

Causal factors of brand engagement affecting brand loyalty in the E-sports industry

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Abstract: This study aims to examine the causal relationships among influencer marketing, social media marketing, content marketing, consumer brand engagement, and brand loyalty in the E-Sports industry in Thailand. A mixed-methods research design is employed, comprising in-depth interviews with five key informants and a quantitative survey of 400 consumers with experience playing, watching, or participating in E-Sports communities in Thailand. General Systems Theory and the Input–Process–Output framework provide the theoretical foundation, with influencer marketing, social media marketing, and content marketing representing input factors, consumer brand engagement representing the process mechanism, and brand loyalty representing the output. Data will be analyzed using descriptive statistics, confirmatory factor analysis, and structural equation modeling. The expected findings will demonstrate the significant effects of digital marketing strategies on consumer brand engagement and brand loyalty, as well as the influence of consumer brand engagement on brand loyalty, including potential indirect relationships. The study is expected to validate an integrated causal model explaining how digital marketing strategies strengthen consumer engagement and sustainable brand loyalty. The findings will provide practical guidance for E-Sports businesses, game brands, digital marketers, influencers, and brand managers in developing effective digital strategies to enhance consumer relationships and long-term brand loyalty.

Keywords: Brand loyalty, Consumer brand engagement, Content marketing, Influencer marketing, Social media marketing.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Importance of the Problem

Digital technology, the internet, and social media platforms have significantly transformed consumer lifestyles, media consumption patterns, and decision-making processes. These changes have encouraged business organizations to shift their marketing communication strategies from traditional channels to digital platforms in order to create brand awareness, stimulate interaction, and develop long-term relationships with consumers (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kim & Ko, 2012). In the contemporary digital environment, marketing communication is no longer limited to one-way communication. Instead, it increasingly involves interactive, personalized, and community-based communication that allows consumers to participate in brand activities, share experiences, and develop stronger relationships with brands. The E-Sports industry has become one of the important digital business sectors driven by online gaming, live streaming, professional competitions, digital communities, and social media interactions. Consumers in this industry are not only players or viewers but also active participants who follow teams, streamers, players, tournaments, and gaming brands through online platforms. They interact with brands by watching livestreams, sharing content, commenting on posts, joining online communities, and participating in brand-related activities. This

makes the E-Sports industry a suitable context for examining how digital marketing strategies influence consumer brand engagement and brand loyalty (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Newzoo, 2025).

In the E-Sports business context, influencer marketing plays a significant role in connecting brands with target consumers. Influencers such as professional E-Sports players, streamers, gaming content creators, and online opinion leaders can act as credible sources of brand communication. Their credibility, trustworthiness, congruence with the brand, and authenticity can influence consumers' perceptions, attitudes, and engagement with brands (Ao, Bansal, Pruthi, & Khaskheli, 2023; Lou, Tan, & Chen, 2019; Ohanian, 1990). Consumers in gaming communities often rely on influencers not only for product information but also for entertainment, social connection, and identity expression. Therefore, influencer marketing has become an important strategy for strengthening consumer relationships in the E-Sports industry. Social media marketing is another important strategy for E-Sports businesses because social media platforms allow brands to communicate with consumers rapidly, continuously, and interactively. Key elements of social media marketing, such as entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization, and electronic word-of-mouth, can stimulate consumer attention and encourage participation in brand-related activities (Bilgin, 2018; Cheung, Pires, & Rosenberger, 2020; Kim & Ko, 2012). In the E-Sports context, consumers frequently use social media to follow tournaments, teams, game updates, brand campaigns, and community discussions. As a result, social media marketing can serve as a strategic mechanism for enhancing consumer brand engagement and brand loyalty.

Content marketing also plays an important role in creating value and building long-term relationships between brands and consumers. Valuable and relevant content can provide information, entertainment, interactivity, personalization, and meaningful brand experiences that encourage consumers to engage with brands (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019; Jacob & Johnson, 2021). In the E-Sports industry, digital content such as competition highlights, game reviews, livestream clips, tutorials, team stories, and interactive campaigns can attract consumers' attention and encourage them to interact with brands. Effective content marketing can therefore help transform short-term consumer attention into deeper consumer brand engagement and long-term brand loyalty. Although influencer marketing, social media marketing, and content marketing have been widely recognized as important digital marketing strategies, previous studies have often examined these factors separately. Some studies have focused on influencer marketing, while others have examined social media marketing or content marketing in isolation (Ao et al., 2023; Cheung et al., 2020; Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). However, limited research has integrated these three digital marketing factors into a single causal relationship model, particularly in the E-Sports industry. This creates an important research gap because consumers in E-Sports communities are exposed to multiple digital marketing activities at the same time, and these activities may jointly influence consumer brand engagement and brand loyalty.

