



The Intervening Impact of Social Media Marketing on Brand Loyalty: A Multi Group Analysis in Customer Demographics

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ABSTRACT

Purpose- The purpose of this paper is to investigate and examine the impact of perceived social media marketing to customer engagement and brand loyalty. An attempt has been made to explore and report the intervening role of customer engagement between social media marketing and brand loyalty among online purchasers.

Design/methodology/approach- A self-administered and structured questionnaire was developed and administered to a random sample of 233 online shoppers who purchased products/services online in the last 30 days. The study deployed the PLS – SEM to test the conceptual model since it is less stringent in working with non-normal data.

Findings- Social media marketing has a significant positive impact on the customer engagement, which result in high brand loyalty among the online shoppers in the Maldives. The study reported that the customer engagement intervenes the relationship between social media marketing and brand loyalty as a mediator and not as a moderator. The study also identified a partial mediation of customer engagement among various customer groups based on their demographics.

Originality/value- This study re- confirms the relevance of social media in modern day marketing decisions. It provides insights to the marketers to understand the potential of social media marketing in enhancing customer engagement and attaining brand loyalty.

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1. Introduction

Social media is a group of internet-based applications that create the foundation of web 2.0 ideology and technology (Bukhori et al., 2022). It allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) which consists of weblogs, social blogs, podcasts, videos, and pictures (Ahuja & Galvin, 2003). It is reported that the expansion of social media users attracted over 97% of businesses to appear on social media (Stelzner, 2014). Therefore, it is to be noted that customer engagements in social media platforms is an important challenge for most marketers due to the overwhelming presence of immediate competitors and wider choices (Menéndez-Benito, 2015). These platforms are highly sensitive and minor reviews on the brands will have far-reaching consequences in the highly competitive business environments (Qin & Men, 2019). Most of the businesses have joined the social media for increasing their customer engagements through acquiring new customers. However, the question of how such engagements creates brand loyalty is still remains as a black box.

A number of researches done on the effect of social media marketing on brand loyalty across different industrial sectors in different parts of the world (Gamage et al., 2022; Hilal, 2021; Ibrahim & Aljarah, 2021; Salem & Salem, 2019; Wantini & Yudianta, 2019). However, the existing literature fails to address the impact of customer group differences on the influence of Social Media Marketing (SMM) on customer engagement and brand loyalty. It is important to understanding the phenomenon of customer engagements in social media platforms and its impact on brand loyalty to design marketing strategies in the modern day customer management. Similarly, understanding the impact of perceived social media marketing activities in predicting brand loyalty will be highly useful for the marketers while designing various campaigns through social medias. Therefore, the current study aimed to fill up the conceptual gap by examining the intervening role of customer engagement between social media marketing and brand loyalty. It is necessary for a country like Maldives, having many businesses running online, to recognize the importance of social media marketing in creating customer engagement and maintaining brand loyalty. This study also stands identical and unique as compared to the past studies because it attempts to examine the prediction of relationship between the variables (Social media marketing to brand loyalty, customer engagement to brand loyalty and social media marketing to customer engagement) based on the customer demographics such as gender, age, frequency of use of social media applications, social media page subscription, and social media preference.

2. Literature review

2.1 Perceived social media marketing activities and customer engagements.

Being a convenient and interactive channel, many firms depend on social media to reach customers with their brands. It helps businesses to deliver the information to target groups and to make customer engagements through entertainments to generate favorable perception about the brand. In short, social media is an effective medium to the marketers to tap the public related information that most people search and demand (Valentini, 2015). Moreover, various social media platforms help the businesses to provide relevant details to create loyal customer groups. Furthermore, social media provides relevant information and make easiness to find required details (Laroche, 2013) and create customer engagement. Previous studies in brand management indicated that marketers can enhance brand loyalty by customer-brand relationships (Dessart et al., 2020; Phan & Ghantous, 2013) through customer engagement (Wongsansukcharoen, 2022). Businesses need to generate emotional connection with its customers through continuous engagement and active relationship (Mollen, 2010). Existing literature has reported that the customer engagement, as a psychological process, builds brand loyalty among various customer groups (Erdoğan and Çiçek, 2012; Khan et al., 2019; Wongsansukcharoen, 2022; Odhiambo, 2012). In addition, various activities in the social media platforms enhances customer engagement which in turn strengthens customer loyalty (Harrigan et al., 2017; Vacas de Carvalho et al., 2020; Algharabat et al., 2020). Therefore, the study hypothesized that the social media marketing activities will influence the customer engagement.

