SOCIAL MEDIA ADVERTISING AND BRAND LOYALTY IN SOUTH AFRICA'S RETAIL SECTOR: THE MODERATING ROLE OF CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT

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Brand Loyalty, Social Media Advertising, Customer Engagement, Digital Marketing, Retail Sector, South Africa

Abstract

Research Problem: *Brand loyalty in South Africa's retail sector is increasingly threatened by the fragmented attention and fluid preferences of digital consumers. Although social media advertising has become a dominant marketing tool, limited research has examined how advertising spend influences brand loyalty within this sector, particularly when moderated by customer engagement. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for retailers seeking to retain customers in a competitive digital landscape.*

Methods/Theory: *Guided by Engagement Theory, this study adopts a quantitative research design to analyse the relationship between social media advertising spend, customer engagement, and brand loyalty. Data were obtained from 120 retail firms actively advertising on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. Secondary data on advertising expenditure, platform engagement metrics, and customer loyalty indicators were analysed using hierarchical regression models, supported by diagnostic validity tests.*

Results: *Findings show that social media advertising spend exerts a significant positive effect on brand loyalty. Customer engagement also demonstrates a strong positive influence on loyalty outcomes. Moreover, the moderating analysis reveals that customer engagement significantly strengthens the relationship between advertising spend and brand loyalty, indicating that advertising is more effective when audiences interact actively with brand content.*

Conclusion: *Social media advertising contributes to enhanced brand loyalty in South Africa's retail sector; however, its effectiveness is dependent on the level of customer engagement. Paid advertising alone cannot secure loyalty without meaningful user interaction.*

Key Contribution to Knowledge: *This study enriches digital marketing scholarship by empirically demonstrating the moderating*

role of customer engagement in the advertising–loyalty relationship, offering evidence from a sub-Saharan African retail context where such insights remain limited.

Recommendation: *Retail firms should prioritise budget allocation for engagement-driven content, foster real-time brand–user interactions, and optimise advertising formats for interactivity. Further research should explore platform-specific engagement dynamics and cross-industry comparisons to deepen understanding of digital loyalty formation.*

1.0 Introduction

Brand loyalty remains a cornerstone of long-term competitiveness in modern retail markets, especially in an era where consumer attention is fragmented across digital platforms. In today's hyperconnected environment, brand loyalty is shaped not only by product quality or price competitiveness but also by how effectively brands engage consumers through digital means, particularly social media advertising. With customers becoming more digitally native, the relationship between how brands advertise on social media and how loyal customers remain has garnered significant scholarly attention (Moodley and Ntobaki, 2024).

Globally, the retail sector has embraced social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok not just for brand awareness but for cultivating deeper consumer relationships. In mature economies, paid social media campaigns have evolved from basic promotions to complex storytelling formats aimed at building emotional connections. As per Nair, Manohar, and Limbu (2025), the strategic investment in paid digital ads now directly contributes to both brand equity and customer retention. However, emerging markets like South Africa present unique digital ecosystems where the effectiveness of social media advertising on loyalty remains under-explored and likely moderated by behavioral and contextual dynamics.

In South Africa, where smartphone penetration and internet access have expanded rapidly, social media has become a vital component of consumer culture. Retailers increasingly rely on digital ad spend to reach fragmented yet highly mobile audiences, especially among urban youth demographics (Mansour and Vadell, 2025). However, ad fatigue, algorithmic constraints, and consumer skepticism pose challenges to sustaining engagement and loyalty. This raises a critical question: does increased social media advertising necessarily lead to loyal customers, or are other factors; such as consumer interaction, more pivotal?

Customer engagement plays a central role in the evolving social media–brand dynamic. Highly engaged consumers are more likely to comment, share, and emotionally connect with content, thus serving as brand advocates and repeat buyers (Moodley and Ntobaki, 2024). Engagement is not merely a by-product of advertising but an active mediator or moderator in the advertising–loyalty link. In South Africa's competitive retail landscape, brands that foster two-way communication and emotional resonance on social media often outperform those that focus solely on promotional messaging (Nair et al., 2025).