Consumer brand engagement is an important construct that explains consumers' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral relationships with brands (Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić, & Ilić, 2013; Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014; Vivek, Beatty, & Morgan, 2012). In highly interactive digital contexts such as E-Sports, consumer brand engagement may function as a process mechanism that links digital marketing strategies to long-term brand outcomes. Consumers who are interested in, emotionally connected to, and behaviorally active toward a brand are more likely to develop favorable attitudes, repeat behaviors, and advocacy toward the brand. Therefore, consumer brand engagement is an important mechanism for explaining how digital marketing strategies can lead to brand loyalty. Brand loyalty is considered an important outcome of long-term consumer-brand relationships. It reflects consumers' favorable attitudes, continued usage or purchase behaviors, and willingness to recommend or support a brand (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Oliver, 1999; Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996). In the E-Sports industry, brand loyalty may be reflected through continuous brand following, repeated participation in brand activities, preference for brand-related products or services, and recommendations to other members of gaming communities. Understanding how digital marketing strategies and consumer brand engagement influence brand loyalty is therefore important for both academic development and practical brand management in E-Sports businesses.

Based on these research gaps, this study aims to develop and validate a causal relationship model of influencer marketing, social media marketing, and content marketing influencing consumer brand engagement and brand loyalty in the E-Sports industry. Drawing upon General Systems Theory and the Input–Process–Output framework, influencer marketing, social media marketing, and content marketing are conceptualized as input factors; consumer brand engagement is conceptualized as the process mechanism; and brand loyalty is conceptualized as the output of the system (Bertalanffy, 1968; Mishra, Kumar, & Garg, 2013; Pokharna & Bobra, 2016). This theoretical perspective provides a systematic explanation of how digital marketing activities can generate consumer engagement and lead to sustainable brand loyalty in the E-Sports business context. The results of this research are expected to contribute to the literature on digital marketing, consumer brand engagement, and brand loyalty by integrating three key digital marketing strategies into a systems-based causal relationship model. In addition, the findings can provide practical guidelines for E-Sports businesses, game brands, event organizers, digital marketers, and brand managers in designing effective marketing strategies to enhance consumer engagement and build long-term brand loyalty.

1.2. Research Question

- 1) What are the causal factors affecting consumer brand engagement and brand loyalty in the e-sports industry?
- 2) In what ways are causal factors influencing consumer brand engagement and brand loyalty in the e-sports industry?
- 3) The model of causal factors of consumer brand engagement affects brand loyalty in the e-sports industry, and what does it look like?

1.3. Research Objective

- 1) To study the causal factors affecting consumer brand engagement and brand loyalty in the e-sports industry.
- 2) To study the influence of causal factors affecting consumer brand engagement and brand loyalty in the e-sports industry.
- 3) To develop a model of the causal factors of consumer brand engagement affecting brand loyalty in the e-sports industry.

