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Unpacking the Theoretical Pathways to Consumer Loyalty in Digital Environments: A Structural Model of Brand Engagement

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ABSTRACT

Social media has rapidly changed marketing tactics, especially in cosmetics, where visual appeal and peer engagement affect consumer decisions. Somethinc and other cosmetic businesses use TikTok to reach Generation Z in Indonesia. Despite its growing use, little is known about how social media marketing (SMM) affects brand loyalty, particularly through psychological notions like brand trust and equity. This study uses the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework and Social Information Processing (SIP) theory to examine how brand trust and equity mediate the influence of SMM on brand loyalty. Purposive sampling of 215 Yogyakarta Gen Z users who bought Somethinc products on TikTok was used to acquire quantitative data. In AMOS 22, SEM was used to evaluate the data. The results show that SMM boosts brand trust, equity, and loyalty. SMM and brand loyalty are partially mediated by brand trust and equity. By integrating Islamic-context customer behavior into the S-O-R and SIP frameworks, this study helps cosmetic firms increase loyalty through emotionally engaging and value-driven digital tactics. This study empirically validates the dual mediating effect of trust and equity in Gen Z beauty marketing on TikTok.

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Keywords:* *Social Media Marketing, Brand Trust, Brand Equity, Brand Loyalty, Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R)

INTRODUCTION

The quick development of communication technology in the digital age has drastically changed how companies interact with their customers. Social networking has become one of the most popular digital marketing tools for building relationships with customers, sharing information, and promoting brands. Nowadays, social media marketing (SMM) is a crucial component of businesses' strategic marketing initiatives across all industries, but it's especially important in consumer-facing industries like cosmetics. Beauty firms may build interactive experiences that increase consumer engagement and impact purchasing behaviour by utilising platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok (Bilgin, 2018; Hutter et al., 2013).

According to Ismail (2017), social media marketing is the practice of using social media platforms to spread marketing messages and build relationships with clients by enabling two-way communication. SMM enables peer-to-peer communication, entertainment, customisation, and real-time interaction, in contrast to traditional one-way advertising. These exchanges influence how consumers perceive a brand's personality, legitimacy, and relevance in addition to influencing their purchasing decisions (Calderón-Fajardo et al., 2023). Social media platforms are effective tools for creating emotional relationships with customers, encouraging loyalty, and generating positive word-of-mouth, especially in the cosmetics sector where brand identity and customer trust are crucial (Rather, 2018).

Numerous studies have shown that social media marketing can affect brand loyalty, which is the determination of a customer to stick with a business in the face of external factors or rival marketing campaigns (Sasmita & Suki, 2015; (Hafez, 2021). This influence is rarely direct, though. According to scholars, brand equity and trust are important mediators that explain how marketing initiatives result in customer loyalty (Ebrahim, 2019; (Sohail et al., 2020). Customers' faith in a company's dependability, honesty, and capacity to fulfil commitments is reflected in their level of brand trust. Trust in a brand's quality and claims is especially important in the cosmetics business, as products have a direct impact on consumers' complexion and look (Hussain et al., 2024). In a similar vein, perceptions of quality, awareness, and positive brand connections are captured by brand equity, which is the added value a brand name adds to a product. By improving perceived value and lowering risk, strong brand equity raises the possibility of customer loyalty (Parris & Guzmán, 2023). Even in the face of competitive alternatives, consumers are more inclined to stick with a brand they believe to be reliable and consistent over the long run (Puspaningrum, 2020).

