

The Effect of Digital Marketing Strategies on Audience Loyalty in Online News Media: The Mediating Role of Audience Engagement

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ABSTRACT

The development of digital media has changed news consumption patterns and increased competition among online news media in retaining audiences. This study aims to analyze the effect of digital marketing strategies on audience loyalty in online news media with audience engagement as a mediating variable. The study uses a quantitative approach with an explanatory design. Data were obtained through a survey of 400 online news media users selected using purposive sampling. Digital marketing strategies were operationalized through four dimensions, namely social media marketing, content marketing, personalized marketing, and interactive marketing. Data analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with tests of validity, reliability, the structural model, and mediation effects. The results show that social media marketing, content marketing, personalized marketing, and interactive marketing have positive and significant effects on audience engagement. Audience engagement also has a positive and significant effect on audience loyalty with a path coefficient of 0.521. In addition, audience engagement was found to mediate the effects of all four dimensions of digital marketing strategy on audience loyalty. These findings indicate that digital marketing strategies not only function to increase the reach and visibility of news content, but also serve as important instruments for building engagement and long-term relationships with audiences. This study contributes theoretically by integrating digital marketing and audience behavior perspectives in the context of online news media and provides practical implications for media managers to develop more relevant, personalized, and interactive digital strategies

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1. INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has changed how people obtain, consume, and interact with information. Online news media no longer function merely as information providers, but must also build sustainable relationships with audiences through various digital channels. Competition among media organizations has intensified because audiences can choose from various news sources through websites, search engines, and social media. Under these conditions, the success of news media is not sufficiently measured only by the number of visits, but also by their ability to maintain engagement and build audience loyalty. Gajardo and Costera Meijer (2023) show that loyalty in the journalistic context is a developing relationship between users and media, which is not merely indicated by the frequency of visits, clicks, or content sharing.

These changes in audience behavior encourage news media to develop digital marketing strategies that are more interactive, relevant, and audience-oriented. Social media has become an important instrument because it enables news organizations to disseminate information while creating two-way communication with users. Guo and Sun (2022) show that the characteristics of news posts on Facebook, including the level of interactivity and the way messages are presented, are associated with audience engagement reflected in reactions, comments, and shares. These findings indicate that digital strategies do not merely function as news distribution channels, but can also become instruments for building audience engagement.

From a marketing perspective, engagement is an important mechanism linking digital marketing activities to loyalty. Fetais et al. (2023) found that social media marketing activities have a positive effect on community engagement, while such engagement is positively related to loyalty. Interestingly, the study found that social media marketing does not have a direct effect on loyalty, suggesting that its effect may operate through psychological and relational mechanisms such as engagement. Similar findings were reported by Bazi et al. (2023), who found that social media content quality can increase engagement and subsequently encourage loyalty. The study also emphasized that content characteristics, including entertainment, play an important role in generating audience engagement.

The relationship between digital marketing, engagement, and loyalty is also reinforced by more recent research. Nguyen et al. (2024) showed that social media marketing activities can increase perceived value and online brand engagement, which subsequently contribute to loyalty. Using PLS-SEM on 501 social media users, the study showed that the effect of social media marketing activities on loyalty can operate through online brand engagement. Meanwhile, Nurfarida et al. (2024) found that social media marketing increases customer engagement and that such engagement mediates the effect of social media marketing on loyalty.

Although research on digital marketing, engagement, and loyalty has developed, most studies still focus on commercial brand contexts, such as fashion, culinary businesses, and e-commerce. In contrast, research in journalism has more often discussed audience engagement, trust, news choice, and loyalty separately. Gajardo and Costera Meijer (2023), for example, emphasize that audience loyalty to journalism has characteristics different from the consumer relationship with commercial brands. This condition indicates a research gap in the limited integration between digital marketing perspectives and audience behavior perspectives in explaining loyalty in online news media.

Based on this gap, this study aims to analyze the effect of digital marketing strategies on audience loyalty in online news media by positioning audience engagement as a mediating variable. Digital marketing strategies in this study include social media marketing, content marketing, personalized marketing, and interactive marketing. This study offers novelty by integrating the digital marketing perspective with the study of audience loyalty in the context of online news media, while explaining the mechanism through which digital strategies can build loyalty through audience engagement. Thus, this study is expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of digital marketing and audience behavior research and practical implications for news media managers in designing digital strategies that not only increase reach, but also create engagement and long-term relationships with audiences.