1.4. Research Framework

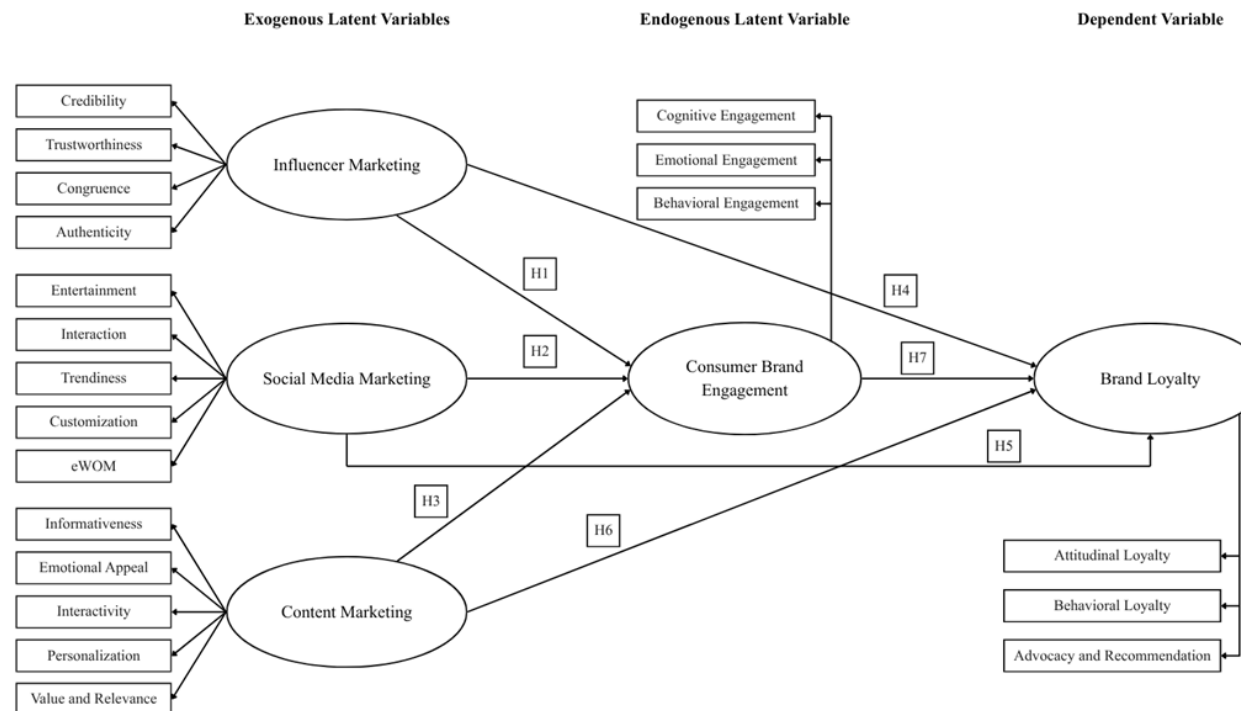


Figure 1.
Research Framework.

1.5. Research Hypothesis

The research hypotheses are formulated based on the research framework and the review of related literature, as follows:

Hypothesis 1: Influencer marketing affects consumer brand engagement.

Hypothesis 2: Influencer marketing affects brand loyalty through consumer brand engagement.

Hypothesis 3: Social media marketing affects consumer brand engagement.

Hypothesis 4: Social media marketing affects brand loyalty through consumer brand engagement.

Hypothesis 5: Content marketing affects consumer brand engagement.

Hypothesis 6: Content marketing affects brand loyalty through consumer brand engagement.

Hypothesis 7: Consumer brand engagement affects brand loyalty.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Concepts, Theories and Related Research Results

2.1.1. Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing is a digital marketing strategy in which brands collaborate with individuals who have the ability to influence the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of online audiences. In the E-Sports industry, influencers include professional players, streamers, gaming content creators, and online opinion leaders who communicate brand-related information and interact with highly engaged gaming communities. Influencer marketing is theoretically associated with source credibility and persuasion, whereby consumers' responses to influencer-generated messages are influenced by the perceived expertise, credibility, trustworthiness, and authenticity of the source. The effectiveness of influencer marketing also depends on the perceived congruence between the influencer and the promoted brand. Previous studies have indicated that credibility, trustworthiness, congruence, and authenticity are

important characteristics that can shape consumer responses to influencer marketing (Ao et al., 2023; Lou et al., 2019; Ohanian, 1990). Accordingly, this study conceptualizes influencer marketing as consisting of credibility, trustworthiness, congruence, and authenticity, which are expected to contribute to consumer brand engagement and brand loyalty.

2.1.2. Social Media Marketing

Social media marketing refers to the use of social media platforms to communicate with consumers, create brand awareness, facilitate interaction, and encourage participation in brand-related activities. Social media provides an interactive and continuous communication environment in which consumers can access, respond to, and share brand-related information. The concept is supported by relationship marketing and social media engagement perspectives, which emphasize interaction, participation, and consumer-generated communication as mechanisms for strengthening relationships between brands and consumers. Previous studies have identified entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization, and electronic word-of-mouth as important dimensions of social media marketing (Bilgin, 2018; Cheung et al., 2020; Kim & Ko, 2012). In the E-Sports industry, these dimensions are particularly relevant because consumers actively follow tournaments, teams, professional players, streamers, and gaming communities through social media. Therefore, this study conceptualizes social media marketing through these five dimensions and examines its influence on consumer brand engagement and brand loyalty.

