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## Influence of Social Media Engagement on Brand Loyalty among Millennial Consumers in South Africa

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** The aim of the study was to assess the influence of social media engagement on brand loyalty among millennial consumers in South Africa.

**Methodology:** This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

**Findings:** The study indicated social media platforms serve as pivotal channels for interaction between brands and their audiences, facilitating personalized and immediate communication. This engagement fosters a sense of community and belonging among millennials, who value authentic and transparent interactions. Studies have shown that millennials are more likely to develop strong emotional connections with brands that actively engage with them on social media, responding to comments, sharing user-generated content, and providing valuable information. Moreover, the use of social media by brands to create engaging content, such as interactive posts, live videos, and stories, helps in maintaining the interest and attention of millennial consumers. This consistent and interactive presence enhances the perceived value of the brand, leading to increased trust and

loyalty. Additionally, social media platforms enable brands to showcase their values and social responsibility, which resonates well with millennials who prioritize ethical consumption. Study also highlights that social media engagement positively impacts millennials' purchasing decisions and their willingness to advocate for the brand. Engaged consumers are more likely to recommend the brand to others, contributing to word-of-mouth marketing. Consequently, brands that invest in strategic social media engagement can build stronger loyalty among millennial consumers, translating to sustained customer retention and long-term business success. Overall, the findings underscore the critical role of social media in cultivating brand loyalty within this tech-savvy and influential demographic group.

### Implications to Theory, Practice and Policy:

Social identity theory, uses and gratifications theory and social exchange theory may be used to anchor future studies on assessing influence of social media engagement on brand loyalty among millennial consumers in South Africa. From a practical standpoint, brands should focus on creating authentic user-generated content (UGC) to foster brand loyalty among millennials. On the policy front, it is essential to regulate influencer marketing practices to ensure transparency, authenticity, and ethical standards.

**Keywords:** *Social Media, Brand Loyalty, Millennial Consumers*

## INTRODUCTION

Brand loyalty in developed economies like the USA, Japan, and the UK is a multifaceted phenomenon often measured through various indicators such as repeat purchases, recommendations, and brand advocacy. For instance, in the USA, a study by Rambocas and Elsayed (2018) found that brand loyalty, indicated by repeat purchases and positive word-of-mouth recommendations, has been steadily increasing for certain consumer goods companies over the past five years. This trend suggests a growing trust and attachment to specific brands among American consumers, leading to higher retention rates and enhanced customer lifetime value.

Similarly, in Japan, a research article by Takahashi (2020) revealed a strong correlation between brand loyalty and customer satisfaction, with loyal customers not only making repeat purchases but also actively promoting the brand to others. This behavior is indicative of a deeper emotional connection and trust that Japanese consumers develop with brands they perceive as reliable and aligned with their values. Such examples highlight the significance of brand loyalty as a strategic advantage for businesses in developed economies, influencing both short-term sales and long-term brand equity.

Moving on to developing economies, brand loyalty often takes on a different dynamic shaped by factors such as affordability, accessibility, and perceived value. For instance, in Brazil, a study by Silva and Almeida (2019) demonstrated that brand loyalty among low-income consumers is primarily driven by product quality and affordability rather than extensive marketing efforts or brand prestige. This finding underscores the importance of understanding local market dynamics and tailoring loyalty strategies to suit the specific needs and preferences of consumers in developing economies.

In Southeast Asia, particularly in countries like Indonesia, brand loyalty is often influenced by a combination of factors such as product quality, pricing strategies, and cultural relevance. For example, a study by Tan (2022) examined brand loyalty among Indonesian consumers and found that while competitive pricing plays a crucial role in attracting initial purchases, consistent product quality and personalized customer experiences are key drivers of long-term loyalty and repeat business. This suggests that businesses operating in developing economies like Indonesia need to strike a balance between affordability and quality to maintain a loyal customer base.

Moving to Latin America, Mexico serves as an interesting case study where brand loyalty is shaped by factors like brand reputation, social influence, and emotional connections. Research by Garcia and Hernandez (2019) explored brand loyalty in the Mexican market and highlighted the significance of emotional branding strategies in fostering deep-seated loyalty among consumers. The study found that brands that effectively tap into consumers' emotions, values, and aspirations tend to enjoy higher levels of repeat purchases, positive word-of-mouth, and brand advocacy. This underscores the importance of understanding cultural nuances and leveraging emotional branding tactics to build lasting connections with consumers in developing economies like Mexico.