H1: Social Media Marketing Influences Customer Engagement

2.2 Customer Engagement and Brand Loyalty

Customer engagement in the context of social media is attributed to a process through which the customers cognitively valence and emotionally and behaviorally react towards all brand activities conducted over social media platforms (Hollebeek et al., 2014). It is the interaction of customers with the brands that helps to get experiences with the major aspects of the preferred brands (Brie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013). Previous studies reported that high customer engagement with the brands leads to brand loyalty (Veloutsou, 2015; Harrigan et al., 2017; Hazzam, 2022; Wibowo et al., 2020; Wongsansukcharoen, 2022). Similarly, researchers explored the mediation role of customer engagements in different business contexts (Bergel, 2019). However, few studies examined the psychological processes in customer engagement showing inconsistent findings. Customer engagement may not constitute brand loyalty as it mainly arises due to the changes in customer characteristics and unique preferences of individual customers. Moreover, the customers prefer to accept comments from businesses that they have emotional bonds and trust (Tao, Cheng, Zhang, & Nee, 2017). This study has an aim to reprove the conceptual stands in customer engagement and brand loyalty relationship as well.

The commonly used definition of brand loyalty is that “it is a consistent consumer preference for making purchases of the same brand in certain products or services and high loyalty to the brand greatly affects the sale of a brand” (Pratiwi et al., 2021). It’s a bond that customer develops over the time for specific brand (Soh, 2012). Different manifestation for brand loyalty has been derived from various literatures due to its customer specific psychological assessments such as attitudinal and behavioral instinct developed in customer mind (Lee D. , 2006). Brand loyalty has gained paramount importance among various marketers for their existence and performance in the competitive business environment (Dwivedi, 2015). Studies have shown that both social media marketing and customer engagement have influence on brand loyalty (Hazzam, 2022; Muchardie et al., 2016) but so far no attempt has been made to explore the mediating and moderating roles of customer engagement in predicting the relationship between social media marketing and brand loyalty. Therefore, we expected that customer engagements may vary in different customer groups and proposed the following hypotheses.

H2: Customer Engagement Influences Brand Loyalty

H3: Customer Engagement Moderates Social Media Marketing in Predicting Brand Loyalty

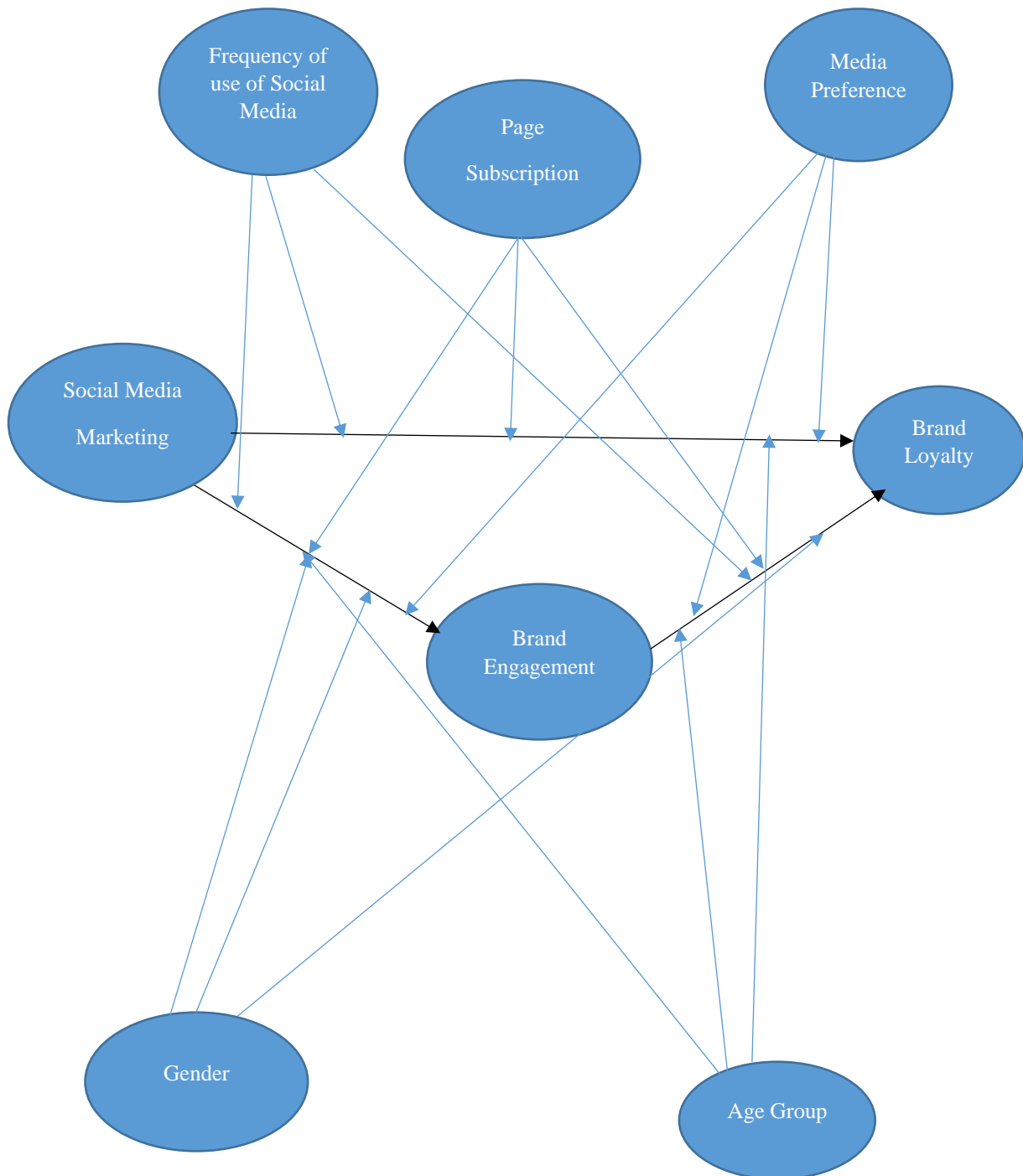
H4: Customer Engagement Mediates Social Media Marketing to Brand Loyalty