2.1.3 Content Marketing

Content marketing refers to the strategic creation and distribution of valuable, relevant, informative, and engaging content to attract, retain, and develop relationships with target consumers. From a content marketing perspective, consumers are more likely to engage with brands when digital content provides meaningful information, emotional stimulation, opportunities for interaction, and value that corresponds with their interests and needs. Content marketing therefore extends beyond the simple provision of promotional information and emphasizes the creation of consumer-centered experiences. Previous research suggests that content characteristics can strengthen consumer engagement, perceived value, trust, and brand loyalty (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019; Jacob & Johnson, 2021; Lou & Xie, 2021). In the E-Sports industry, content may include game reviews, tournament highlights, livestream clips, tutorials, team stories, behind-the-scenes materials, and interactive campaigns. Accordingly, this study conceptualizes content marketing as comprising informativeness, emotional appeal, interactivity, personalization, and value and relevance.

2.1.4. Consumer Brand Engagement

Consumer brand engagement refers to the degree of consumers' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral involvement in interactions with a brand. The concept is grounded in the engagement perspective, which views consumers as active participants in brand relationships rather than passive recipients of marketing communications. Consumer brand engagement reflects consumers' attention and mental involvement, emotional connection, and active participation in brand-related activities. Brodie et al. (2013), Hollebeek et al. (2014) and Vivek et al. (2012) conceptualized engagement as a multidimensional construct involving cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects. In digital and E-Sports environments, consumer brand engagement can occur through activities such as following brands, watching brand-related content, liking, commenting, sharing, creating content, participating in online communities, and joining brand activities. Therefore, this study conceptualizes consumer brand engagement through cognitive engagement, emotional engagement, and behavioral engagement and positions it as the process mechanism linking digital marketing strategies to brand loyalty.

2.1.5. Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty refers to the strength of consumers' favorable attitudes, continued behavioral support, and commitment toward a particular brand over time. The concept is grounded in consumer-brand

relationship and loyalty theories, which distinguish loyalty between attitudinal and behavioral dimensions. Brand loyalty reflects not only repeated usage or purchase but also consumers' preference, commitment, willingness to continue supporting a brand, and readiness to recommend it to others. Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001), Oliver (1999) and Zeithaml et al. (1996) emphasized the importance of behavioral and attitudinal responses in explaining consumer loyalty. In the E-Sports industry, brand loyalty may be demonstrated through continued following of teams or game brands, repeated participation in brand activities, preference for particular gaming-related products or services, and recommendations within online gaming communities. Accordingly, this study conceptualizes brand loyalty through attitudinal loyalty, behavioral loyalty, and advocacy or recommendation and considers it the output of the proposed causal model.

2.2. Relationship Between Variables and Hypotheses

2.2.1. Hypothesis 1

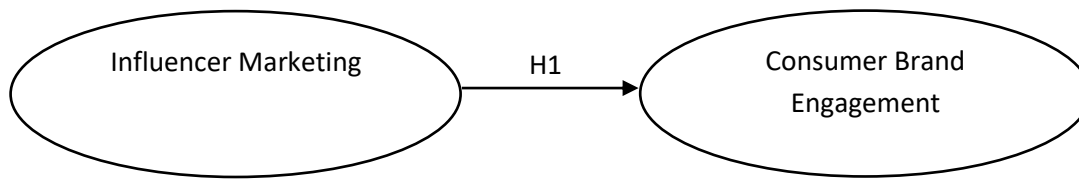


Table 1.

Measures and the Relationship of Variables between Influencer Marketing and Consumer Brand Engagement.