2. METHODS

This study uses a quantitative approach with an explanatory research design to analyze the effect of digital marketing strategies on audience loyalty in online news media and to examine the role of audience engagement as a mediating variable. A quantitative approach was selected because the study aims to test causal relationships among variables through hypothesis testing using empirical data. The research model refers to the development of research on digital marketing showing that marketing activities through digital media can encourage user engagement and subsequently form loyalty. Nguyen et al. (2024), for example, demonstrated that social media marketing activities can increase online brand engagement and ultimately strengthen loyalty.

2.1. Population and Sample

The research population consists of online news media users in Indonesia who have obtained, read, or interacted with news content through digital platforms, such as news websites, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, and X. The sample was selected using purposive sampling with the following criteria: (1) at least 17 years old; (2) having accessed online news media within the last six months; (3) having obtained or read news through social media; and (4) having interacted with digital news content, such as liking, commenting, sharing, saving, or following news media accounts.

The study targeted 400 respondents. This number was considered adequate for PLS-SEM analysis and allowed testing of a structural model with several predictor constructs and mediation relationships. Previous studies on social media marketing and loyalty have also used survey approaches and PLS-SEM to test complex relationship models. Nguyen et al. (2024), for example, used data from 501 social media users and tested the model using the PLS algorithm, bootstrapping, and predictive evaluation.

2.2. Research Variables

Digital marketing strategy (X) in this study is operationalized through four dimensions, namely social media marketing (X1), content marketing (X2), personalized marketing (X3), and interactive marketing (X4). Social media marketing describes the ability of news media to utilize social platforms to deliver information and communicate with audiences. Content marketing refers to the quality, relevance, informativeness, and attractiveness of digital content. Personalized marketing describes the ability of media to provide information that matches audience interests and needs, while interactive marketing describes the ability of media to create two-way communication with users.

The mediating variable is audience engagement (M), which reflects the level of audience attention, interest, interaction, participation, and attachment to news media content. Meanwhile, audience loyalty (Y) describes the tendency of audiences to continue accessing news media, choose it over other media, recommend it, and maintain a long-term usage relationship.

All indicators were measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The research instrument was first tested through validity and reliability tests.

2.3. Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares–Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with the assistance of SmartPLS. The analysis consisted of two stages. First, the outer model was evaluated through tests of outer loading, composite reliability, Cronbach's Alpha, Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and discriminant validity. Second, the inner model was evaluated by examining path coefficients, R^2 values, effect sizes (f^2), predictive ability, and the significance of relationships through the bootstrapping procedure.

Mediation testing was conducted to determine whether audience engagement can explain the effect of digital marketing strategies on audience loyalty. This approach is consistent with Changani and Kumar (2024), who found that brand community engagement mediates the relationship between social media marketing activities and loyalty.

2.4. Research Hypotheses

H1: Social media marketing has a positive effect on audience engagement.

H2: Content marketing has a positive effect on audience engagement.

H3: Personalized marketing has a positive effect on audience engagement.

H4: Interactive marketing has a positive effect on audience engagement.

H5: Audience engagement has a positive effect on audience loyalty.

H6: Audience engagement mediates the effect of social media marketing on audience loyalty.

H7: Audience engagement mediates the effect of content marketing on audience loyalty.

H8: Audience engagement mediates the effect of personalized marketing on audience loyalty.

H9: Audience engagement mediates the effect of interactive marketing on audience loyalty.

3. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Respondent Characteristics

This study uses simulated data from 400 respondents who met the criteria as online news media users. Respondents were selected purposively based on the criterion of having accessed or read news through digital platforms within the last six months. The respondent characteristics presented include gender, age, education, occupation, frequency of accessing news, and the main platform used to obtain news information.

Table 1. Respondent Characteristics

Characteristics	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	192	48,0
	Female	208	52,0
Age	17–20 years	72	18,0
	21–25 years	136	34,0
	26–30 years	88	22,0
	31–40 years	64	16,0
	41–50 years	28	7,0
	>50 years	12	3,0
Education	High School/Vocational School	96	24,0
	Diploma	36	9,0
	Bachelor's Degree (S1)	214	53,5
	Master's Degree (S2)	46	11,5
	Doctoral Degree (S3)	8	2,0

Occupation	Student	132	33,0
	Private Employee	108	27,0
	Civil Servant/Military/Police	48	12,0
	Entrepreneur	52	13,0
	Professional	32	8,0
	Other	28	7,0
Frequency Akses Berita	<1 time/week	20	5,0
	1–2 times/week	56	14,0
	3–4 times/week	88	22,0
	5–6 times/week	76	19,0
	Every day	160	40,0
Main Platform	News media website	112	28,0
	Instagram	92	23,0
	TikTok	76	19,0
	YouTube	60	15,0
	Facebook	28	7,0
	X (Twitter)	20	5,0
	WhatsApp/Messaging channel	12	3,0

Source: Research data, 2026.

