An Integrated Model of Factors Affecting Consumer Sport Brand Loyalty in Thailand in the Digital Era

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Abstract

This research aimed to (1) investigate the levels of digital marketing factors, brand image and credibility, customer experience and engagement, psychological and motivational factors, and sport brand loyalty among Thai consumers; and (2) examine the causal relationships among these variables. While previous studies have examined these factors in isolation, this research addresses a gap by developing an integrated model that combines the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework with Self–Determination Theory (SDT) in the Thai sports industry. The sample consisted of 400 consumers who had purchased sports brand products in Thailand at least twice within the past six months, selected via purposive sampling. Data were analyzed using multiple linear regression. The results revealed that Brand Image and Credibility had the most substantial positive effect on loyalty (β = 0.356, p < .001), followed by Customer Experience and Engagement (β = 0.278, p < .01). Psychological and Motivational Factors (β = 0.241, p < .05) and Digital Marketing Factors (β = 0.214, p < .01) also significantly contributed to the model. The combined factors explained 67.4% of the variance in sport brand loyalty (Adjusted R^2 = 0.674). The findings indicate that while digital marketing initiates interaction, credibility and psychological fulfillment are the primary drivers of retention. Managerial implication: Sport brands should prioritize building authenticity and trust over mere digital exposure to ensure long–term loyalty.

Keywords: brand loyalty; brand image and credibility; customer experience and engagement; digital marketing; psychological and motivational factors

Introduction

In the digital era, the sports industry has transformed into a highly competitive global market valued at over US$300 billion (Statista, 2025). However, this growth presents a critical challenge for sport brands: the erosion of consumer loyalty. A significant real-world problem facing sports brands today is the low switching cost for consumers. With the proliferation of e-commerce and social media, consumers are constantly bombarded with alternatives, making it difficult for brands to retain customers despite heavy investment in digital advertising. In Thailand, the "athleisure" trend has intensified this competition, forcing brands to compete not just on price, but on emotional connection and trust.

While digital marketing is often touted as the solution, existing literature presents a fragmented view. Some studies emphasize external digital stimuli (Stegmann et al., 2025), while others focus on internal psychological drivers, such as brand identification (Li, 2024). However, there is a notable research gap: few studies have integrated external and internal factors into a single, comprehensive model to explain loyalty among Thai consumers. Moreover, it remains unclear whether loyalty in the digital age is driven more by marketing technology (High-tech) or by brand credibility and human connection (High-touch).

This research bridges this gap by proposing an integrated model grounded in the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework and Self-Determination Theory (SDT). It aims to determine which factors—digital marketing, brand credibility, experience, or psychological motivation—most strongly influence loyalty. The findings will provide a strategic roadmap for sport brand managers to allocate resources effectively between digital tools and brand-building assets.

Research Objectives

1. To study the level of digital marketing factors, brand image and credibility, customer experience and engagement, psychological and motivational factors, and sport brand loyalty in the digital age of consumers in Thailand

2. To investigate the effects of digital marketing factors, brand image and credibility, customer experience, and psychological and motivational factors on sports brand loyalty.

Literature Review

This study examines factors influencing brand loyalty in the digital age of sports. The researchers synthesized relevant concepts and theories to create a conceptual framework and hypotheses as follows:

1. Context of the Sports Industry and Consumer Behavior in the Digital Era

In the contemporary digital era, information technology has fundamentally reshaped consumer lifestyles and purchasing behaviors, precipitating a transformative shift across various sectors, particularly within the sports industry. As one of the fastest-growing global markets, the sports industry has undergone significant evolution. According to Statista (2025), the global sports market is currently valued at over US$300 billion and is projected to grow at an average annual rate of 8%. This rapid expansion is driven by a confluence of factors, including the exponential growth of e-commerce in the fashion and sporting goods sectors, the pervasive use of social media for brand communication, and heightened global consciousness of health and fitness.