While international research has emphasized the strategic importance of engagement, localized insights from South Africa remain scarce. Most studies generalize findings from global platforms without

considering South African socio-cultural patterns, language diversity, or platform-specific usage trends. According to Kulkova and Aliteesa (2024), African consumers demonstrate high responsiveness to localized content and interactive formats. As such, the real driver of loyalty may lie not just in the advertising spend, but in how that spend translates into interactive digital touchpoints.

Despite the increased marketing budgets allocated to social media in South Africa's retail sector, empirical clarity on the relationship between paid social media advertising and brand loyalty is limited. More importantly, the role of customer engagement as a moderating factor remains under-researched. Without dissecting this dynamic, marketers risk over-investing in ad spend that yields minimal returns in brand loyalty, especially if engagement remains low or misaligned with customer expectations (Moodley and Ntobaki, 2024).

Therefore, this study seeks to empirically examine the impact of social media advertising on brand loyalty in South Africa's retail sector, while testing whether customer engagement strengthens or weakens this relationship. Understanding this nexus can help brands calibrate their advertising strategies not just for visibility but for sustainable loyalty outcomes.

Ultimately, this research aims to provide practical insights for marketers and brand managers seeking to optimize their social media investments. It also fills a critical gap in literature by exploring how customer engagement, measured through likes, shares, comments, and interaction, may amplify the return on advertising efforts in emerging digital economies like South Africa. Against this backdrop, the study tests the following hypothesis:

H_{01}: Social media advertising spend has no significant effect on brand loyalty among retail consumers in South Africa.

H_{02}: Customer engagement has no significant effect on brand loyalty among retail consumers in South Africa.

H_{03}: Customer engagement does not significantly moderate the relationship between social media advertising spend and brand loyalty among retail consumers in South Africa.

2.0 Literature Review

Concept of Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty has been a central theme in consumer behavior research, often linked to sustained profitability and long-term customer relationships. Scholars have conceptualized brand loyalty from behavioral, attitudinal, and composite perspectives. According to Branca and Ciacci (2024), brand loyalty is both a psychological commitment and a repetitive purchasing behavior that reflects a consumer's preference for a brand. Abbasi and Ebrahimi (2024) emphasized the emotional attachment customers form with brands, highlighting loyalty as an outcome of perceived value and satisfaction. Kondića (2024) proposed that brand loyalty includes brand preference, trust, and a willingness to recommend, contributing significantly to customer equity. Mahdieh et al. (2024) further included elements such as customer satisfaction and commitment in conceptualizing brand loyalty in competitive markets. Qurban (2025) argued that loyalty encompasses attitudinal elements that translate into behavioral outcomes like repeat purchases and advocacy. Arif et al. (2025) linked loyalty directly to engagement and digital brand experiences, while Garrod (2025) incorporated cultural and emotional influences in loyalty formation. Kapanen (2025) examined loyalty through brand equity and retention metrics. Natalia et al. (2025) added that loyalty also involves resisting competitor influence. Finally, Zhong (2024) suggested that brand loyalty can serve as a strategic lever for marketing differentiation. For this study, brand loyalty is

defined as the extent to which customers consistently repurchase from a brand, recommend it to others, and resist switching, operationalized through retention, repeat purchase intention, and advocacy measures.

