011). In the present study, smartPLS was used to test the research hypothesis.

Figure 2: Proposed Model
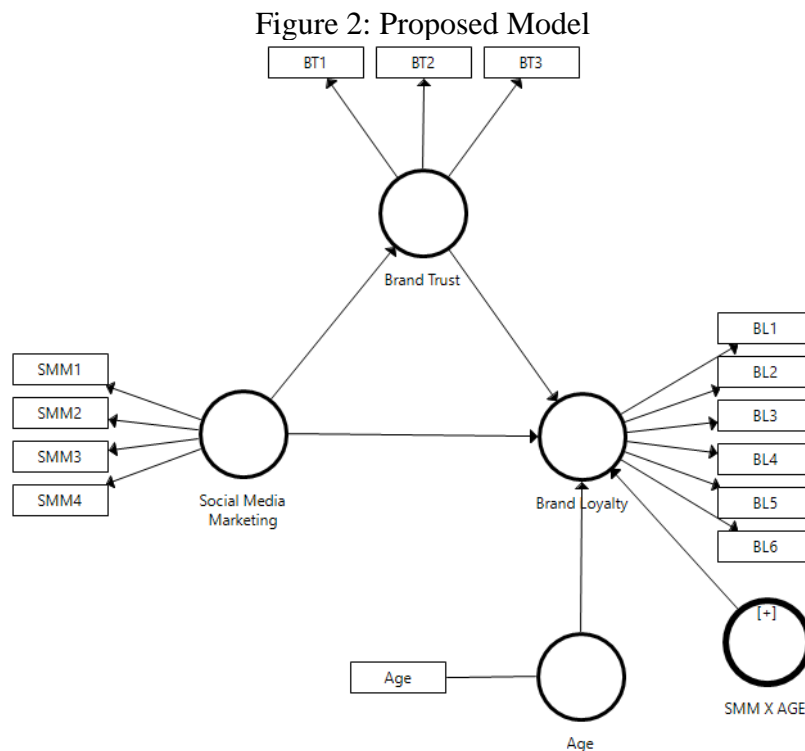
Source: Author's Own Work

5. Data Analysis

5.1 Demographic details

Table 1: Demographic Details

Gender	Frequency	Percent (%)
Male	176	50.28
Female	174	49.72
Age Group	**Frequency**	**Percent (%)**
10-20 Years	43	12.28
20-30 Years	32	9.14
30-40 Years	185	52.85
40-50 Years	15	4.28
50-60 Years	60	17.14
60 Years and Above	15	4.28
Education	**Frequency**	**Percent (%)**
Secondary School	0	12.28
Higher Secondary School	27	7.71
Graduate	156	44.57
Post Graduate	124	35.42

Source: Author's Own Work

As evident in Table 1, there were 50.28% male respondents and 49.72% female respondents in the survey. The majority of the respondents were in the age category of 30-40 years old (52.85%) and were graduates (44.57%).

5.2 Measurement Model

To analyze the data, SmartPLS3.0 was used. The measurement model and the structural model were analyzed separately. The data was tested for its reliability and validity, and it was found that the value obtained supports the internal construct reliability and validity. Fornell & Larcker, (1981) criteria provided satisfactory discriminant validity. The results for the reliability and validity tests are depicted in Table 2 and Table 3:

Table 2: Reliability and Validity

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Brand Loyalty	0.915	0.916	0.934	0.702
Brand Trust	0.793	0.796	0.879	0.707
Social Media Marketing	0.897	0.898	0.928	0.764

Source: Author's Own Work

The finding provides that the value of Cronbach's Alpha is above the threshold of 0.7 for all the three constructs, i.e., Brand Loyalty, Brand Trust and Social Media Marketing. Thus, the reliability is established even if the value of Composite Reliability is above the minimum acceptable value of 0.7 . It was also found that the value of AVE is above the acceptable threshold of 0.5, indicating that more than 50% of the variables in the construct are successfully explained by its items. Therefore, convergent validity is established. Additionally, discriminant validity was tested by using Fornell & Larcker, (1981) model and the result is depicted in Table 3.

Table 3: Discriminant Validity

Construct	Brand Loyalty	Brand Trust	Social Media Marketing
Brand Loyalty	0.838		
Brand Trust	0.749	0.841	
Social Media Marketing	0.775	0.779	0.874

Source: Author's Own Work

The result suggests that all the diagonal values are greater than the off-diagonal values. Hence, establishing discriminant validity. Additionally, the factor loading result suggests that all the items are loaded to their respective constructs only and the value above 0.7 indicates that the items contribute to their respective constructs significantly. The factor loading distribution is provided in Table 4.