2.3 The role of customer characteristics

Most of the studies in consumer behavior highlights the intervention of customer characteristics in predicting various behavioral outcomes (Hsu, 2007; Henrique, 2015). This study has grouped the customers based on their demographic characteristics such as gender, age, frequency of use of social media applications, social media page subscription, and social media preference to explore the path variations among the variables. There are studies such as (Das & Subudhi, 2016; Hazzam, 2022; Kamboj & Rahman, 2016) which analyzed the relationship between the three variables: Social Media Marketing, Customer Engagement and Brand loyalty but there need to have a better clarity on the influence which gender, age, frequency of use of social media applications, social media page subscription, and social media preference can bring to these relationships. There were no attempts made to explore the variation on the impact of customer engagement between social media marketing and brand loyalty on different customer groups based on the demographic characteristics stated above. In line with the above discussion the study hypothesized the following.

H5: The Impact of Customer Engagement between Social Media Marketing and Brand Loyalty varies in different customer groups.

3. Conceptual Framework



4. Methodology

This study is pursued in the context of online shoppers in the Maldives who actively engaged in social media platforms. The study has received responses from a random sample of 233 respondents who bought products through online in the last 30 days and engages in various social media platforms without any incentives. The study has used a combination of random and snowball sampling to identify the sample respondents. A structured questionnaire was designed to collect the data required to test the hypothesis and empirically validate the conceptual model. The questionnaire consists of adapted scales of perceived Social Media Marketing (Singh, 2016), Customer Engagement (Barger, Peltier, & Schultz, 2016) and Brand Loyalty (Tung, Dung, & Thai, 2018). The instrument has been

initially deployed with 30 customers to check the reliability and validity at its first instance. Thereafter, the relevant items in the context of the study has been retained. Before the final data collection, the instrument has been undergone for face and content validity with 5 academicians and 5 customers so as to ensure the items will measure the respective constructs under study. In addition, the study has been deployed the PLS – SEM in testing the model since it is less stringent in working with non-normal data (Hair et al., 2014) irrespective of the sample size. Besides, the theoretical framework was backed with literatures for testing the predictive influences of SMM to CE and thereby BL (Hair et al., 2019).

4.1 Description of the Sample

The sample profile is summarized in Table 1. The valid respondents consist of 134 Female and 99 Male. Sufficient representation from various age group also gathered that includes 75 respondents belong to 18-24 years (32% Young), 89 respondents belongs to 25-34 years (38% Middle) and 69 respondents belongs to above 35 years (30% older groups). All respondents use social media and 113 respondents (48%) belongs to High Users group who always login to social media platforms and 120 respondents (52%) belongs to Moderate Users group who occasionally visits social media platforms. Among the total respondents, 105 respondents (45%) subscribed the social media pages of their brand and always get updates on various offers and schemes but 128 respondents (55%) didn't subscribe the social media page. Most of the customers uses Face book (n=110, 47%) followed by Instagram (n=74, 32%) and other social media platforms (49, 21%). In short, the researchers get good representation of demographics from respondents that helps to test if there any significant variations in each group for predicting Brand Loyalty.