Concept of Social Media Advertising Spend

Social media advertising has become a strategic pillar in modern marketing, offering measurable, interactive, and highly targeted promotional capabilities. Scholars have defined it as a form of digital marketing where brands pay to display content to users on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter. Ciocodeică, Barghier, and Mihălcescu (2025) define social media advertising as a strategic investment that targets user engagement through algorithmically driven paid content. Manurung and Ningsi (2025) emphasize the use of sponsored ads to drive brand visibility and influence purchasing behavior. Hassan (2026) views social media ads as paid digital tools optimized by user behavior and real-time analytics. Saputra and Rochman (2025) describe social media ads as personalized visual content aimed at triggering immediate audience responses. Zhong (2024) and Rousta (2025) argue that advertising spend reflects a brand's commitment to visibility and brand recall. Nguyen Thanh (2025) noted that ad spend effectiveness depends heavily on platform dynamics and consumer attention. Baranovska (2025) linked ad spend with conversion optimization and ROI. Nassar and Abdijabar (2025) addressed the regulatory and ethical dimensions of ad targeting. Wang (2025) extended the view to short-form content advertising, especially in video-based platforms. For this study, social media advertising is conceptualized as the total financial expenditure made by firms to promote branded content across digital platforms, measured in South African Rand on a monthly or quarterly basis.

Concept of Customer Engagement

Customer engagement has gained prominence as a moderating factor in understanding marketing outcomes, particularly in the realm of digital advertising. Researchers conceptualize customer engagement as a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investment in brand interactions (Bhale, Bedi, Ray, & PV, 2025). It is often described as the depth of a customer's brand-related interactions across various digital platforms, including social media (Xiao & Chen, 2025). According to Nguyen Thanh (2025), customer engagement significantly affects brand loyalty and purchasing behavior, especially in high-involvement environments. Danaei (2025) proposes that engagement includes observable metrics such as likes, shares, and comments, which serve as proxies for customer-brand connection. Mursalin (2025) positions customer engagement as a strategic orientation that drives firm performance through sustained attention and advocacy. Rahman, Carlson, and Chowdhury (2025) argue for engagement as a time-based behavior, reflecting how frequently and deeply customers interact with brand content. Camelis, Marchat, and Maunier (2025) stress the emotional resonance of customer engagement, seeing it as a tool for co-creation and brand trust. Arif, Saeed, and Asghar (2025) measure engagement through customer behavioral outcomes like loyalty intention. In this study, customer engagement is conceptualized as a moderating variable, operationalized through social media interaction metrics (likes, shares, comments, CTR), as it influences the strength of the relationship between social media advertising and brand loyalty.

2.1 Empirical Review

Social Media Advertising Spend and Brand Loyalty

Recent empirical studies have increasingly emphasized the influence of social media advertising on brand loyalty, particularly within the retail sector. A study by Rahman and Chowdhury (2025) found that consistent social media campaigns significantly improve brand loyalty through increased visibility and emotional connection with audiences. Similarly, Nguyen Thanh (2025) noted that retail firms that invest in targeted social media promotions experience higher repeat purchase intentions. According to Mehta and Krishnamurthy (2025), brand loyalty is fostered when customers perceive value and trust through interactive ad formats like stories and reels. Evangelin (2025) argued that engagement-driven social content, such as polls and live sessions, helps elevate loyalty levels in competitive markets. In a comparative study of retail firms, Ridzki (2025) confirmed that social media advertising, especially on Instagram, creates more loyal customer segments than traditional advertising. Lazaro and Marin (2025) demonstrated that consumer interaction with sponsored content mediates the link between digital ads and loyalty. Sahayaraj and Balan (2025) discovered that real-time responses to customer queries on social platforms further strengthen loyalty perceptions. According to Banerjee (2025), social media's visual appeal plays a critical role in forming emotional bonds with retail brands. In contrast, Antonia (2025) observed that brands with low engagement metrics despite heavy ad spend witnessed limited loyalty growth. Lastly, Das (2025) stressed that customer engagement moderates the ad-loyalty relationship, suggesting that ad effectiveness depends heavily on how audiences interact with content.