Based on Table 1, the composition of respondents shows a relatively diverse distribution. Female respondents were slightly more dominant than male respondents, at 52.0% and 48.0%, respectively. By age, the 21–25-year-old group was the largest, with a proportion of 34.0%, indicating the dominance of young people as digital media users. In terms of education, most respondents held a Bachelor's degree (S1), at 53.5%, while in terms of occupation, students constituted the largest proportion at 33.0%.

In terms of news consumption intensity, 40.0% of respondents accessed online news every day and 19.0% accessed it five to six times per week. This condition indicates that most respondents had relatively high experience in using digital news media. Meanwhile, news media websites were the main platform used by 28.0% of respondents, followed by Instagram at 23.0% and TikTok at 19.0%. This platform diversity is relevant to the study because digital marketing strategies for news media are currently implemented not only through websites, but also through various social media. With these characteristics, the respondents were considered suitable for testing the relationships among digital marketing strategies, audience engagement, and audience loyalty in online news media.

3.2. Validity and Reliability Test Results

Validity and reliability testing was conducted to ensure that all indicators could accurately and consistently measure the research constructs. The measurement model was evaluated by examining outer loading, Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). Indicators were considered to meet convergent validity when they had an outer loading value ≥ 0.70

and an AVE value ≥ 0.50 . Construct reliability was considered adequate when Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability values were above 0.70.

Table 2. Validity and Reliability Test Results

Construct	Indicator	Outer Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE	Description
Social Media Marketing (X1)	X1.1	0.824	0.903	0.928	0.721	Valid & Reliable
	X1.2	0.861				Valid
	X1.3	0.876				Valid
	X1.4	0.852				Valid
	X1.5	0.823				Valid
Content Marketing (X2)	X2.1	0.841	0.914	0.936	0.746	Valid & Reliable
	X2.2	0.879				Valid
	X2.3	0.891				Valid
	X2.4	0.856				Valid
	X2.5	0.842				Valid
Personalized Marketing (X3)	X3.1	0.817	0.884	0.920	0.742	Valid & Reliable
	X3.2	0.866				Valid
	X3.3	0.891				Valid
	X3.4	0.872				Valid
Interactive Marketing (X4)	X4.1	0.832	0.907	0.931	0.731	Valid & Reliable
	X4.2	0.858				Valid
	X4.3	0.881				Valid
	X4.4	0.849				Valid
	X4.5	0.837				Valid
Audience Engagement (M)	M1	0.845	0.918	0.939	0,753	Valid & Reliable
	M2	0.882				Valid
	M3	0.894				Valid
	M4	0.865				Valid
	M5	0.831				Valid

Audience Loyalty (Y)	Y1	0.856	0.925	0.943	0.768	Valid & Reliable
	Y2	0.889				Valid
	Y3	0.903				Valid
	Y4	0,878				Valid
	Y5	0,867				Valid

Source: Research data, 2026.

Based on Table 2, all indicators had outer loading values between 0.817–0.903, so all indicators met the minimum threshold of 0.70. This shows that each indicator has a good ability to represent the measured construct. The AVE values for all constructs were also in the range of 0.721–0.768, higher than the minimum threshold of 0.50. Thus, all constructs met the criteria for convergent validity.

In terms of reliability, Cronbach's Alpha values for all constructs ranged from 0.884–0.925, while Composite Reliability ranged from 0.920–0.943. All of these values exceeded the threshold of 0.70. These results indicate that the research instrument has a high level of internal consistency and that all constructs can be considered reliable.

Overall, the outer model evaluation results show that 29 indicators across six research constructs were declared valid and reliable. Therefore, all indicators can be retained and used for the structural model (inner model) analysis stage to test the relationships among social media marketing, content marketing, personalized marketing, interactive marketing, audience engagement, and audience loyalty.

3.3. Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis testing was conducted using Partial Least Squares–Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with a bootstrapping procedure. The effects among variables were assessed based on path coefficients, t-statistics, and p-values. A relationship was considered significant when the t-statistic was > 1.96 and the p-value was < 0.05 at the 5% significance level.

Table 3. Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Variable Relationship	Path Coefficient (β)	T-Statistic	P-Value	Decision
H1	Social Media Marketing → Audience Engagement	0.286	4.873	0.000	Accepted
H2	Content Marketing → Audience Engagement	0.318	5.624	0.000	Accepted
H3	Personalized Marketing → Audience Engagement	0.214	3.781	0.000	Accepted
H4	Interactive Marketing → Audience Engagement	0.267	4.396	0.000	Accepted
H5	Audience Engagement → Audience Loyalty	0.521	10.247	0.000	Accepted
H6	Social Media Marketing → Audience Engagement → Audience Loyalty	0.149	4.396	0.000	Accepted

H7	Content Marketing → Audience Engagement → Audience Loyalty	0.166	4.827	0.000	Accepted
H8	Personalized Marketing → Audience Engagement → Audience Loyalty	0.112	3.655	0.000	Accepted
H9	Interactive Marketing → Audience Engagement → Audience Loyalty	0.139	4.071	0.000	Accepted

Source: Research data, 2026.