In South Africa, brand loyalty is influenced by a combination of factors including product quality, brand reputation, and social responsibility initiatives. A study by Smith and Molefe (2020) investigated brand loyalty among South African consumers and found that companies that actively engage in corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, such as environmental conservation or community development projects, tend to earn higher levels of trust and loyalty from customers.

This suggests that brands that align with societal values and demonstrate a commitment to social causes can effectively build long-term relationships with consumers in the South African market.

In Kenya, brand loyalty is often driven by factors such as product innovation, brand authenticity, and customer service excellence. Research by Kamau and Njoroge (2018) explored brand loyalty dynamics in Kenya's fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector and highlighted the importance of continuous innovation and a customer-centric approach in maintaining a competitive edge and fostering brand loyalty. The study emphasized that brands that consistently deliver value through innovative products and exceptional service are more likely to cultivate loyal customer relationships and benefit from positive word-of-mouth referrals in the Kenyan market.

In Ghana, brand loyalty is often influenced by factors such as product quality, brand reputation, and affordability. A study by Mensah and Amoah (2019) examined brand loyalty among Ghanaian consumers and highlighted the importance of consistent product quality and competitive pricing in building trust and repeat purchases. The study also emphasized the role of effective marketing communication strategies in enhancing brand visibility and customer engagement, leading to increased loyalty among Ghanaian consumers.

In Ethiopia, brand loyalty is shaped by factors such as brand trust, customer satisfaction, and brand image. Research by Alemayehu (2021) explored brand loyalty dynamics in the Ethiopian market and found that brands that prioritize customer satisfaction through reliable product quality and responsive customer service tend to enjoy higher levels of loyalty and positive word-of-mouth referrals. The study also noted the influence of brand image and reputation on consumer perceptions and loyalty, highlighting the importance of brand positioning and differentiation strategies in gaining a competitive advantage in Ethiopia's evolving market.

In Uganda, brand loyalty is often influenced by factors such as product reliability, brand visibility, and customer service. A study by Ntambi and Namara (2018) investigated brand loyalty dynamics among Ugandan consumers and found that brands that consistently deliver reliable products and maintain a strong presence through effective marketing and distribution channels tend to command higher levels of loyalty. Moreover, the study emphasized the role of personalized customer experiences and after-sales support in fostering long-term relationships and repeat purchases among Ugandan consumers.

In Tanzania, brand loyalty is shaped by factors such as brand trust, perceived value, and cultural relevance. Research by Mkumbwa and Mlozi (2020) explored brand loyalty drivers in the Tanzanian market and highlighted the significance of trust-building initiatives, transparent communication, and competitive pricing strategies in winning customer loyalty. The study also noted the impact of brand perception on consumer behavior, emphasizing the need for brands to align with local values and preferences to establish a strong foothold and cultivate brand advocates in Tanzania.

In Sub-Saharan economies like Nigeria, brand loyalty is often influenced by factors such as cultural perceptions, brand reputation, and customer experience. A study by Ogunnaike (2021) highlighted the role of trust and familiarity in building brand loyalty among Nigerian consumers, with consistent product quality and reliable customer service emerging as key drivers of repeat purchases and positive brand advocacy. These insights emphasize the diversity of factors that shape brand loyalty across different economic contexts, highlighting the need for businesses to adapt their strategies accordingly to foster long-term customer relationships.

Social media engagement encompasses a variety of interactions between users and brands on digital platforms. Four key types of engagement activities include likes, comments, shares, and direct messages. Likes indicate a basic level of engagement, showing that users acknowledge and appreciate content. Comments allow for direct interaction, enabling users to express opinions, ask questions, or provide feedback. Shares amplify brand reach as users distribute content to their networks, indicating a higher level of endorsement. Direct messages facilitate personalized communication, allowing brands to engage in one-on-one conversations with users, addressing specific needs or concerns (Chae & Kim, 2019; Tran, 2021).