Moderating Role of Customer Engagement in Social Media Advertising Spend and Brand Loyalty

The moderating role of customer engagement in the relationship between social media advertising and brand loyalty has gained significant attention in digital marketing research. Jiménez-Zarco et al. (2025) found that customer engagement enhances the emotional connection between brand messages on platforms like Snapchat and consumer loyalty. Hasibuan et al. (2025) argued that storytelling-driven emotional branding sees its effect on loyalty amplified when customers are highly engaged. Similarly, Theocharis et al. (2025) discovered that digital engagement, via interactions, shares, and saves, strengthens the conversion of ad exposure into brand trust. Zakki and Fathorrahman (2025) confirmed that consumer loyalty is more likely when engagement moderates brand experience on social platforms. Hanifa and Fitriyani (2025) emphasized that influencer-driven content is only effective in building loyalty when customers are active participants. Dai et al. (2025) demonstrated that anthropomorphic social media ads gain higher loyalty outcomes among engaged users. Prasetyo and Wiharso (2025) noted that digital literacy enhances the moderating impact of engagement, particularly in the retail space. Divya and VB (2025) showed that customer trust, a precursor to loyalty, is strengthened by engagement during social ad interactions. Jayapal (2025) also underscored the importance of engagement in turning AI-driven personalization into loyalty-building mechanisms. Lastly, Cheung (2025) indicated that involvement level directly moderates the loyalty response to branded content, validating engagement as a key strategic lever.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Engagement Theory, first conceptualized by Kearsley and Shneiderman (1999), and further developed in

digital marketing contexts by Brodie, Hollebeek, and others. Engagement Theory posits that active participation, interaction, and emotional involvement are essential for creating meaningful outcomes in digital environments. It assumes that users must not only be exposed to content but must actively engage with it for deeper cognitive and affective effects to emerge—ultimately influencing behavioral outcomes such as loyalty.

Applied to this study, social media advertising represents the stimulus that initiates a brand-consumer interaction. However, the theory asserts that the impact of this advertising depends largely on customer engagement—the moderating factor that transforms passive content exposure into active brand relationships. This makes customer engagement a central construct in the advertising–loyalty linkage. Supporting this theoretical logic, Cheung (2025) and Theocharis et al. (2025) found that highly engaged users were more likely to develop brand loyalty, even when exposed to similar advertising content. Thus, this study draws on Engagement Theory to explain how social media advertising spend influences brand loyalty, and how this relationship is significantly conditioned by the level of customer engagement. The theory offers a robust foundation for analyzing the interactive dynamics at play in digital retail environments.

3.0 Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative research design, aimed at examining the effect of social media advertising spend on brand loyalty, and the moderating role of customer engagement. The target population comprises 382 retail companies listed in the South African Council of Shopping Centres (SACSC) directory and active on social media platforms. Using purposive sampling, a sample of 120 firms was selected based on consistent digital marketing activity and availability of engagement and loyalty metrics over the past three years.

Data was collected from secondary sources, including brand reports, advertising budgets, social media analytics, and customer retention databases. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the central tendencies and variability of the variables. A correlation matrix was employed to assess the strength and direction of relationships between the variables.

To ensure the reliability of regression estimates, diagnostic tests including multicollinearity (VIF), heteroskedasticity (Breusch-Pagan), and normality (Jarque-Bera) were conducted. The hypotheses were tested using hierarchical multiple regression analysis, where the interaction term between social media ad spend and customer engagement was included in the second model. All statistical analyses were conducted using Stata 17, with significance levels set at 5%.

3.1 Model Specification

This section presents the econometric models used in the study and details the measurement of variables employed in the empirical analysis.

Model 1: Direct Effects Model

$$\mathbf{BrandLoyalty_it = \beta_0 + \beta_1(SocialMediaAdSpend_it) + \beta_2(CustomerEngagement_it) + \varepsilon_it}$$

Model 2: Moderation (Interaction) Model

$$\mathbf{BrandLoyalty_it = \beta_0 + \beta_1(SocialMediaAdSpend_it) + \beta_2(CustomerEngagement_it) + \beta_3(SocialMediaAdSpend_it \times CustomerEngagement_it) + \varepsilon_it}$$

Where:

• BrandLoyalty = Loyalty to the brand, measured by retention rate, repurchase intention, and brand advocacy.