Over the past decade, leading global sport brands—such as Nike, Adidas, Puma, Under Armour, and New Balance—have pivotally realigned their marketing strategies toward digital branding. These organizations now emphasize omnichannel integration, aiming to deliver a seamless, consistent consumer experience across both online and offline touchpoints. By leveraging social media platforms, mobile applications, and official online stores, these brands have redefined consumer engagement. Instead of sporadic transactions, they create continuous interactions and personalized experiences that foster deeper emotional bonds (Truong et al., 2025).

Consequently, the determinants of loyalty toward sport brands have shifted. Loyalty is no longer confined to product quality, functional satisfaction, or pricing structures, which are often similar across competitors in this highly competitive market (Mohammadi, 2025). Instead, modern loyalty encompasses emotional, psychological, and social connections. In the digital age, consumers evaluate brands based on the overall experience they provide. They expect smooth interactions across websites, customer service, and social media channels. As noted by Lazaris et al. (2022) and Truong et al. (2025), a seamless omnichannel experience significantly enhances satisfaction and stimulates positive emotions such as trust and attachment, which are critical precursors to repeat purchases.

In Thailand, these global trends are mirrored by the growing influence of "athleisure," which blends athletic comfort with everyday style. This trend has fueled substantial consumer demand among young adults and professionals (Department of Business Development, 2023). In the Thai market, competition among sport brands now extends beyond pricing to heavily rely on brand image and customer experience, both of which strongly influence consumer emotions.

This phenomenon can be understood through the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework proposed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974). In this context, external marketing efforts and digital touchpoints serve as "Stimuli" that trigger internal psychological "Organisms" (such as emotional attachment and trust), which subsequently lead to the "Response" of behavioral loyalty. Thus, for modern sport brands, building loyalty requires a synergistic approach that integrates digital marketing efficiency with consumers' psychological fulfillment.

2. Theoretical Framework

To comprehensively investigate the determinants of consumer loyalty toward sport brands in the Thai context, this study integrates several foundational theories. The conceptual framework is primarily anchored in the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework, supported by Brand Equity Theory and Self–Determination Theory (SDT) to explain specific variables within the model.

2.1 The Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) Framework

The overarching structure of this research is based on the S–O–R framework proposed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974). This environmental psychology theory posits that environmental cues, or "Stimuli" (S), trigger internal emotional and cognitive states, or "Organisms" (O), which subsequently lead to behavioral "Responses" (R).

Stimulus (S): In the context of this study, the stimuli represent the external marketing efforts and environmental factors managed by the brand. These include Digital Marketing Factors (e.g., social media communication, influencer marketing) and the Customer Experience and Engagement provided across omnichannel platforms (websites, apps, and physical stores). These factors act as the initial triggers that capture consumer attention.

Organism (O): This component represents the internal processing of the consumer. It encompasses the cognitive evaluation of Brand Image and Credibility, as well as the internal Psychological and Motivational Factors (e.g., emotion, sense of belonging, and trust). According to the framework, when consumers are exposed to positive digital stimuli, they process these inputs internally, forming emotional bonds and trust.

Response (R): The outcome of this process is the consumer's behavior. In this study, the response is defined as Sport Brand Loyalty, manifested through both attitudinal commitment and behavioral actions such as repeat purchasing and advocacy.

2.2 Brand Equity Theory

To explain the significance of Brand Image and Credibility, this study draws upon Brand Equity Theory (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 2013). Aaker (1991) asserts that brand equity creates value for both the firm and the customer through assets such as brand awareness, brand loyalty, and perceived quality.

In the digital era, Brand Credibility is paramount. As noted by Widjajanta et al. (2025), in an environment rife with information overload, credibility serves as a signal of product positioning transparency and consistency.

Brand Image extends beyond visual identity to include the brand's personality and values. When a sport brand successfully aligns its image with the consumer's self-concept (e.g., athleticism, discipline), it fosters Brand Identification, which acts as a psychological anchor for long-term loyalty.

2.3 Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

To explicate the Psychological and Motivational Factors, the study utilizes Self-Determination Theory (SDT) developed by Ryan and Deci (2000). SDT is a macro-theory of human motivation that distinguishes between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation.