5. Analysis

Table 1. Customer Demographics

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Female	134	57.5
Male	99	42.5
Total	233	100
Age Group		
18-24	75	32
25-34	89	38
35 and Above	69	30
Total	233	100
Frequency of Use		
High User	113	48
Moderate User	120	52
Total	233	100
SM Page Subscription		
Subscribed	105	45
Unsubscribed	128	55
Total	233	100
Preferred social media		
Facebook	110	47
Instagram	74	32
Other Platforms	49	21
Total	233	100

The **Table 2** provides the Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability and average variance extracted (AVE) scores as measures for internal consistency and convergent validity (Hamza & Zakkariya, 2014). All measurement items had significant extractions from the manifest items as the AVE's are greater than the threshold value of 0.5 so that the latent variable explain more than half of the variance of its measurement indicators. The Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability coefficients are greater than 0.7 and it is concluded that the measuring instrument is reliable and valid for further analysis (Hamza & Rahul, 2017).

Table 2

	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Brand Loyalty	0.715	0.798	0.611
Customer Engagement	0.796	0.816	0.657
Perceived Social Media Marketing	0.739	0.797	0.682

5.1 Testing procedure

This study applies partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) (Sarstedt M. , 2017) ; (Gudergan, 2018), using the software SmartPLS3 to test the hypothesis. In order to test the intervening role of customer demographics as envisaged in Hypothesis 5, PLS-Multi Group Analysis have been used to test the differences and significances of such differences if any among the subgroups (Gudergan, 2011) ; (Sarstedt M. &. , 2010); (Schwaiger, 2011). This method allows to compare the intervention or customer engagements in various demographic subgroups in the sample.

5.2 Results

Table 3 shows the test results of hypothesis 1 and 2. The Influences of Social Media Marketing to Customer Engagement is significant as the path coefficient (0.402) is significant as the t-statistics. 7.175 is above the threshold value of 1.96. Besides, the p-Value vouches the significance of this path. Similarly, the hypothesis 2, the influences of Customer Engagement to Brand Loyalty also significant as the path coefficient (0.671) shows significant impact as per the t-statistics and p-Value ($t=17.208$, $p=0$). Accordingly, it is concluded the Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 has been proved statistically.

Table 3

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics ((O/STDEV))	P Values
Customer Engagement -> Brand Loyalty	0.671	0.679	0.039	17.208	0
Perceived Social Media Marketing -> Customer Engagement	0.402	0.424	0.056	7.175	0

5.2.1 Customer Engagement Moderates Social Media Marketing to Brand Loyalty

The **Table 4** shows the results of the hypothesized moderation role of Customer Engagement among the impact of perceived Social Media Marketing to Brand Loyalty. The t-statistic and p-Value of the moderating path is not significant ($\beta=0.051$, $t=0.789 < 1.96$, $p\text{-Value } 0.43 > 0.05$). However, the impact of SMM to BL ($\beta=0.325$, $t=4.65$, $p\text{-Value } 0$) and CE to BL ($\beta=0.57$, $t=9.818$, $p\text{-Value } 0$) shows significant influences. Hence, it is concluded that the Customer Engagement doesn't moderate perceived Social Media Marketing in predicting Brand Loyalty. Therefore, the study rejects the hypothesis 3.

Table 4. Moderation

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics ((O/STDEV))	P Values
Customer Engagement -> Brand Loyalty	0.57	0.568	0.058	9.818	0
Moderating Effect 1 -> Brand Loyalty	0.051	0.051	0.064	0.789	0.43
Perceived Social Media Marketing -> Brand Loyalty	0.325	0.33	0.07	4.65	0

5.2.2 Customer Engagement mediates Social Media Marketing to Brand Loyalty

To investigate the mediation effect of Customer Engagement on the relationship between perceived Social Media Marketing and Brand Loyalty, bootstrapping analysis was applied using 95% of confidence interval and 5000 subsamples in order to find out PLS-SEM Means and Standard Deviations. The results of mediating effect of any of the variables over the relationship between SMM to BL can have three options such as no mediation, full mediation and partial mediation depends on p-Values and t-statistics (Huang, Afsharifar, & Veen, 2015). If there is no direct relationship between SMM and BL but shows significant relation between Customer Engagement to Brand Loyalty, we can

conclude as full mediation effect. If the direct relationship between SMM to BL is significant and the Customer Engagement to BL is not significant, we can conclude no mediation. While both SMM and Customer Engagement (Mediator) shows significant influence towards the BL, it is to be concluded as partial mediation (Klärner, Sarstedt, Hock, & Ringle, 2013).