3.4. Discussion

The results show that all proposed hypotheses received empirical support. The first finding shows that social media marketing has a positive effect on audience engagement ($\beta = 0.286$; $p < 0.001$). This result indicates that the use of social media as a means of news distribution and communication can increase audience attention and interaction. This finding is consistent with Guo and Sun (2022), who showed that the characteristics of news content on Facebook, including interactivity and message presentation, are related to audience reactions, comments, and shares. It is also consistent with Fetais et al. (2023), who found that social media marketing activities increase community engagement, although a direct effect on loyalty does not always occur.

Content marketing was also shown to have a positive effect on audience engagement ($\beta = 0.318$; $p < 0.001$) and was one of the strongest effects in the model. This finding supports Bazi et al. (2023), who found that social media content quality can increase customer engagement, especially when content has attractive and entertaining characteristics. They also showed that engagement subsequently contributes to loyalty. In the context of news media, Himma-Kadakas and Ferrer-Conill (2022) found that young audiences are more interested in news content that is high quality, concise, and relevant. Thus, content quality and relevance are important elements in digital news media marketing strategies.

Furthermore, personalized marketing has a positive effect on audience engagement ($\beta = 0.214$; $p < 0.001$). This finding indicates that the ability of media to tailor information to audience interests and needs can increase the likelihood that audiences will pay attention to and interact with content. This finding is relevant to Nguyen et al. (2024), who showed that social media marketing activities can generate utilitarian and hedonic value, which subsequently increases online brand engagement. This effect ultimately contributes to loyalty.

Interactive marketing was also shown to increase audience engagement ($\beta = 0.267$; $p < 0.001$). This result confirms that digital relationships between media and audiences should not be purely one-way. Interactions through comments, shares, reactions, and other forms of communication can strengthen engagement. Guo and Sun (2022) support this argument by showing that interactive characteristics in news posts are associated with various forms of news engagement. This perspective is also consistent with Pertiwi et al. (2023), who identified relationships among social media marketing, user engagement, and loyalty in the Indonesian context.

The strongest relationship in this study was between audience engagement and audience loyalty ($\beta = 0.521$; $p < 0.001$). This finding indicates that audiences who actively pay attention to, interact with, and participate in news content have a higher tendency to maintain their relationship with news media. This result is consistent with Bazi et al. (2023), who found that customer engagement increases loyalty. The findings of Nguyen et al. (2024) also strengthen this relationship because online brand engagement was shown to be one of the mechanisms transmitting the effect of social media marketing on loyalty.

The subsequent mediation testing showed that audience engagement mediates the effects of all dimensions of digital marketing strategy on audience loyalty. This finding is important because it shows that digital marketing strategies do not always produce loyalty directly, but work through the process of building engagement. This pattern is consistent with Fetais et al. (2023), who found that community engagement is an important mechanism between social media marketing activities and

loyalty. Nguyen et al. (2024) also found a mediation pattern through perceived value and online brand engagement.

In the context of news media, Castells-Fos et al. (2023) position audience loyalty as an important dimension in understanding the relevance and sustainability of digital news media. Meanwhile, research on audience relationships with journalism shows that loyalty is related not only to frequency of use, but also to the relationship formed between audiences and news organizations. Thus, this study extends previous literature by integrating digital marketing, audience engagement, and loyalty perspectives in the context of online news media.

4. CONCLUSION

This study shows that digital marketing strategies consisting of social media marketing, content marketing, personalized marketing, and interactive marketing have positive and significant effects on audience engagement in online news media. Audience engagement is also shown to have a positive and significant effect on audience loyalty, while also serving as a mediating variable in the relationship between all dimensions of digital marketing strategy and audience loyalty. These findings indicate that the success of digital marketing in news media is determined not only by the ability to increase the reach and visibility of content, but also by the ability of media to create relevant, interactive experiences that encourage audience participation. Therefore, online news media managers need to develop engagement-oriented digital marketing strategies through the provision of informative and relevant content, information personalization, optimal use of social media, and two-way communication with audiences. Theoretically, this study expands digital marketing research by integrating the concepts of audience engagement and loyalty in the context of online news media, while practically, the findings provide a basis for media organizations to build long-term relationships with audiences through digital strategies that are more oriented toward users' needs and participation.

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