The theory suggests that sustainable behavior is driven by the satisfaction of basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

In the context of sport brands, consumers are often driven by Intrinsic Motivation, such as the enjoyment of sports, the pride of achievement, and the social need for a Sense of belonging to a community (Mohammadi, 2025).

The study posits that loyalty is not merely a transactional behavior but a result of these internal psychological fulfillments. When a brand helps consumers satisfy these internal needs (e.g., feeling part of a "fitness community"), loyalty becomes deeply rooted.

2.4 The Concept of Consumer Loyalty

Finally, the dependent variable is grounded in the multidimensional view of loyalty proposed by Oliver (1999) and Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001). Loyalty is defined as a deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, despite situational influences and marketing efforts that could prompt switching behavior.

This study acknowledges that true loyalty in the sports industry comprises two dimensions: Behavioral Loyalty (repeat purchases) and Attitudinal Loyalty (emotional attachment and willingness to recommend).

By synthesizing these theories, the research proposes an integrated model in which External Stimuli (Digital Marketing, Customer Experience) and Internal/Cognitive Factors (Brand Image, Psychological Motivation) jointly influence Sport Brand Loyalty. This theoretical lens allows for a holistic understanding of how modern consumers in Thailand form relationships with sport brands.

Synthesis of Literature and Hypothesis Development

Existing research highlights diverse drivers of loyalty. Comparing recent studies reveals a dichotomy: Stegmann et al. (2025) and Herhausen et al. (2020) argue that Digital Marketing Factors (Stimuli) are the primary initiators of consumer interest. Conversely, Matosas-López (2025) and Ayasanond et al. (2025) contend that without Brand Image and Credibility (Organism), digital exposure fails to convert into loyalty. Furthermore, Truong et al. (2025) emphasize the role of Customer Experience, while Li (2024) focus on Psychological Factors driven by intrinsic motivation (SDT).

This study synthesizes these perspectives by positioning Digital Marketing and Customer Experience as external *Stimuli* (S) that trigger internal *Organisms* (O)—specifically Brand Credibility and Psychological Motivation—leading to the *Response* (R) of Brand Loyalty. Unlike prior studies that test these separately, this research tests them simultaneously to identify the most potent predictor.

1. Digital Marketing Factors (DM)

Digital marketing serves as the initial external stimulus. While Stegmann et al. (2025) argue it drives visibility, mere exposure does not guarantee loyalty without deeper engagement. In this study, digital marketing is posited as the trigger for brand interaction.

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Digital Marketing Factors have a significant positive effect on sport brand loyalty.

2. Brand Image and Credibility (BI)

As a cognitive internal state, brand credibility is crucial in an era of misinformation (Matosas-López, 2025). Aaker's (1991) theory suggests that without a credible image, digital stimuli fail to convert into loyalty. Thus, credibility is expected to be a stronger predictor than marketing itself.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Brand Image and Credibility have a significant positive effect on sport brand loyalty.

3. Customer Experience and Engagement (CE)

Truong et al. (2025) highlight that seamless omnichannel experiences reinforce positive emotions. This variable acts as a bridge, transforming digital interaction into satisfaction.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Customer Experience and Engagement have a significant positive effect on sport brand loyalty.

4. Psychological and Motivational Factors (PM)

Drawing on Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), internal drives, such as the "sense of belonging," sustain long-term commitment (Li, 2024). This internal organism anchors the consumer to the brand beyond functional needs.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Psychological and Motivational Factors have a significant positive effect on sport brand loyalty.