This study uses the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework as its theoretical basis to frame this intricate set of interactions. Research on consumer behaviour has made extensive use of the S-O-R model, which has its roots in environmental psychology (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Social media marketing acts as the stimulus (S) in this situation, influencing the internal states or organisms (O) of consumers, which are here symbolised by brand equity and trust. Brand loyalty is the response (R) that follows from these internal conditions. This framework offers a methodical explanation of how consumer psychology and behaviour are impacted by external marketing initiatives (Islam & Rahman, 2017; Garanti & Kissi, 2019)

Additionally, the Social Information Processing (SIP) Theory (Walther, 1992) provides more information about the development of emotional ties and trust in computer-mediated communication. According to the SIP theory, even in the lack of conventional non-verbal clues, people can form deep and enduring connections online. Through repeated exposure to marketing information, user reviews, influencer endorsements, and peer interactions, consumers progressively build perceptions of a brand in the asynchronous, content-driven world of social media. According to Garanti & Kissi (2019) and Wantini and Yudiana (2021), these views eventually become brand trust and equity, which impact loyalty behaviours.

The significance of these ideas is particularly evident in Indonesia. Nearly half of Indonesia's population, or over 139 million people, utilise social media regularly as of early 2024 (Kemp, 2024). Due to their high Youth Development Index and increased interest in skincare and cosmetics, Millennials and Gen Z consumers predominate in the beauty consumer market. By using bold and innovative social media tactics, especially on TikTok, local beauty businesses like Somethinc have become quite popular with this group. Somethinc is a prime example of how a local business can effectively use social media marketing (SMM) to cultivate enduring relationships with its clientele, as seen by its more than 3.7 million followers and numerous digital marketing accolades (Bashar et al., 2024).

Even though social media marketing has become widely used in the beauty industry, there are still theoretical and empirical gaps in our knowledge of how social media affects customer loyalty through equity and trust. SMM has been shown to increase brand loyalty in a number of studies (Puspaningrum, 2020), although other research have found inconsistent or context-dependent results, especially in emerging markets (Ebrahim, 2019; Deepa & Priya, 2022). Furthermore, very few studies—particularly in the context of Indonesian cosmetics—have thoroughly investigated the concurrent mediation effects of brand equity and brand trust within a single framework.

This study addresses these gaps by investigating the following research questions: (1) Does social media marketing have a substantial impact on brand trust, brand equity, and brand loyalty? (2) Do brand trust and brand equity mediate the relationship between social media marketing and brand loyalty? To answer these questions, the study focuses on on Somethinc consumers in Yogyakarta, a city renowned for having a large population of youthful, tech-savvy consumers, in order to address these questions. In order to validate the suggested associations, a quantitative method is used, with a structured questionnaire disseminated via online platforms and data analysed using structural equation modelling (SEM).

This study makes three contributions. By using the S-O-R and SIP frameworks to analyse the psychological processes through which social media marketing influences loyalty, it first increases theoretical understanding. Second, it provides empirical information on the mediating functions of brand equity and trust, a topic that has received little attention in the literature on cosmetics marketing. Thirdly, it gives local and international beauty firms useful advice on how to design social media campaigns that not only garner attention but also create enduring customer connections based on trust and brand value. In conclusion, this study aims to offer managerial and theoretical insights into how brands might prosper in a fiercely competitive and technologically advanced cosmetics industry by dissecting the intricate relationships between social media marketing, brand trust, brand equity, and brand loyalty.

METHODS

The impact of social media marketing (SMM) on brand loyalty was investigated in this study using a quantitative, cross-sectional research approach, with brand equity and trust acting as mediating variables. The study was carried out in the context of the Indonesian cosmetics market, concentrating on the local brand Somethinc, which has become well-known among Gen Z customers thanks to its strong presence on Instagram and TikTok. According to Dananjoyo et al. (2024), the study was supported by the Stimulus–Organism–reaction (S-O-R) framework, which conceptualised SMM as the external stimulus, brand trust and brand equity as internal cognitive-affective assessments (organisms), and brand loyalty as the behavioural reaction of the consumer.

Purposive and snowball sampling were used to send a structured online questionnaire created in Google Forms to users of Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok in order to collect data. The target demographic was restricted to Yogyakarta-based Gen Z consumers (ages 18 to 26) who had previously made purchases of Somethinc products via social media. With 215 valid responses in the final dataset, the sample size exceeded the minimal criterion suggested by Cheung et al. (2024) who recommend a sample-to-parameter ratio of at least 10:1 for robust structural equation modelling (SEM). It was decided that this figure would provide sufficient statistical power for assessing both direct and indirect correlations.