Table 5

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (O/STDEV)	P Values
Direct Effect					
Customer Engagement -> Brand Loyalty	0.556	0.556	0.058	9.556	0
Perceived Social Media Marketing -> Brand Loyalty	0.306	0.31	0.071	4.308	0
Perceived Social Media Marketing -> Customer Engagement	0.373	0.397	0.06	6.21	0
Indirect Effect					
Perceived Social Media Marketing -> Brand Loyalty	0.208	0.22	0.036	5.695	0
Total Effect					
Perceived Social Media Marketing -> Brand Loyalty	0.514	0.53	0.06	8.597	0

Table 5 shows the results of mediation analysis. It indicates the direct and indirect effects of exogenous, mediator and endogenous variables with the t-statistics and p-Value. Both direct effect (0.306, t=4.308) and indirect effect (0.208, t=5.695) of SMM to BL is significant as the t-statistics and p value is acceptable. It means, the total effect of SMM to BL (0.514, t=8.597) is contributed through customer engagement (0.208, t=5.695) as a mediator. Therefore, it is concluded that Customer Engagements partially mediates the relationship between SMM to BL and partially proves the hypothesis 4.

5.3 PLS-MGA Gender (Male and Female)

The generalization of the results in hypothesis 4 will be meaningless if we cannot explore the varying impacts of partial mediation in subgroups of customer demographics. The test results of hypothesis 4 is the combined effect of all customer groups. Hence, we attempted to explore if this intervention is significant in various sub groups. In order to test this, we run partial least squares –multi group analysis using Smart PLS (Jedidi, Jagpal, & DeSarbo, 1997).

Table 6

Path relationship	Path Male	Path Female	t-Value Male	t-Value Female	p-Value Male	p-Value Female
SMM -> CE	0.376	0.397	4.151	5.874	0	0
SMM -> BL	0.29	0.356	2.351	4.52	0.009	0
CE -> BL	0.575	0.515	5.973	8.155	0	0

N=233, Male=99, Female=134

The **Table 6** shows the group-specific PLS-SEM results and their differences. The result shows that there are no significant differences in both gender group on the influences of perceived SMM on CE and BL. The impact of SMM to CE in male group (0.376, t=4.151) and female group (0.397, t=5.874) are significant. The direct influences of SMM to BL is stronger in females (0.356, t=4.52) than male customers (0.29, t=2.351) but both are significant. While assessing the role of CE to BL, male customers shows stronger impacts (0.575, t=5.973) than female customers (0.515, t=8.155), but both groups shows significant impacts.

Table 7

	Path	Path Coefficients-diff.	t-Value	p-Value
Significances in differences of two groups	SMM -> BL	-0.066	0.472	0.319
	SMM -> CE	-0.02	0.185	0.427
	CE -> BL	0.06	0.544	0.293

The **Table 7** shows that whether the differences in two gender groups are significant on various path in the model such as SMM to BL, SMM to CE and CE to BL. The differences in the Path Coefficients are not significant as the t-statistics are less than threshold value of 1.96 and p-Values are not significant. So it is concluded that male and female are indifferent in moderating the influences of various path in the model.

Table 8

		Path Coef. (Young)	Path Coef. (Middle)	Path Coef. (Older)	t-Value (Young)	t-Value (Middle)	t-Value (Older)	p-Value (Young)	p-Value (Middle)	p-Value (Older)
Path relationship	CE -> BL	0.636	0.484	0.497	7.332	3.562	4.326	0	0	0
	SMM -> BL	0.277	0.297	0.379	1.669	1.939	3.674	0.044	0.026	0
	SMM -> CE	0.182	0.638	0.479	0.684	11.71	3.938	0.242	0	0

The **Table 8** shows the results of various age group impacts on the specified paths in the model such as CE to BL, SMM to BL and SMM to CE. We found that the impact of CE to BL is more in Young customers (0.636, t=7.332) followed by Older group (0.497, t=4.326) and Middle age group customers (0.484, t=3.562) and all categories are influencing significantly in predicting CE to BL. However, the impact of SMM to BL is higher in Older customers (0.379, t=3.674) and lower in Young customers (0.277, t=1.669) and Middle age customers (0.297, t=1.939) respectively. The significance of this influences need to be relooked again as the p-Value and t-statistics are in brim for the young customers. The t-statistics shows the impact is not significant (t=1.669 which is lesser than 1.96) and p-Value is at the edge (0.044 which is lesser to the threshold of 0.05) but significant. Similarly, the SMM to CE is not significant in Young customers (0.182, t=0.684) but significantly moderate in Middle age customers (0.638, t=11.397) and Older customers (0.479, t=3.938). The p-Value of SMM to CE shows that SMM has no impact in creating CE in young customers (0.242) but significantly moderates with Middle age group and Older group.