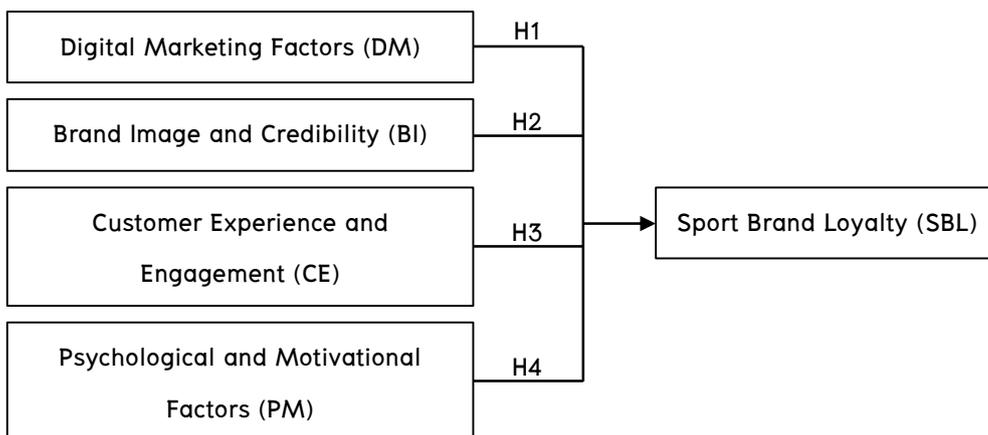The research conceptual framework is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Research Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

This research employed a quantitative approach to investigate the factors affecting consumer sport brand loyalty in Thailand. The study aimed to test the effects of four major dimensions—digital marketing factors, brand image and credibility, customer experience and engagement, and psychological and motivational factors—on sport brand loyalty.

1. Population and sampling

The population comprises Thai consumers who purchased sportswear (e.g., Nike, Adidas) at least twice in the past six months. A purposive sampling method was employed to ensure respondents possessed actual, recent brand experience, which is crucial for evaluating loyalty. The

sample size of 400 respondents exceeds the minimum required for multiple regression analysis (Hair et al., 2017) and is representative of the active online consumer population in Thailand.

2. Instrument and Quality

The research instrument was a questionnaire designed to measure the five key constructs of the study. All items were assessed using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). The measurement items were adapted from validated scales in previous studies to ensure construct validity:

1) Digital Marketing Factors (DM): This section measured consumers' perception of online marketing activities, including social media communication, influencer marketing, content quality, and personalization. The items were adapted from Stegmann et al. (2025) and Gheorghe (2024).

2) Brand Image and Credibility (BI): This section assessed the perceived trustworthiness, expertise, and personality of the sport brand. Items covering brand credibility, authenticity, and consistency were adapted from Keller (2013), Aaker (1991), and Matosas–López (2025).

3) Customer Experience and Engagement (CE): This variable measured the holistic experience, including user experience (UX) on digital platforms, customer satisfaction, and active engagement (online and offline). The scale was adapted from Truong et al. (2025) and Lazaris et al. (2022).

4) Psychological and Motivational Factors (PM): This section examined internal drivers, including brand identification, sense of belonging, and intrinsic motivation (enjoyment/pride). Items were grounded in Self–Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and adapted from Li (2024).

5) Sport Brand Loyalty (SBL): The dependent variable measured both Attitudinal Loyalty (emotional attachment) and Behavioral Loyalty (repeat purchase intention). The scale was adapted from Oliver (1999) and Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001).

Validity and Reliability: Three experts in marketing and consumer behavior validated the content, yielding Item–Objective Congruence (IOC) indices ranging from 0.80 to 1.00. To address potential Common Method Bias (CMB) arising from self–reported data, Harman's Single Factor Test was conducted. The results showed that the first factor explained 38.5% of the total variance (below the 50% threshold), indicating that CMB was not a significant concern. A pilot test with 30 participants confirmed reliability, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all constructs exceeding the 0.70 threshold (Hair et al., 2017), ranging from 0.87 to 0.91.

3. Data Collection

Data were collected during June–July 2025 using online platforms such as Google Forms, Facebook, Instagram, and sports community groups. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, confidentiality measures, and the voluntary nature of participation prior to participation.

4. Data Analysis

After screening for completeness, 400 valid responses were included in the analysis. Descriptive statistics—including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations—were employed to describe respondents' profiles and perceptions of each construct. Pearson's Correlation Analysis and Multiple Linear Regression Analysis were used to test the hypotheses to evaluate the simultaneous influence of the four independent variable groups on sport brand loyalty. Before running the regression, diagnostic tests were conducted to verify the following statistical assumptions: linearity, independence of residuals, absence of multicollinearity (VIF < 5), homoscedasticity, and normality of residuals (Field, 2020).