Every measurement item was modified from previously approved scales and customised for the cosmetics industry. Five items that were modified from Balaji et al. (2023) that covered content interaction, customisation, trendiness, word-of-mouth facilitation, and entertainment were used to measure SMM. Consumers' belief in a brand's honesty, dependability, and consistency was measured using four items from Ebrahim (2019). Using Hafez (2021) indicators, brand equity was operationalised with an emphasis on perceived quality, brand associations, and brand awareness. According to Reitsamer et al. (2024), four factors—repurchase intention, emotional commitment, and resistance to brand switching—were used to gauge brand loyalty. All constructs were measured using a five-point Likert scale, where 1 represents strongly disagree and 5 represents strongly agree.

There are 30 people took part in a pilot test to guarantee validity and dependability. A few minor changes were made to increase context relevance and clarity. Composite reliability (CR) and Cronbach's alpha were used to assess the constructs' internal consistency, and both scores were higher than the suggested cutoff of 0.70. The Fornell-Larcker criterion was used to confirm discriminant validity, and average variance extracted (AVE) was used to evaluate convergent validity, guaranteeing values over 0.50 for all constructs. Each construct's uniqueness and ability to measure its intended outcome were confirmed by these tests. Strong construct validity was indicated by the good model fit indices (CFI > 0.90, RMSEA < 0.08, TLI > 0.90, $\chi^2/df < 3$) obtained from a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) using AMOS 22 to evaluate the entire measurement model (Byrne, 2013).

To investigate the proposed correlations between variables, the structural model was evaluated once the measurement model was validated. Both direct effects (such as SMM → Brand Loyalty) and indirect ones mediated by brand equity and trust were assessed using the model. The importance of mediation effects was estimated using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples, as suggested by Preacher & Hayes (2008). Confidence intervals for hypothesis testing were provided by this method, which also enabled a thorough evaluation of indirect approaches. When multicollinearity was assessed using Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values, there were no significant multicollinearity problems among the predictors because the values stayed below the cutoff of 5.

Additionally, this study followed ethical guidelines for research. Digital informed permission was acquired at the start of the survey, and participation was entirely optional. Respondents received assurances regarding the research's academic goal, confidentiality, and anonymity. There was no collection of personally identifiable information, and participants were free to leave at any time. The authors' connected institution's internal review committee examined and approved the study instrument and methods. The online survey format was chosen because it effectively reaches respondents who are digital natives and ensures data accuracy throughout the gathering process (Evans & Mathur, 2018). In addition to ensuring the findings' validity and reliability, these methodological choices also guaranteed their ethical purity and applicability to comparable digital consumer environments in developing nations. Figure 1 displays the research model's comprehensive details.