Table 9

		Path (Young vs Older)	t-Value (Young vs Older)	p-Value (Young vs Older)	Path (Young vs Middle)	t-Value (Young vs Middle)	p-Value (Young vs Middle)	Path (Middle vs Older)	t-Value (Middle vs Older)	p-Value (Middle vs Older)
Significances in differences of groups	CE -> BL	0.139	0.983	0.164	0.151	0.906	0.183	-0.012	0.066	0.474
	SMM -> BL	-0.103	0.528	0.299	-0.02	0.089	0.465	-0.083	0.425	0.336
	SMM -> CE	-0.297	1.014	0.156	-0.457	1.832	0.034	0.16	1.316	0.095

The **Table 9** shows that whether the differences in various customer groups such as young customers, middle age customers and older groups are significant in predicting various path in the model. The t-statistic and p-Values shows that the differences in the impacts on CE to BL and SMM to BL is not significant in Young and Middle age customers. It is evident that the differences in the Young and Older groups in moderating various path are not significant as the t-statistic and p-Value is

not significant. Similarly, the differences in Young and Middle age groups in predicting CE to BL (0.151, $t=0.906$, $p=0.183$) and SMM to BL (-0.02, $t=0.089$, $p=0.465$) is not significant as the t-statistics and p-Value are not significant. But, the differences in the young and middle age groups in moderating the SMM to CE is significant as the t-statistic is significant at 10% and p-Value (0.034) is lesser than the threshold limit of 0.05. The differences in Middle and Older groups in predicting the paths are not significant as CE to BL (-0.012, $t=0.066$, $p=0.474$), SMM to BL (-0.083, $t=0.425$, $p=0.336$) and SMM to CE (0.16, $t=1.316$, $p=0.095$). Accordingly, it is concluded that middle age group customers moderate the impact of perceived Social Media Marketing on Customer Engagement but Young and Older customers don't moderate any paths in the model.

Table 10

	Path (High User)	Path (Moderate User)	t-Value (High User)	t-Value (Moderate User)	p-Value (High User)	p-Value (Moderate User)
Path relationship CE -> BL	0.585	0.531	7.661	6.114	0	0
SMM -> BL	0.38	0.258	3.553	2.889	0	0.002
SMM -> CE	0.198	0.535	2.299	7.123	0.011	0

Table 10 show the results for whether High Users and Moderate Users of Social Media have any significant differences in predicting various path in the model. The impact of CE to BL in High Users (0.585, $t=7.661$) and Moderate Users (0.531, $t=6.114$) are almost equal and couldn't find much differences. The impact of SMM to BL is slightly stronger in High Users (0.38, $t=3.553$) than Moderate Users (0.258, $t=2.889$). Similarly, the impact of SMM to CE is stronger in Moderate Users (0.535, $t=7.123$) than High Users (0.198, $t=2.299$). The p-Value shows that High Users and Moderate Users significantly influences in all path in the model.

Table 11

	Path diff. (High User - Moderate User)	t-Value (High User vs Moderate User)	p-Value (High User vs Moderate User)
Significances in differences of two groups	CE -> BL	0.054	0.468
	SMM -> BL	0.121	0.879
	SMM -> CE	-0.337	2.968

The **Table 11** shows that whether the differences in two groups such as High User and Moderate User are significant on various path in the model such as CE to BL, SMM to BL and SMM to CE. The differences in the Path Coefficients are not significant as the t-statistics are less than threshold value of 1.96 and p-Values are not significant in the case of CE to BL and SMM to BL. However, the differences in path coefficients of SMM to CE in Higher User and Moderate User are significant as the t-value (2.968) and p-Value (0.002) is relevant.