Table 4: Factor Loading

Items	Brand Loyalty	Brand Trust	Social Media Marketing
BL1	0.793		
BL2	0.85		
BL3	0.845		
BL4	0.852		
BL5	0.842		
BL6	0.842		
BT1		0.865	
BT2		0.85	
BT3		0.807	
SMM1			0.877
SMM2			0.872
SMM3			0.875
SMM4			0.871

Source: Author's Own Work

5.3 Model Fit indices

Though the model fit indices are based on a comparison of covariance matrices, previous literature does not suggest model fit indices in the SmartPLS since it is not a covariance-based SEM. However, Henseler et al., (2014), suggested that SRMR can also be used as a model fit criterion for Smart PLS . SRMR can be understood as the difference between observed and model implied correlation, the value of which should be less than 0.08 for a good model fit (Hu & Bentler,1998).

Another fit measure, Normed Fit Index (NFI) compares the chi square value with the saturated model value (Bentler & Bonett, 1980). Previous literature has not explained meaningfully how the value of Chi square of Smart PLS differs from that of CB-SEM. Thus, NFI index is used for the model fit in SmartPLS. Lohmöller, (1989) discussed the use of NFI in PLS. A closer value of NFI to 1 indicates a good model fit.

The value of SRMR and NFI for the proposed model was calculated by using Consistent PLS Algorithm in SmartPLS. The result is mentioned in Table 5 below:

Table 5: Model Fit

	Saturated Model	Estimated Model
SRMR	0.0259	0.0261
d_ULS	0.0704	0.0716
d_G	0.0737	0.0736
NFI	0.9582	0.9578

Source: Author's Own Work

The model fit indices suggest that the model is a good fit as the value of SRMR of the estimated model is 0.0259 which is less than the 0.08 (Hu & Bentler,1998). Similarly, the value of NIF is 0.9578, which is above the minimum threshold of 0.9 indicating a good model fit. As a result, it can be concluded that the proposed model is a good fit.

5.4 Analyzing Mediating impact

In order to explore the total direct, direct and indirect (mediating) effect between SMM and BL, a bootstrapping process with 5000 sub sample was applied. The result is as below:

Table 6: R^2 Value

Relationship	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P Values
SMM -> BL	0.7759	0.774	0.0353	21.9866	0

Source: Author's Own Work

Table 7: Total Direct Effect

	R Square	R Square Adjusted
Brand Loyalty	0.602	0.6008

Source: Author's Own Work

The finding (Table 6) suggests that total direct relationship between the SMM and BL is positive and significant (t>1.96, p<0.05). The R2 Value (Table 7) for this relationship indicates that 60.2% of the variance in BL is explained successfully by SMM. As a result, we can conclude that Social Media Marketing significantly impact the Brand Loyalty of the customers, and the finding supports our first hypothesis (H1).

The result for the mediating role of Brand Trust was analyzed, and it was found that after introducing the BL into the relationship, the value of Total Direct effect of SMM and BL came down, indicating the significant impact of BL on the relationship. The result for the relationship is highlighted in Table 8.

Table 8: Total Effect

Relationship	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P Values
BT -> BL	0.3681	0.3664	0.0507	7.256	0
SMM -> BL	0.4887	0.4897	0.0521	9.3836	0
SMM -> BT	0.7789	0.7779	0.0323	24.1446	0

Source: Author's Own Work

Table 9: R^2 Value

	R Square	R Square Adjusted
Brand Loyalty	0.6546	0.6526
Brand Trust	0.6066	0.6055

Source: Author's Own Work

The result indicates that the relationship between SMM and BT, BT and BL, and SMM and BL is significant. Hence, this indicates the significant role of mediation in the relationship between SMM and BL. Additionally, the R2 value of BL has shown an increase from 60% to 65%, which indicates that after introducing the mediator, the percentage of total variance explained by the independent variables has increased (Table 9). However, since the direct relationship between SMM and BL is also significant, it can be concluded that the mediation is partial.

Table 10: Total Indirect Effect

Relationship	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P Values
Social Media Marketing -> Brand Loyalty	0.2867	0.2851	0.0421	6.8141	0

Source: Author's Own Work

The total indirect effect suggests that 28% of the direct effect is absorbed by the indirect effect of BT (Table 10). Hence, the Variance Accounted for (VAF) is 28%. As per Hair et al., (2014), the minimum threshold for mediating is 20%, below which there is no mediation. Above the value of 80%, we have full mediation, and any value between these two indicates partial mediation. Hence, we can conclude that Brand Trust (BT) partially mediates the relationship between SMM and Brand Loyalty. The finding supports our second Hypothesis.

5.5 Analyzing Moderating impact
In order to analyze the moderating role of Age on the relationship between SMM and BL, we have used Multi-Group Analysis (MGA) approach in Smart PLS. The age was categorized as High age group (HAG) (Age above 45 years) and low age group (LAG) (Age below 45 years). The path coefficient for both categories is provided in Table 11 and Table 12 respectively.