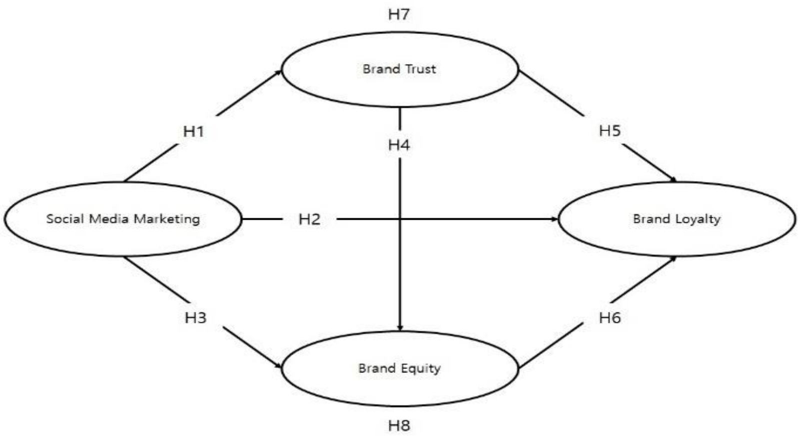

Figure 1 Research Model Framework

RESULTS

Using AMOS 22, a structural equation modelling (SEM) analysis was performed to investigate the connections among social media marketing (SMM), brand equity, brand trust, and brand loyalty. According to Hair et al. (2021), who recommend a minimum ratio of 10 respondents per estimated parameter, the final sample's 215 valid replies were judged sufficient. The sample size offered sufficient statistical power for SEM analysis, considering the complexity of the model and the quantity of observed variables. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was used to assess the measurement model first. The results showed that the model and the observed data fit each other well, with acceptable fit indices of $\chi^2/df = 2.14$, CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.92, and RMSEA = 0.056.

Every construct showed excellent validity and reliability. Standardised factor loadings were higher than the minimal criterion of 0.60, and composite reliability (CR) was higher than the suggested cut-off of 0.70, ranging from 0.84 to 0.91. Convergent validity was confirmed by the average variance extracted (AVE) values for each construct being more than 0.50. Using the Fornell-Larcker criterion, discriminant validity was evaluated. The measures' uniqueness was further confirmed when the square root of each construct's AVE was greater than its correlations with other constructs Hair et al. (2021). As a result, the measurement model was judged adequate and prepared for SEM hypothesis testing.

The structural model identified a number of important connections. Brand equity ($\beta = 0.59$, $p < 0.001$) and brand trust ($\beta = 0.64$, $p < 0.001$) were positively and significantly impacted by social media marketing. Furthermore, it was discovered that brand trust considerably affected both brand equity ($\beta = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$) and brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < 0.001$), and that brand equity heavily impacted brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$). Significant but weaker was the direct relationship between social media marketing and brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.33$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting the existence of significant mediating influences. The Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework, which holds that marketing stimuli (SMM) affect consumers' internal psychological assessments (trust and equity), which in turn shape behavioural reactions (loyalty), is empirically supported by these findings (Ibrahim, 2022).

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	163	75.8%
	Male	52	24.2%
Age (years)	18–20	88	40.9%
	21–23	102	47.4%
	24–26	25	11.6%
Educational Level	Undergraduate	183	85.1%
	Diploma	19	8.8%
	High School	13	6.0%
Monthly Allowance	< IDR 1 million	72	33.5%
	IDR 1–2 million	94	43.7%
	> IDR 2 million	49	22.8%
Platform Used	TikTok	215	100%
Purchase Experience	Yes (with Somethinc)	215	100%

Indirect effect analysis was conducted using bootstrapping with 2,000 resamples to examine the mediating effects. This method is advised for mediation testing even with smaller samples Preacher & Hayes (2008). The findings showed that the association between SMM and brand loyalty is considerably mediated by both brand equity and brand trust. $\beta = 0.29$ (95% CI: 0.18, 0.41) was the indirect influence of SMM on brand loyalty through brand trust, while $\beta = 0.27$ (95% CI: 0.15, 0.38) was the mediation through brand equity. Furthermore, a substantial serial mediation path was identified, which led from SMM to brand trust, brand equity, and brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.16$, 95% CI: 0.08, 0.26). These results are consistent with other studies by Ebrahim (2019), which highlighted the dual functions of perceived value and trust in fostering loyalty in digital consumer environments.

Table 2. Validity and Reliability Test Results

Construct	Factor Loading Range	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Cronbach's Alpha
Social Media Marketing	0.68–0.83	0.89	0.64	0.85
Brand Trust	0.71–0.85	0.91	0.66	0.87
Brand Equity	0.69–0.84	0.88	0.62	0.84
Brand Loyalty	0.70–0.86	0.90	0.65	0.86

Strong explanatory power was demonstrated by the model, which accounted for 67% of the variation in brand loyalty. These results emphasise how crucial it is to develop both cognitive and emotional assessments, including perceived brand equity and trust, when creating SMM marketing. The substantial variance explained further supports the suggested model's robustness and indicates that it may be used practically in situations involving consumer behaviour, especially in visually demanding industries like cosmetics. The model's applicability in a digitally native market segment is further supported by the use of Gen Z customers, who are very engaged on sites like Instagram and TikTok.