Research Results

The research results can be summarized as follows:

1. Respondent Profile

A total of 400 valid responses were collected from consumers who had purchased sport brand products at least twice within the past six months. The majority of respondents were female (58.5%), while male respondents accounted for 41.5%. Most participants were aged 21–30 years (46.0%), followed by 31–40 years (33.5%), representing the millennial and Gen Z consumer segments. Regarding occupation, private employees (45.8%) formed the largest group, followed by students (25.0%) and self-employed individuals (15.3%).

In terms of monthly income, 41.3% earned between 15,000–29,999 THB, and 29.5% between 30,000–49,999 THB. The most frequently purchased brands were Nike (40.8%), Adidas (34.5%), and Puma (12.0%). Over half of respondents (53.5%) purchased primarily through official brand websites and e-commerce platforms, while 30.8% preferred in-store purchases. These demographic findings suggest that the sample reflects the typical online-active, brand-aware consumer group in Thailand's sport retail market.

2. Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables

The mean scores and standard deviations for the five significant variables are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics of Main Variables (n = 400)

Variables	Mean (*M*)	*SD*	Level of Perception
DM: Digital Marketing Factors	3.94	0.62	High
BI: Brand Image & Credibility	4.15	0.58	High
CE: Customer Experience & Engagement	4.02	0.60	High
PM: Psychological & Motivational Factors	3.87	0.66	High
SBL: Sport Brand Loyalty	4.10	0.55	High

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the five main variables in the study: digital marketing factors, brand image and credibility, customer experience and engagement, psychological and motivational factors, and sport brand loyalty. The mean scores of all variables ranged from 3.87 to 4.15, indicating that respondents generally held highly positive perceptions toward sport brands and the related factors examined in the study. The standard deviations, ranging from 0.55 to 0.66, suggest moderate dispersion and consistency in respondents' opinions.

The results show that Brand Image & Credibility received the highest mean score (*M* = 4.15, *SD* = 0.58), reflecting that consumers strongly perceive sport brands as trustworthy, authentic, and consistent with their desired identity.

Customer Experience & Engagement ranked second (*M* = 4.02, *SD* = 0.60), indicating that participants were satisfied with the overall experiences they received from sport brands—whether through online channels, store interactions, or social media engagement.

Digital Marketing Factors scored a mean of 3.94 (*SD* = 0.62), showing that consumers generally value online marketing activities such as social media campaigns, influencer promotions, and personalized communication.

Meanwhile, Psychological & Motivational Factors had the lowest mean (*M* = 3.87, *SD* = 0.66), though it was still at a high level. This indicates that intrinsic motivations—such as emotional attachment, identification with the brand, and a sense of belonging—are important, but they may vary across individual consumers' personal characteristics and lifestyles.

Finally, Sport Brand Loyalty recorded a high mean value (M = 4.10, SD = 0.55), suggesting that consumers demonstrate both strong attitudinal and behavioral loyalty toward sport brands. This confirms Oliver's (1999) conceptualization that loyalty results from positive emotions, trust, and satisfaction built over repeated interactions.

3. Correlation Analysis

Before testing the hypotheses, Pearson's correlation analysis was performed to examine the relationships among the key variables and to ensure the absence of multicollinearity. Details are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Correlation Matrix among Key Variables

Variables	DM	BI	CE	PM	SBL	*VIF*
DM: Digital Marketing Factors	1					2.18
BI: Brand Image & Credibility	.643**	1				2.54
CE: Customer Experience & Engagement	.587**	.612**	1			2.33
PM: Psychological & Motivational Factors	.562**	.588**	.609**	1		2.27
SBL: Sport Brand Loyalty	.614**	.729**	.684**	.641**	1	–

Note: **$p < 0.01$ (2-tailed)

Data in Table 2 showed that all variables were positively correlated with sport brand loyalty, confirming their theoretical consistency. The correlation coefficients (r) ranged between .562 and .729, with significance at the 0.01 level ($p < 0.01$).

Importantly, correlation values were below 0.80. The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values ranged from 2.18 to 2.54, well below the threshold of 5, confirming the absence of multicollinearity among the independent variables and ensuring the appropriateness of subsequent regression analysis. The correlation analysis supports the proposed conceptual framework, indicating that both marketing-related and psychological factors are interrelated and jointly influence sport brand loyalty among Thai consumers in the digital era.

4. Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

To test the hypotheses, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted with sport brand loyalty as the dependent variable. The analysis results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Results of Multiple Linear Regression Analysis (Dependent Variable: Sport Brand Loyalty)

Hypothesis/Independent Variables	B	SE	β	t	Sig. (p)
Constant	0.482	0.214	–	2.25	0.025
H1: Digital Marketing Factors	0.214	0.047	0.214	4.51	0.000**
H2: Brand Image and Credibility	0.342	0.050	0.356	6.89	0.000***
H3: Customer Experience and Engagement	0.276	0.053	0.278	5.17	0.001**
H4: Psychological and Motivational Factors	0.197	0.050	0.241	3.93	0.012*
R = 0.826, R^2 = 0.681, Adjusted R^2 = 0.674, F = 91.56, Sig. (p) = 0.000***					

Note: *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

The data in Table 3 provided robust empirical evidence supporting all four proposed hypotheses regarding the determinants of sport brand loyalty in the digital era. The overall model was statistically significant (F = 91.56, $p < .001$) and explained 67.4% of the variance (Adjusted R^2 = 0.674). The effect of variables: Brand Image and Credibility (BI) had the most substantial positive effect (β = 0.356, $p < .001$), Customer Experience and Engagement (CE) had the second-largest effect (β = 0.278, $p < .01$), Psychological and Motivational Factors (PM) had a significant positive effect (β = 0.241, $p < .05$), and Digital Marketing Factors (DM) ad a significant positive effect (β = 0.214, $p < .01$).

Therefore, all four hypotheses (H1–H4) were supported. The results suggest that sport brand loyalty is shaped by both external marketing strategies and internal psychological mechanisms, forming a comprehensive loyalty model for digital consumers in the Thai context.

The findings can be summarized in the predictive equation as follows:

Sport Brand Loyalty (SBL) = 0.214(DM) + 0.356(BI) + 0.278(CE) + 0.241(PM)

Discussion

The findings of this study provide robust empirical evidence that the integrated model of digital marketing, brand credibility, customer experience, and psychological factors effectively predicts consumer sport brand loyalty in Thailand. The multiple regression analysis revealed that these four factors collectively explained 67.4% of the variance in sport brand loyalty (Adjusted R^2 = 0.674). This high explanatory power confirms the validity of combining the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework with Self–Determination Theory (SDT) to understand modern consumer behavior. The specific impacts of each variable are discussed below in order of decreasing influence.

Brand Image and Credibility as the Primary Driver of Loyalty

The most significant determinant of sport brand loyalty was Brand Image and Credibility (β = 0.356, p < .001). This finding underscores that in the digital era, "trust" is the most valuable currency. This result aligns with Matosas–López (2025) and Ayasanond et al. (2025), who asserted that brand credibility acts as a risk–reduction mechanism in online environments characterized by information overload and skepticism.

From a theoretical perspective, this supports Aaker's (1991) Brand Equity Theory, confirming that a strong, authentic brand personality creates a "halo effect" that fosters long-term commitment. In the context of the Thai sports market, where consumers are increasingly health-conscious and status-aware, a brand that consistently delivers on its promises (Credibility) and aligns with the consumer's self-identity (Image) creates a psychological bond that is harder to break than loyalty based solely on price or convenience.

The Critical Role of Seamless Customer Experience

Customer Experience and Engagement emerged as the second most influential factor (β = 0.278, p < .01). This corroborates the findings of Truong et al. (2025) and Lazaris et al. (2022), who emphasized that a seamless omnichannel experience—bridging online convenience with offline engagement—is essential for retaining customers.

Validating the S–O–R Framework, this result demonstrates that positive experiences serve as powerful "Stimuli" that trigger emotional satisfaction ("Organism"), leading to the "Response" of repurchase behavior. For Thai consumers, the "experience" encompasses not just the usability of a mobile app or website, but the holistic interaction with the brand, such as responsive customer service and engaging physical touchpoints. Brands that fail to deliver a consistent experience across channels risk breaking the emotional connection required for loyalty.