Table 12

	Path (Not Subscribed The Page)	Path Original (Subscribed The Page)	t-Value (Not Subscribed The Page)	t-Value (Subscribed The Page)	p-Value (Not Subscribed The Page)	p-Value (Subscribed The Page)
CE -> BL	0.511	0.628	5.405	8.103	0	0
SMM -> BL	0.308	0.306	3.151	3.13	0.001	0.001
SMM -> CE	0.45	0.268	5.202	3.096	0	0.001

The **Table 12** shows the customers who subscribed the social media page of the organization and those who didn't subscribe have any significant differences in predicting SMM to CE, SMM to BL and CE to BL. The CE to BL is slightly higher in customers who subscribed the social media (0.628,

t=8.103) than non-subscribed customers (0.511, t=5.405) but couldn't find any significant difference in SMM to BL (0.306, t=3.13 and 0.308, t=3.151 respectively) in either groups. However, SMM to CE is higher in non-subscribed customers (0.45, t=5.202) than subscribed customers (0.268, t=3.096). Altogether, we couldn't find significant differences in each group for the prediction of any path in the model.

Table 13

	Path Coefficients-diff (Subscribed The Page - Not Subscribed The Page)	t-Value((Subscribed The Page vs Not Subscribed The Page)	p-Value (Subscribed The Page vs Not Subscribed The Page)
CE -> BL	0.117	0.935	0.175
SMM -> BL	-0.001	0.011	0.496
SMM -> CE	-0.182	1.475	0.071

The **Table 13** shows that whether the differences in two groups such as customers who subscribed the social media page of the organization and non-subscribers are significant or not. The differences in the Path Coefficients are not significant as the t-statistics are less than threshold value of 1.96 and p-Values are not significant in the case of all paths such as CE to BL and SMM to BL and SMM to CE in both groups.

Table 14

	Path (Face book)	t-Value (Face book)	P- Value (Face book)	Path (Insta)	t-Value (Insta)	p-Value (Insta)	Path (Other Plat.)	t-Value (Other Plat.)	p-Value (Other Plat.)
CE -> BL	0.632	7.065	0	0.527	4.709	0	0.525	3.863	0
SMM -> BL	0.238	1.887	0.03	0.277	2.151	0.016	0.361	2.504	0.006
SMM -> CE	0.322	3.452	0	0.478	3.646	0	0.461	2.832	0.002

The **Table 14** shows the results of various social media platforms mainly used by customers that has been influenced them mostly for online purchases. We found that the customers who mainly uses Facebook (0.632, t=7.065) slightly moderates the impact of CE to BL followed by Instagram users (0.527, t=4.709) and other platforms (0.525, t=3.863). While the impact of SMM to BL is not significant in Facebook users (0.238, t=1.887) as the t-statistic is lower than the threshold but shows significant influences in Instagram followers (0.277, t=2.151) and other social media platform users (0.361, t=2.504). However, the impact of SMM to CE is higher in Instagram users (0.478, t=3.646) followed by Facebook users (0.322, t=3.452) and Other platform users (0.461, t=2.832). Despite of these, all paths in the framework are significance at 5% level as the p-Value is under the threshold limit.

Table 15

	Path diff (Face book - Other Plat)	t-Value (Facebook vs Other Plat)	p-Value (Facebook vs Other Plat)	Path Coef-diff (Facebook - Insta)	t-Value (Face book vs Insta)	p-Value (Facebook vs Insta)	Path diff (Insta - Other Plat)	t-Value Insta vs Other Plat)	p-Value (Insta vs Other Plat)
CE -> BL	0.107	0.671	0.252	0.105	0.738	0.231	0.002	0.013	0.495
SMM -> BL	-0.124	0.589	0.278	-0.039	0.21	0.417	-0.085	0.418	0.338
SMM -> CE	-0.139	0.779	0.219	-0.156	1.002	0.159	0.017	0.077	0.469

Table 15 shows that whether the differences in various social media users such as Facebook, Instagram and other platforms are significant in predicting different paths in the model or not. The differences in various social media users in predicting CE to BL among Facebook users and other

platforms (0.107, $t=0.671$, $p\text{-Value}=0.252$), Facebook and Instagram users (0.105, $t=0.736$, $p\text{-Value}=0.231$), and Instagram and other platform users (0.002, $t=0.013$, $p\text{-Value}=0.495$) are not significant. Similarly, the differences in predicting SMM to BL and SMM to CE is not significant in various medium of users as the t -statistic is less than 1.96 and all the paths in the model are insignificant. Accordingly, it is concluded that the differences in various social media users have not significantly predicts the path such as CE to BL, SMM to CE and SMM to BL.

