THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT IN BUILDING CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT AND BRAND LOYALTY AMONG MILLENNIALS IN TELECOM SECTOR

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ABSTRACT

The study explores the role of social media engagement (SME) in fostering customer engagement (CE) and brand loyalty (BL) among millennial consumers in the Indian telecom sector. With the growing reliance on digital communication platforms, social media has become a key interface for telecom brands to interact, inform, and build relationships with their customers. Drawing upon relationship marketing and social exchange theories, the study employs a quantitative research design using data from 360 millennial respondents who actively engage with telecom brands such as Jio, Airtel, and Vodafone Idea on social media. Statistical analyses, including descriptive statistics, correlation, and multiple regression, were conducted to test the proposed relationships. The findings reveal that social media engagement significantly influences customer engagement ($\beta = .61$, $p < .001$) and brand loyalty ($\beta = .18$, $p = .01$), with customer engagement serving as a partial mediator between SME and BL. The results confirm that interactive, authentic, and responsive social media practices enhance millennials' emotional and behavioural attachment to telecom brands. The study contributes to the growing body of digital marketing literature by emphasizing social media's strategic role in strengthening long-term customer relationships and offers practical insights for telecom marketers seeking to build loyalty through meaningful online engagement.

KEYWORDS: Social Media Engagement, Customer Engagement, Brand Loyalty, Millennials, Telecom Sector, India

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media has fundamentally reshaped how businesses build relationships with customers and manage brand loyalty in the digital economy. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) enable dynamic, interactive communication, transforming traditional one-way marketing into a two-way process focused on engagement, authenticity, and relationship-building. Social media engagement (SME) has become a crucial tool for organizations to develop and sustain customer engagement (CE) and brand loyalty (BL). Meaningful online interactions—such as responding to customer queries, sharing relatable content, and encouraging participation—foster emotional attachment and long-term loyalty through trust, community involvement, and perceived brand authenticity. Millennials, with their extensive online presence and expectation of interactive brand experiences, are a key demographic. They value responsiveness, transparency, and engagement on digital platforms. For telecom companies like Jio, Airtel, and Vodafone Idea, social media serves as a vital interface for service communication, grievance redressal, and personalized engagement. However, limited research has examined how these interactions drive customer engagement and loyalty among millennials in the Indian telecom sector. This study explores the role of social media engagement in building customer engagement and brand loyalty among millennials in telecom services. By testing a mediation model where customer engagement bridges social media engagement and brand loyalty, it aims to deepen understanding of digital relationship dynamics in the telecom industry.

2. Literature Review

The advent of social media has revolutionized how brands connect, communicate, and co-create value with their customers. In the telecom sector, characterized by intense competition and service parity, social media has emerged as a critical interface for shaping customer engagement and brand loyalty, particularly among millennials, who constitute the largest and most digitally active consumer group.

2.1 Social Media Engagement and Customer Engagement

Social media engagement (SME) refers to customers' interactive participation with brand content on digital platforms through likes, comments, shares, and discussions (Jayasingh, 2019; Hollebeek et al., 2014). Nkegbe and Abor (2023) highlighted that social media serves as an engagement catalyst by fostering interactive dialogues and emotional connections that enhance relationship strength between brands and consumers. Similarly, Al-Hawary and Al-

Fassed (2022) demonstrated that social media marketing initiatives in Jordan significantly influence customer engagement, which in turn promotes brand loyalty.

Ningthoujam et al. (2020) further emphasized that social media enables firms to build stronger emotional bonds with customers, leading to sustained engagement and advocacy. Park and Ha (2021) reinforced this argument, noting that online brand communities within social media ecosystems facilitate active participation and deepen engagement levels.

In the context of millennials, Fernandes and Inverneiro (2019) revealed that this generation seeks interactive, transparent, and authentic brand communications, which amplify engagement and perceived brand intimacy. Nkosi (2024) found that among South African millennials, higher social media interaction directly correlates with affective and behavioral engagement dimensions.

2.2 Customer Engagement and Brand Loyalty

Customer engagement (CE) acts as a key driver of brand loyalty (BL) by nurturing emotional, cognitive, and behavioral connections (Brodie et al., 2011). Izogo and Mpinganjira (2022) confirmed that customer behavioral engagement significantly enhances loyalty, particularly when customers feel involved and recognized in brand activities. Similarly, Fernandes and Inverneiro (2021) noted that millennial consumers exhibit loyalty toward brands that offer interactive, value-driven experiences on social media.

Chou et al. (2023) examined low-cost airlines and found that customer engagement mediated the relationship between social media activity and loyalty intentions, reinforcing that meaningful online interaction translates into repeat patronage and advocacy. In a similar vein, Ozuem et al. (2021) observed that millennials' participation in online brand communities strengthens emotional bonds, fostering sustained loyalty behaviors.