References Author(s) / Year	Influencer Marketing				Consumer Brand Engagement		
	Credibility	Trustworthiness	Congruence	Authenticity	Cognitive Engagement	Emotional Engagement	Behavioral Engagement
Lou et al. (2019)	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
Cheung, Leung, Yang, Koay, and Chang (2022)	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
Ao et al. (2023)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Dandona, Shikha, Dani, Sangeetha, and Patra (2025)	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓

2.2.2. Hypothesis 2

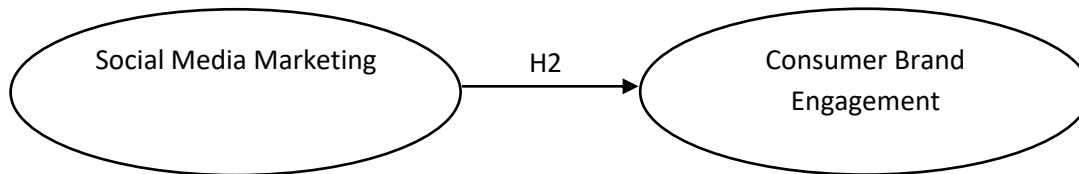
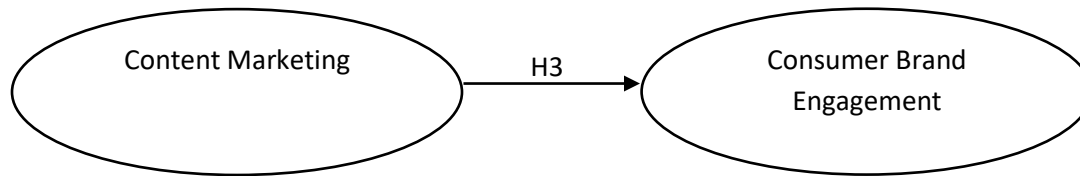


Table 2.

Measures and the Relationship of Variables between Social Media Marketing and Consumer Brand Engagement.

References Author(s) / Year	Social Media Marketing					Consumer Brand Engagement		
	Entertainment	Interaction	Trendiness	Customization	eWOM	Cognitive Engagement	Emotional Engagement	Behavioral Engagement
Kim and Ko (2012)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Cheung et al. (2020)	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Bilal, Jianqu, and Ming (2021)	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Adzhani and Widodo (2023)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

2.2.3. Hypothesis 3**Table 3.**

Measures and the Relationship of Variables between Content Marketing and Consumer Brand Engagement.

References Author(s) / Year	Content Marketing					Consumer Brand Engagement		
	Informativeness	Emotional Appeal	Interactivity	Personalization	Value and Relevance	Cognitive Engagement	Emotional Engagement	Behavioral Engagement
Hollebeek and Macky (2019)	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Jacob and Johnson (2021)	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mahmić and Klico (2022)	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Odoom (2025)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

2.2.4. Hypothesis 4

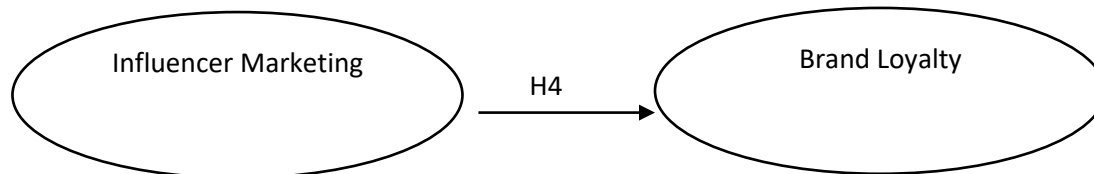


Table 4.

Measures and the Relationship of Variables between Influencer Marketing and Brand Loyalty.

References Author(s) / Year	Influencer Marketing				Brand Loyalty		
	Credibility	Trustworthiness	Congruence	Authenticity	Attitudinal Loyalty	Behavioral Loyalty	Advocacy and Recommendation
Pinto and Paramita (2021)	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Tarmidi and Rimba (2022)	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
Kumar and Bhatia (2024)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Günay (2025)	✓		✓		✓	✓	

2.2.5. Hypothesis 5

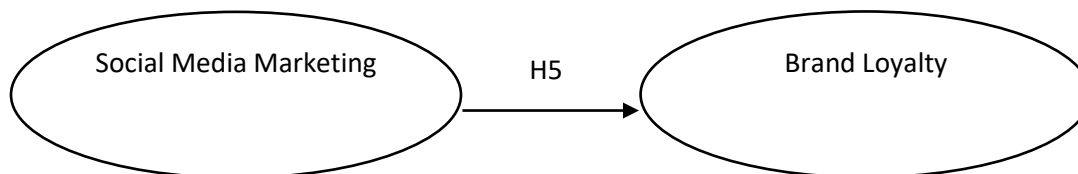


Table 5.