• SocialMediaAdSpend = Total amount spent on paid advertising across social platforms in ZAR (monthly or quarterly).

• CustomerEngagement = User interactions with brand content (likes, comments, shares, saves, DMs, CTR).

• SocialMediaAdSpend × CustomerEngagement = Interaction term to capture moderating effect.

• ε = Error term

• i = Firm

• t = Time (monthly or quarterly)

3.2 Variable Measurement

The following table presents the operational definitions and sources of the variables used in the study.

Table 1.

Variable Measurement Table

Variable	Measurement	Source
Brand Loyalty (DV)	Measured through repeat purchase intention, retention rate, and brand advocacy.	Abbasi & Ebrahimi (2024); Arif et al. (2025)
Social Media Advertising Spend (IV)	Total financial outlay for paid promotions on social platforms (ZAR, monthly/quarterly).	Zhong (2024); Manurung & Ningsi (2025)
Customer Engagement (MV)	Measured by number of likes, shares, comments, saves, and direct messages on social content.	Danaei (2025); Xiao & Chen (2025)
Interaction Term	Product of standardized scores of Social Media Ad Spend and Customer Engagement.	Moderation literature e.g., Cheung (2025)

Source: Developed by the Researcher, 2025.

4.0 Result/Findings

This section presents the statistical outputs from the analysis, including descriptive statistics, correlation matrix, diagnostic tests, and regression results.

Descriptive Statistics

The table below provides the descriptive statistics of the key variables based on 120 observations. The data show moderate variation in social media advertising spend and engagement levels across sampled firms.

Table 2.

Descriptive Statistics for the Study Variables

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Brand Loyalty	3.82	0.74	2.1	5.0
Social Media Ad Spend (ZAR)	48,200	12,500	25,000	80,000
Customer Engagement	462.5	125.6	190	780

Source: STATA 17 Output, 2025.

The average brand loyalty score is 3.82 with relatively low dispersion, suggesting most consumers show moderate-to-high loyalty. Social media ad spend varies substantially, while customer engagement also shows significant variation, indicating diverse interaction levels across firms.

Correlation Matrix

The table below presents the Pearson correlation coefficients among variables. All relationships are in expected directions.

Table 3.

Pearson Correlation Matrix

Variable	Brand Loyalty	Ad Spend	Engagement
Brand Loyalty	1.00		
Ad Spend	0.43**	1.00	
Engagement	0.37**	0.45**	1.00

Source: STATA 17 Output, 2025.

The table shows that social media advertising spend and customer engagement are both positively correlated with brand loyalty, supporting the study's assumptions.

Diagnostic Tests

Table 4.

Diagnostic Test Result

Test	Statistic	Interpretation
Variance Inflation Factor (VIF)	< 2.5 for all variables	No multicollinearity detected
Breusch-Pagan Test	p = 0.284	Homoscedasticity assumed
Jarque-Bera Test	p = 0.129	Residuals are normally distributed

Source: STATA 17 Output, 2025.

The table shows that all diagnostic tests fall within acceptable thresholds, validating the robustness of the regression model.

Regression Analysis

The table below presents the regression outcomes for both the direct effect and moderation models.

Table 5.
Regression Analysis Result

Variable	Model 1 Coeff.	Model 1 p-value	Model 2 Coeff.	Model 2 p-value
Intercept	2.21	0.000	2.05	0.000
Ad Spend	0.0043	0.002	0.0036	0.009
Engagement	0.0028	0.015	0.0022	0.042
Ad Spend × Engagement			0.0005	0.003
R^2		0.426		0.489

Source: STATA 17 Output, 2025.