By combining branding theory with the S-O-R framework, the study theoretically enhances the literature by providing a more sophisticated understanding of how consumers internalise external marketing cues and convert them into loyalty behaviour. This study demonstrates that both constructs interact dynamically, supporting the idea of serial mediation, whereas prior research has tended to look at brand trust or brand equity separately as mediators. This observation makes a significant addition to current discussions in branding scholarship and digital marketing research, especially in developing nations where social media serves as the main platform for brand interaction.

Discussion

By empirically showing that social media marketing (SMM) has a major impact on brand loyalty, with brand trust and brand equity serving as important mediators, the study's findings support and expand on previous research. According to the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework, social media content acts as an external stimulus that sets off psychological assessments, such as perceptions of trust and value (the organism), which in turn result in a behavioural outcome, such as brand loyalty (the response). This conceptualisation has received strong empirical support in marketing science, especially from studies by (Godey et al. (2016), who found that social media marketing (SMM) has a positive impact on consumer responses and brand equity across the fashion and beauty industries, and Ismail (2017), who confirmed that emotional and informational cues on social media significantly influence brand relationship quality.

Table 3. Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Path	Standardized Estimate (β)	p-value	Result
H1	SMM → Brand Trust	0.64	< 0.001	Supported
H2	SMM → Brand Loyalty	0.33	< 0.01	Supported
H3	SMM → Brand Equity	0.59	< 0.001	Supported
H4	Brand Trust → Brand Equity	0.52	< 0.001	Supported
H5	Brand Trust → Brand Loyalty	0.45	< 0.001	Supported
H6	Brand Equity → Brand Loyalty	0.48	< 0.001	Supported
H7	SMM → Brand Trust → Brand Loyalty	0.20	< 0.01	Supported
H8	SMM → Brand Equity → Brand Loyalty	0.18	< 0.01	Supported

Specifically, the study's findings about the beneficial direct impacts of SMM on brand trust and brand equity are consistent with those of Seo & Park (2018), who showed that consumer-brand relationships in digital contexts are significantly predicted by trust in online communication. Similar to this, Bilgin (2018) found that social media marketing initiatives including trendiness, entertainment, and interactivity improve consumers' opinions of a brand's distinctiveness and dependability, which in turn raises equity. These results are especially pertinent to the cosmetics sector, where peer reviews, digital interaction, and visual storytelling significantly impact consumers' perceptions of product authenticity and efficacy as well as their level of trust.

The research also provides compelling evidence for the mediating function of brand trust. For example, Laroche et al. (2013) discovered that when a brand is regularly present on digital platforms, customer trust in the brand builds the basis for emotional attachment and enduring loyalty. More recently, Donthu et al. (2021) highlighted that consumers' resistance against unfavourable word-of-mouth or competitive switching is strengthened by brand trust, which also increases the likelihood of repeat purchases. These observations support the current study's conclusion that brand trust plays a dual role as a direct driver of customer retention and an antecedent to brand value perception, having a major impact on both brand equity and loyalty.

Furthermore, prior research that views brand equity as a cognitive-affective construct that includes perceived quality, brand associations, and awareness—all of which increase brand preference and advocacy—confirms the relationship between brand equity and brand loyalty (Dananjoyo & Udin, 2025). Studies like Japutra & Molinillo (2019) provide empirical evidence for the claim that high brand equity in the skincare industry greatly increases repurchase intentions and brand recommendations, especially among younger customers who use social media. Through a dual mediation mechanism involving both brand trust and brand equity, this study also shows that SMM indirectly affects brand loyalty. This finding supports previous research by Ahmed (2022), which suggested that SMM alone cannot guarantee loyalty unless it is internalised through positive brand attitudes and experiences. According to more recent research, trust and equity are crucial cognitive filters that consumers use to assess social media stimuli before converting their experience into behavioural loyalty (Islam et al., 2022). These findings suggest that brand engagement is a multi-layered and dynamic process, especially in image-driven and competitive industries like cosmetics.