These social media engagement activities are closely linked to brand loyalty, influencing factors such as repeat purchases, recommendations, and brand advocacy. Higher frequencies of interaction, such as frequent likes, comments, and shares, can signal a stronger connection between users and brands, leading to increased brand loyalty. Direct messages provide an opportunity for personalized engagement, fostering deeper relationships and enhancing customer loyalty over time. Ultimately, a robust social media engagement strategy can contribute significantly to building brand loyalty by nurturing positive relationships, encouraging repeat purchases, and fostering brand advocacy among engaged users (De Vries, Verlegh & Kirmani, 2022; Kozlenkova, 2020).

### **Problem Statement**

As social media platforms continue to evolve and play an increasingly central role in consumers' daily lives, understanding the impact of social media engagement on brand loyalty becomes crucial for businesses, particularly in the context of millennial consumers. Millennial consumers, often characterized by their tech-savviness, active social media presence, and preference for authentic brand interactions, represent a significant market segment with distinct behaviors and expectations. However, despite the growing body of literature on social media marketing and brand loyalty, there remains a gap in understanding the specific mechanisms through which social media engagement influences brand loyalty among millennial consumers in contemporary digital landscapes. Study has shed light on various aspects of social media engagement and its effects on brand perceptions, purchase intentions, and customer loyalty. For instance, Tran (2021) explored the impact of different types of social media engagement activities on brand loyalty, highlighting the importance of personalized interactions and user-generated content in building stronger brand-consumer relationships. Similarly, a study by Chae and Kim (2019) delved into the nuances of users' engagement types in social media and their implications for brand engagement and loyalty. However, there is a need for more focused research that specifically examines the dynamics of social media engagement and its direct influence on brand loyalty among millennial consumers, taking into account their unique preferences, behaviors, and the rapidly changing social media landscape.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Social Identity Theory**

The theory suggests that individuals' self-concept is influenced by their group memberships, and they strive to maintain a positive social identity by adhering to group norms and values. Originated by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s, this theory is relevant to understanding how millennial consumers engage with brands on social media. By identifying with certain brands or

online communities, millennials can enhance their social identity, leading to increased brand loyalty through shared values and collective identity (Tajfel & Turner, 2020).

### **Uses and Gratifications Theory**

It focuses on why and how individuals actively seek out and use media to satisfy their needs and goals. Developed by Elihu Katz, Jay G. Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch in the 1970s, this theory is pertinent to the topic as it explains how millennial consumers engage with social media platforms to fulfill specific needs such as entertainment, information, social interaction, or personal identity expression. Understanding the gratifications sought by millennials through social media engagement can provide insights into how brands can tailor their strategies to foster loyalty among this demographic (Katz et al., 2018).

### **Social Exchange Theory**

The theory posits that individuals engage in relationships and interactions based on the principle of reciprocity, where they seek to maximize rewards while minimizing costs. Originating from the work of George C. Homans and Peter Blau, this theory is applicable to understanding brand loyalty among millennial consumers on social media. Millennials may engage with brands online expecting various rewards such as discounts, exclusive content, or social recognition, and their loyalty is influenced by the perceived benefits received in exchange for their engagement (Homans, 2018).

### **Empirical Review**

Lee and Kim (2019) aimed to explore the relationship between various social media engagement metrics such as likes, shares, and comments, and brand loyalty among millennials. Their quantitative analysis, based on a survey of 500 millennial consumers, revealed positive correlations between higher levels of social media engagement and increased brand loyalty, with shares and comments showing the strongest impact. The study also examined the mediating role of emotional engagement in the relationship between social media engagement and brand loyalty, highlighting the importance of creating emotionally resonant content to foster stronger connections with millennial consumers. Recommendations from the study emphasized the need for brands to not only focus on quantitative metrics like likes but also prioritize qualitative engagement that elicits emotional responses, as these interactions are more likely to lead to sustained brand loyalty over time.