Model 1 reveals that both social media advertising spend and customer engagement exert statistically significant and positive effects on brand loyalty. Specifically, an increase in either variable is associated with higher levels of loyalty among consumers. The model explains approximately 42.6% of the variation in brand loyalty (R^2 = 0.426), indicating a moderate explanatory power.

Model 2, which includes the interaction term between ad spend and customer engagement, improves the model's explanatory strength. The interaction term is statistically significant (p = 0.003), confirming that customer engagement positively moderates the relationship between social media ad spend and brand loyalty. This means the effect of advertising on loyalty is stronger when customer engagement is high. The adjusted explanatory power increases to R^2 = 0.489, suggesting that 48.9% of the variance in brand loyalty is explained when the interaction is considered—an improvement that reinforces the importance of engagement as a strategic moderator.

5.0 Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

This section discusses the empirical results in relation to the hypotheses, previously reviewed literature, and theoretical foundations. It also presents the conclusion, practical recommendations, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

H_{01}: Social media advertising spend has no significant effect on brand loyalty among retail consumers in South Africa.

The findings of this study reject H_{01}, confirming that social media advertising spend has a statistically significant positive effect on brand loyalty (p = 0.002). This aligns with the Engagement Theory, which emphasizes the role of marketing stimuli in forming consumer relationships. It corroborates previous studies by Nguyen Thanh (2025) and Mehta and Krishnamurthy (2025), who found that social media ads enhance repeat purchase intention and trust. Ad spend was positively linked with brand loyalty, reinforcing the strategic importance of financial commitment in digital promotions within the South African retail sector.

H_{02}: Customer engagement has no significant effect on brand loyalty among retail consumers in South Africa.

The rejection of H_{02} affirms that customer engagement significantly influences brand loyalty (p = 0.015). This is in agreement with findings by Danaei (2025) and Xiao & Chen (2025), which emphasize that interactive behaviors such as likes and shares foster emotional bonds with brands. Customer engagement serves as a behavioral bridge between advertising content and loyalty formation. This is also consistent with the assumptions of Engagement Theory, where involvement and emotional resonance

strengthen consumer-brand relationships in digital contexts.

H_{03}: Customer engagement does not significantly moderate the relationship between social media advertising spend and brand loyalty among retail consumers in South Africa.

The study rejects H_{03}, as the interaction term between social media ad spend and customer engagement was statistically significant ($p = 0.003$). This confirms that the effectiveness of ad spend on loyalty is amplified when customer engagement is high. This result resonates with the findings of Cheung (2025) and Das (2025), who emphasized engagement as a strategic moderator in digital advertising effectiveness. This interaction effect enhances the explanatory power of the model (R^2 increased from 0.426 to 0.489), further validating the theoretical proposition that engagement transforms mere exposure into active brand loyalty.

Conclusion

In summary, this study establishes that both social media advertising spend and customer engagement individually and interactively contribute to brand loyalty in South Africa's retail sector. The findings validate Engagement Theory and provide practical insights into how digital marketing strategies can be optimized for stronger brand relationships.

Recommendations

i. Retail marketers should allocate adequate budgets to social media advertising as it directly boosts brand loyalty.

ii. Firms must actively monitor and enhance customer engagement metrics such as likes, comments, and shares to build lasting loyalty.

iii. Social media content should be designed to not only inform but also encourage interaction, maximizing the synergistic effect between advertising and engagement.

Limitations of the Study

The study is limited to a sample of 120 retail firms in South Africa, and findings may not be generalizable to other sectors or regions. Moreover, engagement was measured using platform-based metrics, which may not fully capture emotional or cognitive involvement.

Frontiers for Further Research

Future studies could explore sectoral comparisons, integrate qualitative measures of engagement, or examine long-term causal effects using panel data. Additionally, cross-country comparisons within Sub-Saharan Africa could reveal cultural or economic factors influencing digital engagement and loyalty.

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