Table 11: Path Coefficient (Higher Age Group)

Relationship	Path Coefficients Original	Path Coefficients Mean	STDEV	t-Value	p-Value
BT -> BL	0.3604	0.3603	0.1472	2.4479	0.0147
SMM -> BL	0.4145	0.4079	0.1173	3.5344	0.0004
SMM -> BT	0.7005	0.6782	0.1327	5.2774	0

Source: Author's Own Work

Table 12: Path Coefficient (Lower Age Group)

Relationship	Path Coefficients Original	Path Coefficients Mean	STDEV	t-Value	p-Value
BT -> BL	0.3719	0.3735	0.0554	6.7157	0
SMM -> BL	0.5045	0.5005	0.0559	9.0173	0
SMM -> BT	0.7978	0.7939	0.0377	21.1598	0

Source: Author's Own Work

The findings suggest that the effect from BT to BL is almost equal in both age groups (LAG =0.37 and HAG = 0.36). The effect of SMM on BL (LAG = 0.5045 and HAG = 0.4145) and of SMM on BT (LAG = 0.7978 and HAG = 0.7005) was found to be higher in LAG in comparison to HAG. All the paths were found to be significant (t>1.96, p<0.05). Hence, we find that there is a difference in the LAG and HAG in the test path i.e., SMM to BL. Next, we investigate whether this difference is significant, which would inform about the moderating role of Age in the proposed relationship. The parametric test provides information regarding the significance. The findings are given in Table 13.

Table 13: Parametric Test

Relationship	Path Coefficients-diff (HAG - LAG)	t-Value (|HAG vs LAG|)	p-Value (HAG vs LAG)
Brand Trust -> Brand Loyalty	-0.0116	0.091	0.9276
Social Media Marketing -> Brand Loyalty	-0.09	0.7804	0.4357
Social Media Marketing -> Brand Trust	-0.0973	0.9537	0.3409

Source: Author's Own Work

The result suggests that the difference between the LAG and HAG is not significant in any of the relationships (t<1.96 and p>0.05). Hence, we can conclude that the Age does not moderate the relationship between Social Media Marketing and Brand Loyalty. Additionally, it does not moderate any other relations in the model as differences in any of the relations were not found to be significant.

5.6 Hypothesis Testing
The proposed hypothesis was tested, and the result is as below:

Table 14: Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Relationship	Original Sample	t value	p value	Remark
H1	SMM------------> BL	0.7759	21.98	0.00	Supported
H2	SMM---> BT----->BL	0.2867	6.81	0.00	Supported
H3	SMM----> BL		**LAG vs HAG**		
		p1-p2	**t value**	**p value**	**Remark**
		-0.09	0.784	0.4357	Not Supported

Source: Author's Own Work

The result suggests that there is a direct relationship between the Social Media Marketing and Brand Loyalty, the relationship is positive and significant (Table 14). Hence, the statistical test supports our first hypothesis. The analysis provided support for the mediating role of brand trust in the relationship between Social media marketing and Brand Loyalty. The mediation was found to be partial. Hence, the finding supports our second hypothesis regarding the mediating role of Brand trust in the relationship. Lastly, the moderating role of Age in the relationship was tested using Multi Group Analysis (MGA). Though the result suggests the difference between two age groups in the relationship of SMM and BL, the parametric analysis suggests that the difference so obtained is not significant. Hence, the finding does not support the moderating role of age in the relationship. Thus, our third hypothesis was not supported.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of the study was to study the impact of social media marketing on brand loyalty among consumers. The study is also intended to assess the mediating role of brand trust in the relationship between social media marketing and brand loyalty and the moderating role of age in the relationship between social media marketing and brand loyalty. The results of the study have contributed effectively towards enriching the existing knowledge base and practice. Social media marketing will certainly redefine the traditional ways of building brand loyalty among consumers ,so the findings of study are timely and relevant to provide future directions. The findings will be helpful to other Asian countries (Thailand, Burma, Bangladesh etc.) as SMM is growing in these countries, and companies have started using social media for building brand loyalty.

The study has established that social media marketing success depends on how advantageous it is for the consumers. Relevant content, availability of different social media platforms and popularity also affect social media marketing. Thus, companies may work on creating relevant content highlighting advantages for the customers to ensure the success of social media marketing campaigns. The study has further proved that brand trust is affected by meeting expectations, dependability and satisfaction. Brand trust has to be built over a long period of time, and companies should be consistent in meeting expectations of consumers. The study concludes that there is a direct relationship between the Social Media Marketing and Brand Loyalty. The relationship is positive and significant. It was also established that there is a mediating role of brand trust in the relationship between social media marketing and brand loyalty. The study could not find any moderating role of age in the relationship.

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