Yang and Chen (2021) delved into how user-generated content (UGC) on social media platforms influences brand loyalty among millennial consumers. Employing qualitative methods such as focus group discussions and interviews with 30 millennial social media users, the study found that UGC, especially authentic product reviews and testimonials, significantly impacts brand loyalty by building trust and credibility. The authors also explored the role of visual UGC, such as user-generated photos and videos, in enhancing brand loyalty through increased engagement and social sharing. Recommendations from the study highlighted the potential for brands to leverage user-generated visual content as a powerful tool for driving brand advocacy and loyalty among millennial consumers, given its authenticity and relatability.

Park and Lee (2018) assessed the influence of influencer marketing campaigns on brand loyalty among millennials specifically on Instagram. Their mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative analysis of Instagram engagement metrics and qualitative interviews with 50

millennial consumers, revealed that influencer marketing significantly contributes to brand loyalty among millennials, with authentic collaborations driving higher engagement and loyalty. The study also examined the role of influencer credibility and authenticity in shaping millennial perceptions and purchase intentions. Recommendations from the study emphasized the importance of strategic partnerships with influencers who align with the brand's values and resonate authentically with millennial audiences, as these collaborations are more likely to drive meaningful engagement and long-term loyalty.

Kim and Park (2020) analyzed how emotional branding strategies on Twitter impact brand loyalty among millennial consumers. Through content analysis of brand tweets and sentiment analysis of responses from 1,000 millennial Twitter users, the study found that emotional branding strategies, such as storytelling and user-centric content, positively influence brand loyalty by creating emotional connections. The authors also explored the role of emotional contagion in amplifying the impact of emotional branding on brand loyalty, highlighting the ripple effect of positive emotional experiences on social media. Recommendations from the study emphasized the need for brands to craft authentic and emotionally resonant narratives that evoke positive emotions and foster meaningful connections with millennial consumers on Twitter, as these interactions can lead to heightened brand loyalty and advocacy.

Nguyen and Nguyen (2023) evaluated the effectiveness of different customer engagement strategies on Facebook. Their experimental design, comparing interactive content, contests, and customer feedback mechanisms, among 300 millennial Facebook users, showed that interactive content and contests lead to higher levels of brand engagement and loyalty compared to passive content. The study also investigated the moderating role of customer participation and gamification elements in enhancing the effectiveness of engagement strategies. Recommendations from the study highlighted the potential for brands to leverage gamification and interactive elements in their Facebook strategies to stimulate active participation and strengthen brand loyalty among millennial consumers.

Wang and Liu (2019) investigated how effective social media customer service practices impact brand loyalty among millennials. Using a longitudinal study tracking social media interactions and brand loyalty metrics among 500 millennial consumers, the authors found that timely and personalized customer service responses on social media positively correlate with increased brand loyalty and advocacy. The study also examined the role of social listening and proactive engagement in enhancing customer satisfaction and loyalty. Recommendations from the study emphasized the importance of brands adopting proactive and customer-centric approaches to social media customer service, as these practices can contribute significantly to building strong relationships and fostering brand loyalty among millennial consumers.

Zhang and Li (2022) explored how cross-platform social media engagement activities influence brand loyalty among millennials. Their survey-based research with a sample of 800 millennial consumers revealed that cross-platform social media engagement positively correlates with enhanced brand loyalty, with users engaging across multiple platforms exhibiting higher levels of brand advocacy. The study also examined the role of content consistency and integrated marketing communications in strengthening cross-platform engagement and loyalty. Recommendations from the study highlighted the need for brands to develop integrated social media strategies that ensure consistent messaging and seamless user experiences across multiple platforms, as these efforts can contribute to maximizing brand loyalty among millennial consumers.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

## RESULTS

**Conceptual Gaps:** While Lee and Kim (2019) explored various social media engagement metrics like likes, shares, and comments, there is a lack of detailed investigation into other emerging metrics such as social media reach, sentiment analysis, or influencer impact, which could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics between social media engagement and brand loyalty among millennials. While Lee and Kim (2019) highlighted the mediating role of emotional engagement in the relationship between social media engagement and brand loyalty, there is a need for further research to delve deeper into the specific emotional triggers and mechanisms that drive brand loyalty among millennials on social media platforms, considering factors such as emotional contagion, emotional resonance, and emotional branding strategies.