6. Discussion

The present study made an attempt to examine the impact of perceived social media marketing to customer engagement and brand loyalty. The study results show that the social media marketing has a significant positive impact on the customer engagement among the online shoppers in the Maldives. The study also revealed the significant positive influence of brand engagement on brand loyalty. In addition, the study reports no moderating effect of customer engagement between social media marketing and brand loyalty. However, customer engagement partially mediates the social media marketing on brand loyalty (Shelash Al-Hawary & Al-Fassed, 2022). Therefore, the study reported that the customer engagement intervenes the relationship as a mediator and not as a moderator. The study also made an attempt to explain the identified partial mediation of customer engagement among various customer groups based on their demographics.

The influences of SMM to CE, CE to BL and SMM to BL has been checked in various sub-groups in the respondents. The results of the analysis show that there are no significant differences between male and female in the hypothesized influences. However, the middle age group customers moderate the impact of SMM to CE while no significant differences in other age group such as younger and older customers. Similarly, high users of social media tend to get less impact on social media marketing to their engagement than moderate or occasional users of social media. This difference proved statistically and warrants more study as the moderate or occasional users of social media may be more curious than high users in receiving various messages from social media platforms. The study couldn't find any significant differences between those who subscribed the business pages and non-subscribers in influencing various relationships. The social media platforms such as Facebook users are more influencing CE to BL followed by Instagram and other platforms. However, Facebook users are not influencing in predicting SMM to BL, whereas Instagram users are significantly influencing.

Given the context, the study concludes that the customer engagement partially mediates SMM to BL and it varies in different customer groups. While exploring the mediation role of CE in various customer demographics shows inconsistent results. This phenomenon might have been the reason for inconsistency in the literatures for varying role of mediation and moderation of customer demographics among the antecedents and consequences. The findings of this study are in consistent with the findings of the prior research attempts done in different other contexts (Dwivedi, 2015; Erdoğan and Çiçek, 2012; Hazzam, 2022; Muchardie et al., 2016).

The study contributes to the SMM and CBE literature by determining the moderation mediation effect of CBE on SMM to Brand loyalty relationship. In addition, this study advances the B.L and CBE literature by examining the moderating role of selected customer demographics between CBE to BL. Though the prior studies examined whether the impact of SMM on CBE varies within different age groups (Cheung et al., 2021; Hafez, 2022; Hazzam, 2022), these researches didn't consider the moderating role of other customer groups which includes, gender, frequency of social media use and preferred social media. The current study fills this lacuna by investigating how the impact of SMM on CBE varies within different customer groups.

7. Practical implications of the study

The study benefits the marketing managers by offering several suggestions on how to design their social media marketing campaigns so that they can ensure customer engagement and resulted brand loyalty. Firstly, the study asserts the significance of SMM in creating Customer Brand Engagement and CBE's influence on Brand Loyalty. Therefore, the marketers should continue giving emphasize to SMM activities to ensure customer brand engagement and brand loyalty. Secondly, the study reports partial mediation of CBE between SMM and BL, which further interprets the stronger impact of CBE to BL among male shoppers than the female shoppers. However, the influence of CBE to BL is

significant in both the gender groups. This propounds the need for concentrating on Customer brand engagement by marketers for increasing the brand loyalty among their customers. Thirdly, the study highlights that SMM has no impact in creating CBE among young customers whereas it is significant among middle aged and older customer groups, which is contradicting with the previous literature (Hazzam, 2022). This result asserts the importance of updating the SMM activities design so that the young customers will also accept it and lead to customer brand engagement. Finally, the study results suggest that the customer subscription to social media results in more impact than non- subscription whereas the type of social media is not significant in predicting the CBE and BL.

8. Conclusion

The current study reveals that the social media marketing is significant in determining the customer engagement. The study also reports the significance of customer engagement in creating brand loyalty. Therefore, this study proposes social media as an important marketing tool which can determine the customer engagement and brand loyalty. Hence, the study concludes that the social media marketing is an important driver of both customer engagement and brand loyalty and customer engagement partially mediates the relationship between social media marketing and brand loyalty.

9. Limitations and Directions for future research

Referring to the limitations and future directions of the study, this research is conducted among the online shoppers in the Maldives. The study adopted a descriptive research design which uses a quantitative research paradigm and deduction approach. The problem with the descriptive research design it fails to explain the reason of a particular phenomenon rather than describing it. Therefore, this study suggests future research attempts to be made in qualitative method, so that an in-depth understanding of the reason for the results are possible. For example, the reason for no impact of social media marketing among the youngsters can be explored in detail if it is a qualitative enquiry. Adding on, the study is cross sectional in nature and used survey method for collecting the data. Since social media marketing and its influence are subject to changes over period, it is better to adopt a longitudinal method in future studies.

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