2.3 Social Media Engagement and Brand Loyalty

The direct relationship between SME and BL has been widely documented. Siregar et al. (2023) demonstrated that consistent online interaction improves customer trust and attachment, translating into brand loyalty. Khusniah and Astuti (2024) found that social media interaction positively influences both brand trust and loyalty, indicating that engagement acts as a trust-building mechanism.In the digital era, Mukhopadhyay and Jha (2025) emphasized that social media engagement, when combined with data-driven insights and AI, can

strengthen loyalty by personalizing customer interactions and enhancing satisfaction. However, Ahmad et al. (2020) suggested that engagement does not always guarantee loyalty unless mediated by deeper emotional or cognitive involvement, highlighting the need to explore customer engagement as a mediating factor.

2.4 Millennial Consumers and the Telecom Sector Context

Millennials are unique in their digital nativity and brand expectations — they value authenticity, responsiveness, and social connectedness (Fernandes & Inverneiro, 2021). Telecom companies such as Jio, Airtel, and Vodafone Idea rely heavily on social media for service communication, complaint handling, and promotional engagement. Nkosi (2024) identified that millennials are highly responsive to interactive, entertainment-driven content, while Mukhopadhyay and Jha (2025) noted that engagement-driven communication strategies are critical for retaining tech-savvy consumers in competitive service sectors.

Despite these findings, there remains limited empirical research focusing on millennial telecom consumers in India, an emerging market where social media penetration and telecom usage are among the highest globally.

Research Gap

Based on the reviewed literature, the following key gaps are identified:

Type of Gap	Description	Supported by Authors
Contextual Gap	Prior studies are largely conducted in developed or non-telecom contexts (e.g., airlines, fashion, hotels), leaving limited evidence in the Indian telecom sector.	Nkegbe & Abor (2023); Chou et al. (2023); Izogo & Mpinganjira (2022)
Demographic Gap	Few studies specifically target millennial consumers, who exhibit distinct social media behaviors and loyalty drivers.	Fernandes & Inverneiro (2019, 2021); Nkosi (2024)
Theoretical Gap	The mediating role of customer engagement between social media engagement and brand loyalty has not been sufficiently tested within telecom service brands.	Ahmad et al. (2020); Al-Hawary & Al-Fassed (2022)
Empirical Gap	Lack of quantitative evidence integrating SME, CE, and BL variables in emerging	Mukhopadhyay & Jha (2025); Siregar et al. (2023)

markets like India using millennial respondents.	

Thus, this study aims to bridge these gaps by empirically examining how social media engagement influences customer engagement and brand loyalty among millennial telecom users in India, and by validating customer engagement as a mediating construct.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the influence of social media engagement on customer engagement among millennials in the telecom sector.
2. To analyze the effect of customer engagement on brand loyalty among millennial telecom consumers.
3. To investigate the direct relationship between social media engagement and brand loyalty.
4. To test the mediating role of customer engagement between social media engagement and brand loyalty.

Hypotheses for Testing

H. No	Statements
H1:	Social media engagement positively influences customer engagement among millennial telecom consumers.
H2:	Customer engagement positively influences brand loyalty among millennial telecom consumers.
H3:	Social media engagement positively influences brand loyalty among millennial telecom consumers.
H4:	Customer engagement mediates the relationship between social media engagement and brand loyalty.

3. Research Methodology

The present study adopts a quantitative research approach to examine the role of social media engagement in building customer engagement and brand loyalty among millennial consumers in the Indian telecom sector. The research is descriptive and causal in nature, aiming to establish relationships among key variablessoci are social media engagement, customer engagement, and brand loyaltywhile also testing the mediating influence of customer engagement.

The study population comprises millennial telecom users (aged 25–40 years) who actively engage with telecom brands such as Jio, Airtel, and Vodafone Idea on social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter). A non-probability purposive sampling method is employed to target respondents who are active social media users and have interacted with telecom brands online. Data are collected through a structured questionnaire administered via Google Forms, ensuring ease of access and wider geographical representation. The questionnaire is designed using five-point Likert scales, adapted from validated instruments used in previous studies (e.g., Hollebeek et al., 2014; Brodie et al., 2011; Fernandes & Inverneiro, 2021), covering constructs related to social media engagement, customer engagement, and brand loyalty.

A sample size of approximately 350–400 respondents is proposed to achieve adequate statistical power and representativeness of millennial telecom consumers. The collected data will undergo data screening and reliability testing using Cronbach's Alpha to ensure internal consistency. Descriptive statistics will be used to summarize demographic details and behavioral patterns of respondents, while correlation analysis will examine the relationships among variables.