Measures and the Relationship of Variables between Social Media Marketing and Brand Loyalty.

References Author(s) / Year	Social Media Marketing					Brand Loyalty		
	Entertainment	Interaction	Trendiness	Customization	eWOM	Attitudinal Loyalty	Behavioral Loyalty	Advocacy and Recommendation
Bilgin (2018)	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Ebrahim (2020)			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Althuwaini (2022)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Kainde and Mandagi (2023)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

2.2.6. Hypothesis 6

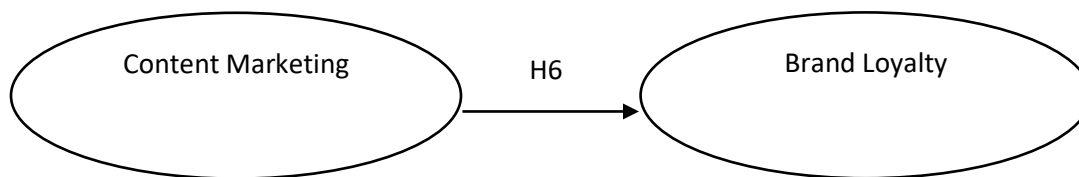


Table 6.

Measures and the Relationship of Variables between Content Marketing and Brand Loyalty.

References Author(s) / Year	Content Marketing					Brand Loyalty		
	Informativeness	Emotional Appeal	Interactivity	Personalization	Value and Relevance	Attitudinal Loyalty	Behavioral Loyalty	Advocacy and Recommendation
Lou and Xie (2021)	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Jafarova and Tolon (2022)	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Bui, Tran, Alang, and Le (2023)	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	
Xie and Lou (2024)	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓

2.2.7. Hypothesis 7

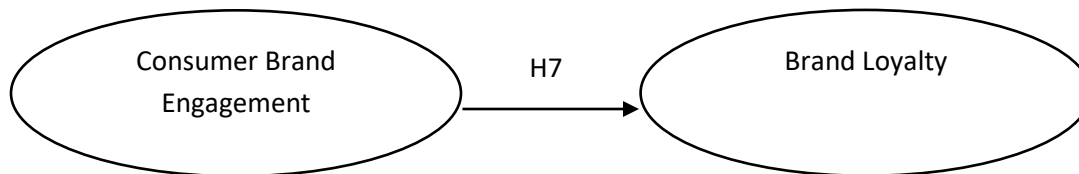


Table 7.
Measures and the Relationship of Variables between Consumer Brand Engagement and Brand Loyalty.

References Author(s) / Year	Consumer Brand Engagement			Brand Loyalty		
	Cognitive Engagement	Emotional Engagement	Behavioral Engagement	Attitudinal Loyalty	Behavioral Loyalty	Advocacy and Recommendation
Rather, Tehseen, and Parrey (2018)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Purnami and Mujiati (2019)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Susanti, Rafika, and Melinda (2021)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tuti and Sulistia (2022)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods research design by integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches. The qualitative approach is used to examine and refine the research variables, components, and measurement items based on expert opinions. The quantitative approach is used to test the causal relationship model of influencer marketing, social media marketing, and content marketing influencing consumer brand engagement and brand loyalty in the E-Sports industry. The research model is developed based on a review of related literature, General Systems Theory, and the Input–Process–Output framework.

3.2. Population and Sample

The population of this study consists of consumers in Thailand who have experience playing, watching, following, or participating in E-Sports activities through online platforms or E-Sports communities. For the quantitative phase, the sample consists of 400 respondents selected from E-Sports consumers in Thailand. The sample size is considered appropriate for structural equation modeling because the research model includes 5 latent variables and 20 observed variables. For the qualitative phase, the key informants consist of five experts and experienced professionals in the E-Sports business, digital marketing, influencer marketing, branding, and consumer behavior. The key informants are selected through purposive sampling based on their knowledge and experience relevant to the research context.