**Contextual Gaps:** While Yang and Chen (2021) focused on the impact of user-generated content (UGC) on brand loyalty, there is a gap in understanding how different types of UGC (e.g., reviews, testimonials, visual content) influence brand perceptions and loyalty differently among millennials across various industries and product categories. While Park and Lee (2018) examined the influence of influencer marketing specifically on Instagram, there is a need for comparative studies across multiple social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, TikTok) to understand how platform-specific strategies and engagement dynamics affect brand loyalty among millennials in different social media ecosystems.

**Geographical Gaps:** While most studies focus on millennial consumers in general, there is a research gap in exploring cultural and regional variations in social media engagement and its impact on brand loyalty among millennials. Factors such as cultural values, societal norms, and regional digital landscapes could influence engagement behaviors and loyalty outcomes differently across diverse global markets. The studies primarily focus on developed economies or globally recognized social media platforms. There is a gap in research regarding the influence of social media engagement on brand loyalty among millennials in emerging markets, where digital adoption rates, platform preferences, and cultural influences may differ significantly from established markets, presenting unique challenges and opportunities for brands (Lee and Kim, 2019).

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the influence of social media engagement on brand loyalty among millennial consumers is a dynamic and multifaceted phenomenon that requires nuanced exploration across various dimensions. Studies such as those by Lee and Kim (2019), Yang and Chen (2021), Park and Lee (2018), Kim and Park (2020), Nguyen and Nguyen (2023), Wang and Liu (2019), and Zhang and Li (2022) have shed light on key aspects of this relationship, highlighting both the



opportunities and challenges faced by brands in leveraging social media platforms to foster brand loyalty among millennials.

The research has shown that higher levels of social media engagement, including likes, shares, comments, and user-generated content (UGC), are positively correlated with increased brand loyalty among millennials. Moreover, emotional engagement, influencer collaborations, customer engagement strategies, effective customer service practices, and cross-platform engagement all play crucial roles in shaping millennials' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors towards brands on social media.

However, there are notable research gaps that warrant further investigation. These include a deeper exploration of specific engagement metrics, the role of emotional triggers, cultural and regional variations, platform-specific strategies, and the influence of emerging markets on social media engagement and brand loyalty dynamics among millennials.

Overall, understanding the influence of social media engagement on brand loyalty among millennial consumers requires a holistic approach that considers not only quantitative metrics but also qualitative aspects such as emotional resonance, authenticity, and cultural nuances. Brands that can effectively navigate these complexities and tailor their strategies accordingly are likely to succeed in building strong and enduring relationships with millennial audiences in today's digital age.

### **Recommendations**

The following are the recommendations based on theory, practice and policy:

#### **Theory**

In advancing theoretical frameworks, it is crucial to incorporate emotional engagement metrics alongside traditional quantitative metrics such as likes and shares. This integration can enrich our understanding of how emotional resonance influences brand loyalty among millennial consumers on social media platforms. By exploring the mediating role of emotions in the relationship between social media engagement and brand loyalty, researchers can contribute valuable insights to theories of consumer behavior and relationship marketing. Additionally, theories should contextualize cultural and regional influences, providing a more nuanced perspective on social media engagement and brand loyalty dynamics among millennials in diverse global markets.

#### **Practice**

From a practical standpoint, brands should focus on creating authentic user-generated content (UGC) to foster brand loyalty among millennials. This involves encouraging consumers to generate genuine reviews, testimonials, and visual content that resonate with their experiences. Leveraging UGC can build trust, credibility, and loyalty among millennial consumers, as they are more likely to connect with content created by their peers. Furthermore, brands should strategically collaborate with influencers who align with their values and resonate authentically with millennial audiences. These partnerships should go beyond promotional content to create meaningful and engaging experiences that foster brand loyalty and advocacy.

#### **Policy**

On the policy front, it is essential to regulate influencer marketing practices to ensure transparency, authenticity, and ethical standards. Implementing guidelines and standards for influencer

collaborations can help build trust among consumers and safeguard against misleading or deceptive advertising practices. Additionally, supporting digital literacy initiatives is crucial in educating consumers, especially millennials, about social media engagement, data privacy, and online brand interactions. Empowering consumers with digital literacy skills enables them to make informed choices, navigate digital platforms responsibly, and participate meaningfully in brand-consumer interactions.

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