Psychological Factors and Intrinsic Motivation

Psychological and Motivational Factors played a crucial, moderate role (β = 0.241, p < .05). This finding supports Self–Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and recent work by Li (2024), suggesting that loyalty is driven not just by external incentives but by the satisfaction of intrinsic needs, such as a "sense of belonging" and "pride."

This implies that sport brands in Thailand are viewed as more than just product providers; they are symbols of lifestyle and community. When consumers feel that a brand supports their athletic goals or connects them to a like-minded community (e.g., a running club), their loyalty shifts

from transactional to emotional. This internal psychological anchor is vital for sustaining loyalty when competitors offer lower prices or aggressive promotions.

Digital Marketing as the Initiator, Not the Sole Driver

Interestingly, while Digital Marketing Factors had a significant positive effect (β = 0.214, p < .01), it had the *lowest* impact coefficient among the significant variables. While consistent with Stegmann et al. (2025) regarding the necessity of digital presence, the lower beta value relative to Brand Credibility (β = 0.356) offers a nuanced insight: Digital marketing primarily serves as an "initiator" or "enabler," rather than the ultimate sustainer of loyalty.

In the highly digitized Thai market, digital marketing has become a "hygiene factor"— something consumers expect as a baseline. While effective social media campaigns and influencer marketing can capture attention (Stimulus), they must be backed by credibility and a superior experience to convert that attention into lasting loyalty. Without the trust foundation (H2) and positive experience (H3), digital marketing alone cannot prevent consumers from switching brands.

In conclusion, the study reveals a hierarchical mechanism of loyalty formation: Digital Marketing (β = 0.214) initiates the relationship, Customer Experience (β = 0.278) facilitates interaction, but Brand Credibility (β = 0.356) and Psychological Connection (β = 0.241) are the decisive anchors that secure long-term loyalty. This integrated perspective offers a more comprehensive explanation than prior single-dimension studies.

New Knowledge from Research

This study contributes a "Trust-Driven Digital Loyalty Model" tailored to the Thai context. The model reveals a hierarchical mechanism in which Digital Marketing (β = 0.214) serves merely as an *Enabler*, while Brand Credibility (β = 0.356) and Psychological Factors (β = 0.241) act as the *Anchors*. This synthesis provides a new theoretical lens: technology initiates contact, but credibility secures the relationship.

1. The Supremacy of Credibility in a Noise-Filled Digital Landscape

Despite the pervasive focus on digitalization, this study reveals a critical counter-intuitive finding: Brand Image and Credibility (β = 0.356) exerts the most decisive influence on loyalty, surpassing Digital Marketing Factors (β = 0.214). This establishes that in an era of information overload and potential online misinformation, Thai consumers prioritize "trust" and "authenticity" over mere digital exposure. Digital marketing acts as the *enabler*, but credibility is the *anchor* of loyalty.

2. The Synergistic Mechanism of Loyalty

The study successfully validates a hybrid model combining the S–O–R Framework with Self–Determination Theory (SDT). It proves that a specific drives sports brand loyalty:

External Drivers: Seamless omnichannel experiences and digital engagement trigger behavioral responses.

Internal Sustainers: Psychological factors (e.g., sense of belonging, pride) sustain emotional commitment. This finding confirms that digital engagement without psychological resonance is insufficient for long–term retention.

3. A Validated Predictive Equation

The research provides a mathematically validated equation capable of explaining 67.4% of the variance in sport brand loyalty among Thai consumers:

$$SBL = 0.214(DM) + 0.356(BI) + 0.278(CE) + 0.241(PM)$$

This equation serves as a new strategic tool for sport brand managers, indicating that resource allocation should prioritize building a trustworthy image and optimizing customer experience to maximize consumer loyalty.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that sport brand loyalty in Thailand is multidimensional. The integrated model (Adjusted R^2 = 0.674) confirms that while digital marketing is necessary, it is less influential than brand credibility and customer experience. The key contribution is the empirical evidence that Thai consumers prioritize "trust" and "authenticity" over digital noise. External brand management activities and internal consumer motivations; effective digital marketing communication; and a consistent brand image help create awareness, trust, and differentiation. Internally, positive experiences and psychological engagement—such as brand identification and intrinsic satisfaction—strengthen emotional attachment and behavioral loyalty. The study confirms that sport brand loyalty in the digital age is not merely a function of marketing exposure but rather the outcome of a synergistic relationship between trust, experience, and emotional connection. This integrated model contributes to a deeper understanding of how sport brands can sustain consumer loyalty amid intensified online competition.