3.3. Research Instruments

The research instruments used in this study consist of an in-depth interview form and a structured questionnaire. The in-depth interview form is used to collect qualitative data from experts to confirm and refine the research variables and measurement components. The structured questionnaire is developed based on a review of related literature and the qualitative findings. The questionnaire consists of items measuring five latent variables: influencer marketing, social media marketing, content marketing, consumer brand engagement, and brand loyalty. The measurement items are assessed using a five-point Likert scale. The content validity of the questionnaire will be examined by experts using the Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC), and the reliability of the instrument will be tested using Cronbach's alpha coefficient.

3.4. Data Collection

The data collection process consists of both qualitative and quantitative phases. In the qualitative phase, data will be collected through in-depth interviews with five key informants. The interview data will be analyzed using content analysis to synthesize important issues and refine the questionnaire. In the quantitative phase, data will be collected through an online questionnaire from consumers who have experience playing, watching, following, or participating in E-Sports communities in Thailand. Data collection will be conducted through online platforms and E-Sports -related communities.

3.5. Statistics Used for Data Analysis

The data analysis consists of qualitative and quantitative analyses. For qualitative data, content analysis will be used to analyze and synthesize the information obtained from in-depth interviews. For quantitative data, descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation, will be used to describe the characteristics of the respondents and the level of each research variable. Inferential statistics will be used to test the research hypotheses and validate the proposed model. Pearson correlation analysis will be conducted to examine the relationships among the observed variables. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) will be used to confirm the measurement model. Structural equation modeling (SEM) will be used to test the causal relationship model of influencer marketing, social media marketing, and content marketing influencing consumer brand engagement and brand loyalty in the E-Sports industry.

4. Anticipated Results

The anticipated results of this research are expected to provide a causal relationship model of influencer marketing, social media marketing, and content marketing that influences consumer brand engagement and brand loyalty in the E-Sports industry. The model is expected to explain how influencer marketing, social media marketing, and content marketing function as key digital marketing factors that stimulate consumer brand engagement and lead to brand loyalty among e-sports consumers in Thailand. It is also expected that consumer brand engagement will act as an important mechanism linking digital marketing strategies to brand loyalty.

The findings are expected to contribute to academic knowledge in digital marketing, consumer brand engagement, and brand loyalty by integrating key digital marketing strategies into a single causal relationship model. In terms of practical benefits, E-Sports businesses, game brands, event organizers, digital marketers, and brand managers can apply the research findings to develop effective marketing strategies, strengthen consumer engagement, and build sustainable brand loyalty in the e-sports industry.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

5.1. Conclusion

This research proposes a causal relationship model of influencer marketing, social media marketing, and content marketing influencing consumer brand engagement and brand loyalty in the E-Sports industry. The study applies General Systems Theory and the Input–Process–Output framework to explain the relationship among the variables. Influencer marketing, social media marketing, and content marketing are considered input factors, consumer brand engagement is considered the process mechanism, and brand loyalty is considered the output of the system. The proposed model consists of five latent variables and twenty observed variables, which are developed from the review of related concepts, theories, and previous research.

The study is designed to examine both the direct effects of digital marketing strategies on consumer brand engagement and brand loyalty, and the effect of consumer brand engagement on brand loyalty. The expected findings are anticipated to provide a clearer understanding of how digital marketing activities can enhance consumer engagement and strengthen long-term brand loyalty in the E-Sports

industry. Therefore, this research can contribute to the development of academic knowledge in digital marketing, consumer brand engagement, and brand loyalty in the context of digital business.

5.2. Recommendation

E-Sports businesses, game brands, E-Sports event organizers, digital marketers, and brand managers can apply the proposed model as a guideline for developing effective digital marketing strategies. Businesses should select credible, trustworthy, congruent, and authentic influencers to communicate with target consumers. They should also develop social media marketing activities that provide entertainment, interaction, updated information, customization, and electronic word-of-mouth. In addition, content marketing should focus on creating informative, emotionally appealing, interactive, personalized, valuable, and relevant content that encourages consumers to participate in brand-related activities.

For future research, the proposed causal relationship model should be empirically tested using structural equation modeling with data collected from E-Sports consumers in Thailand. Future studies may also compare different groups of E-Sports consumers, such as players, viewers, streamers' followers, and online community members, in order to better understand differences in consumer brand engagement and brand loyalty. Moreover, additional variables such as brand trust, brand experience, perceived value, and online community identification may be examined to further extend the proposed model.

Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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