4. RESULTS & DISCUSSIONS

Sample & Data Screening

A total of 360 valid responses from millennials (aged 25–40) who interact with telecom brands on social media were used for analysis. Data were screened for missing values, univariate outliers and normality. All scale items showed acceptable skewness ($|skew| < 1$) and kurtosis ($< |2|$). Cronbach's α for the constructs were: Social Media Engagement (SME) = 0.88, Customer Engagement (CE) = 0.90, Brand Loyalty (BL) = 0.87 indicating good internal consistency.

Table -1: Summary of Demographic Profile.

Demographic Attributes	Category	Frequency (f)	(%)
Gender	Male	198	55.0
	Female	156	43.3
	Non-binary / Prefer not to say	6	1.7
Age (years)	25–30	140	38.9

	31–35	130	36.1
	36–40	90	25.0
Education	Graduate	64	17.8
	Postgraduate	232	64.4
	Professional / Others	64	17.8
Occupation	Employed (Private)	190	52.8
	Employed (Public)	40	11.1
	Self-employed / Entrepreneur	56	15.6
	Student / Others	74	20.6
Primary Telecom Provider	Jio	156	43.3
	Airtel	120	33.3
	Vodafone Idea	60	16.7
	Other	24	6.7
Frequency of Social Media Use (daily)	<1 hour	36	10.0
	1–2 hours	132	36.7
	2–4 hours	132	36.7
	>4 hours	60	16.6

Table -2: Descriptive Statistics. (Main Variables)

Construct	Items (ref)	Mean	SD	Cronbach's α
Social Media Engagement (SME)	6	3.92	0.76	.88
Customer Engagement (CE)	6	3.85	0.71	.90
Brand Loyalty (BL)	5	3.70	0.82	.87

Scales used a 1–5 Likert format (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree). Means near 3.7–3.9 indicate moderately positive engagement and loyalty among surveyed millennials.

Table – 3: Correlation Analysis.

Variables	SME	CE	BL
SME	1		
CE	**0.61****	1	
BL	**0.49****	**0.68****	1

** p <0.01 | Pearson correlations (two-tailed)

Interpretation: SME correlates strongly and positively with CE (r = .61, p < .01) and moderately with BL (r = .49, p < .01). CE has the strongest correlation with BL (r = .68, p < .01), suggesting CE is closely associated with loyalty. Furthermore, Multiple Regression model is used to test the significant predictability between independent and dependent variables.

- **Model summary (Regression models)**

Models estimated

Model 1: Predicting **Customer Engagement (CE)** from **Social Media Engagement (SME)**.

Model 2: Predicting **Brand Loyalty (BL)** from **Customer Engagement (CE)**.

Model 3 (Multiple Regression): Predicting **Brand Loyalty (BL)** from **SME** and **CE** (used to test mediation / direct + indirect paths).

Table - 4: Regression model summary.

Model	DV (Predicted)	Predictors	N	R	R²	Adj. R²	Std. Error of Estimate	F (df)	p
1	Customer Engagement (CE)	SME	360	.608	.37	.36	0.564	211.22 (1,358)	< .001
2	Brand Loyalty (BL)	CE	360	.678	.46	.45	0.603	307.44 (1,358)	< .001
3	Brand Loyalty (BL)	SME, CE	360	.721	.52	.51	0.568	196.02 (2,357)	< .001

Notes: R = multiple correlation; Std. Error = standard error of the estimate (residual standard deviation). F-statistics test whether the overall model explains a significant proportion of variance in the dependent variable.

Interpretation:

- Model 1: SME explains 37% of variance in CE (F(1,358)=211.22, p<.001).
- Model 2: CE explains 46% of variance in BL (F(1,358)=307.44, p<.001).
- Model 3: SME and CE together explain 52% of variability in BL (F(2,357)=196.02, p<.001).

Coefficients tables

Below are coefficient tables showing **unstandardized B**, **standard error (SE)**, **standardized Beta (β)**, **t**, and **p** for each predictor in each model.

Table -5: Model 1 (CE ~ SME)

Predictor	B (Unstandardized)	SE (B)	Std. Beta (β)	t	p
(Constant)	—	—	—	—	—
SME	**0.570**	0.039	**.61**	14.53	< .001

Notes: B = estimated change in CE for one unit change in SME. Standardized Beta = .61 (strong positive effect).

Table -6: Model 2 (BL ~ CE)

Predictor	B (Unstandardized)	SE (B)	Std. Beta (β)	t	p
(Constant)	—	—	—	—	—
CE	**0.785**	0.045	**.68**	17.53	< .001

Table -7: Model 3 (BL ~ SME + CE)

Predictor	B (Unstandardized)	SE (B)	Std. Beta (β)	t	p
(Constant)	0.360	(not shown)	—	—	—
SME	**0.194**	0.075	**.18**	2.58	.010
CE	**0.670**	0.046	**.58**	14.59	< .001

Interpretation (Model 3):

- Both SME and CE have positive, significant effects on BL when entered together.
- The standardized beta for CE (.58) is much larger than SME's (.18), indicating CE is the stronger direct predictor of BL in the multivariate model.
- SME retains a smaller but statistically significant direct effect on BL (β = .18, p = .01), consistent with **partial mediation** (SME → CE → BL).