Suggestion

Suggestions for Practical Implications

Based on the empirical findings that prioritize Brand Credibility and Customer Experience over mere Digital Marketing exposure, this study proposes a strategic roadmap for sport brand managers and marketers in Thailand:

Prioritize "Trust Marketing" over Advertising Noise: Since *Brand Image and Credibility* were the strongest predictors of loyalty (β = 0.356), brands must shift their focus from aggressive ad spending to building authenticity. So, Managers should leverage User–Generated Content (UGC) by encouraging real customers to share their fitness journeys rather than relying solely on paid influencers. Transparency in product manufacturing, sustainability efforts, and ethical practices should be communicated clearly to build the "trust" that Thai consumers value most.

Orchestrate a "Phygital" Customer Experience: With *Customer Experience* being the second most critical factor (β = 0.278), brands must dissolve the boundary between online and offline channels (O2O). So, it should implement "Click–and–Collect" services or in–store digital kiosks that let customers check inventory online instantly. Brands should ensure that the quality of service on social media (e.g., response time to inquiries on Line OA or Facebook Messenger) matches the in–store consultancy experience. A seamless transition between the app and the physical store prevents friction that destroys loyalty.

Foster "Tribal" Communities to Satisfy Psychological Needs: *Psychological Factors* Significantly influence loyalty (β = 0.241) by fulfilling the need for belonging. So, it should move beyond selling products to building Brand Communities. Brands should organize local events such as "Run Clubs," "Yoga in the Park," or online challenges that connect users with shared goals. By positioning the brand as an enabler of their athletic identity, managers can tap into intrinsic motivation, making switching to a competitor psychologically difficult.

Use Digital Marketing as a "Connector," Not Just a Broadcaster: While *Digital Marketing* is essential (β = 0.214), it should be used to facilitate the above strategies rather than as a standalone tool. Use data analytics to personalize offers that reward loyalty (e.g., birthday discounts, exclusive early access) rather than generic blasting. Digital channels should be the medium for telling the brand's credibility story and inviting users into the community experience.

2. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into the determinants of sport brand loyalty in the digital era, several limitations should be acknowledged to guide future research:

2.1 Cross-Sectional Design: This study employed a cross-sectional research design, collecting data at a single point in time. Consequently, it captures correlations rather than confirming long-term causal relationships. Future research should adopt a Longitudinal Design, collecting data over 6–12 months, to track how changes in digital marketing strategies or brand perception dynamically affect consumer loyalty over time.

2.2 Sampling Limitations: The use of purposive sampling via online channels may have excluded consumers who are less digitally active or those in older demographics who still purchase sport brands but do not engage online. Future studies could employ Probability Sampling or a mixed-method approach, combining online surveys with offline intercepts at physical sport stores, to ensure broader generalizability across different consumer segments.

2.3 Scope of Variables: The current model focuses on four main factors. However, other external variables, such as Price Sensitivity, Economic Conditions, or Competitor Promotions, may also moderate loyalty. Future research should introduce Mediating or Moderating Variables (e.g., Brand Love, Perceived Value, or Switching Costs) to deepen understanding of the complex mechanism underlying the relationship between digital stimuli and behavioral loyalty.

2.4 Cultural Context: This study is specific to the Thai context. Cultural values regarding trust and community may differ in other regions. A Cross-Cultural Comparative Study (e.g., comparing Thailand with Vietnam, Japan, or Western markets) would be beneficial to determine if the supremacy of "Brand Credibility" over "Digital Marketing" is a universal phenomenon or unique to Thai consumer behavior.

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