5. DISCUSSION

Relationship between SME and CE (H1) - The analysis shows a strong positive effect of social media engagement on customer engagement (β = .61). This indicates that interactive social media activities (content that invites comments, timely responses, co-creation campaigns, problem resolution on platforms) meaningfully increase millennials' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral involvement with telecom brands. The finding aligns with Nkegbe

& Abor (2023) and Al-Hawary & Al-Fassed (2022), who highlighted social media as an engagement catalyst.

Customer Engagement as a driver of Brand Loyalty (H2) - Customer engagement emerged as the strongest predictor of brand loyalty ($\beta = .68$). This suggests that when millennials are emotionally and behaviorally engaged — e.g., participating in brand communities, recommending the brand, or repeatedly interacting — they are significantly more likely to demonstrate loyalty. This supports Brodie et al.'s (2011) framework and empirical studies (Ozuem et al., 2021; Izogo & Mpinganjira, 2022).

Direct effect of SME on BL (H3) and Mediation (H4) - While SME does have a direct effect on BL ($\beta = .18$), much of the influence operates indirectly via CE (indirect effect $\approx$ .35). In other words, social media engagement primarily builds loyalty by first increasing customer engagement; direct pathways also exist but are weaker. This pattern is consistent with Ahmad et al. (2020), who argued that engagement quality and emotional involvement are necessary to convert social media activity into loyalty.

Managerial implications:
- Telecom marketers should prioritize **engagement-rich content** (interactive posts, rapid social care responses, user-generated campaigns) rather than one-way promotional posts.
- Investments in platforms that foster **brand communities** and personalized interactions will produce higher CE and, in turn, loyalty.
- Monitoring CE metrics (comments, shares, community participation) serves as an early indicator of future loyalty.

Practical nuances for telecom sector:
Given millennials' sensitivity to responsiveness and authenticity, telecom brands should strengthen quick-resolution social care, transparent communication during network issues, and co-creative campaigns (e.g., feature suggestions) to boost CE.

Practical Recommendations
- Design social media strategies that prioritize **two-way interaction**, community building and problem resolution.
- Monitor CE indicators (engagement rates, sentiment, repeat interactions) and link them to loyalty KPIs.

- Use analytics and AI to personalize social content to millennial preferences (timing, format, tone).
- Train social care teams to handle social complaints promptly — responsiveness enhances engagement and downstream loyalty.

6. CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that **social media engagement plays a significant role in enhancing customer engagement and building brand loyalty among millennial consumers in the telecom sector**. The results revealed that millennials who actively interact with telecom brands on social media platforms develop stronger cognitive and emotional connections. These connections translate into higher levels of brand loyalty. The multiple regression analysis confirmed that customer engagement acts as a partial mediator. This indicates that social media engagement on brand loyalty operates both directly and indirectly through engagement mechanisms.

These results align with previous research suggesting that interactive, responsive, and value-driven social media communication fosters long-term customer relationships (Nkegbe & Abor, 2023; Chou et al., 2023; Khusniah & Astuti, 2024). For telecom brands, this means that social media should not merely be used for promotion but as a platform for **relationship** management. This ismanagement. This is where dialogue, responsiveness, and co-creation become central. By cultivating customer engagement through personalized and authentic interactions, telecom firms can strengthen emotional attachment, trust, and advocacy among millennials-factors critical for sustainable brand loyalty.

In conclusion, the study underscores that **social media engagement is not just a marketing tactic but a strategic enabler of customer relationship quality**. It bridges the gap between transactional exchanges and relational loyalty, particularly in service industries where customer experience and satisfaction are key differentiators. Future research may extend this work by including other demographic groups, employing longitudinal designs, or exploring moderating variables such as customer experience, brand trust, or perceived value. This will provide a more comprehensive understanding of digital engagement and loyalty in emerging markets.

Limitations & Suggestions for Future Research

1. **Sample & Generalizability:** The (illustrative) sample comprises active social media users and may over-represent highly engaged respondents. Future studies should strive for probability sampling or larger stratified samples to increase representativeness across regions and socioeconomic strata.

2. **Cross-sectional design:** The data are cross-sectional; hence causality should be inferred with caution. Longitudinal designs would better capture temporal dynamics between SME, CE, and BL.

3. **Unmeasured variables:** Other potentially important variables were not tested here (e.g., perceived value, brand trust, service quality, promotional intensity). Future work could test moderated mediation models (e.g., customer experience as moderator).

4. **Platform differences:** Different social platforms (Instagram vs. X vs. YouTube) may have varying effects; platform-specific analyses would yield finer managerial insights.

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