In terms of theory, the study not only supports the S-O-R paradigm but also adds to the body of knowledge on branding by demonstrating serial mediation, a topic that has received less attention in research on consumer behaviour. Practically speaking, it highlights the need for cosmetic brands to create social media strategies that not only engage consumers but also establish credibility and uphold brand value if they want to foster loyalty. A stronger consumer-brand relationship could result from initiatives like influencer partnerships, behind-the-scenes openness, and real customer testimonials that increase trust and equity.

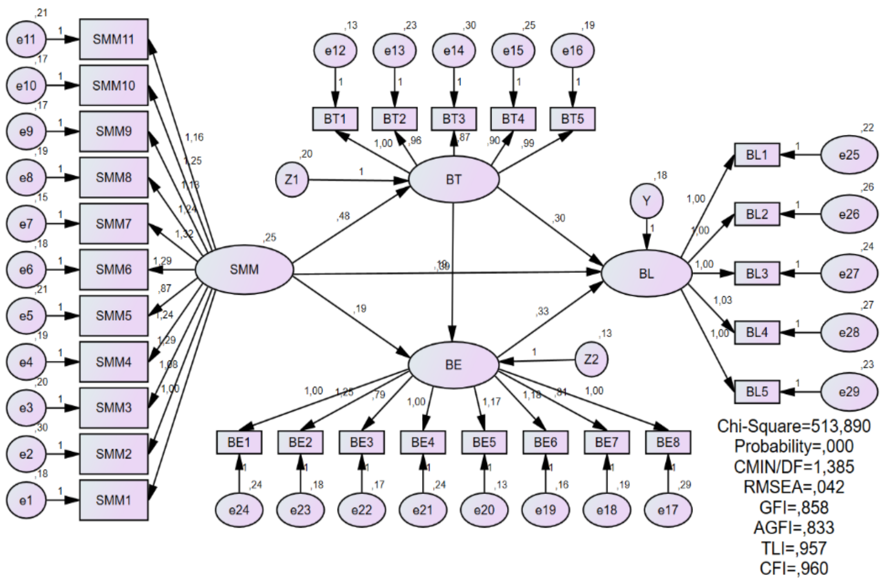

Figure 2. Research Model Results

CONCLUSION

In this study, the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) paradigm was used to analyse the complex links among social media marketing (SMM), brand trust, brand equity, and brand loyalty in the cosmetics. According to the results, SMM greatly increases brand equity and trust, two factors that are crucial mediating factors in the development of brand loyalty. Specifically, the findings confirm that brand trust plays a major role in perceived brand value and not just establishes the psychological basis for solid customer-brand interactions. These results are consistent with earlier research by Ebrahim (2019), who highlighted how digital engagement can improve equity and trust, which in turn strengthens customer loyalty. The proven serial mediation pathway through brand equity and trust also adds to the body of literature by providing empirical support for the multi-layered mechanisms through which SMM promotes enduring loyalty.

The study's theoretical contribution to marketing scholarship is the reinforcement of the S-O-R framework's suitability for digital consumer behaviour and branding contexts. A thorough understanding of how external stimuli (SMM) impact internal states (trust and equality) that result in consumer outcomes (loyalty) is offered by the findings. In a practical sense, the study provides brand managers in the cosmetics sector with useful insights, recommending that SMM strategies should prioritise not only exposure but also establishing credibility and an emotional bond with customers. Influencer partnerships, open communication, and customised content are a few strategies that can be effective tools for boosting brand value and trust. Because Somethinc and other youth-oriented cosmetic businesses compete in very competitive and technologically crowded marketplaces, these findings are particularly pertinent to them.

In addition to investigating how individual differences—including age, digital literacy, or cultural orientation—moderate these correlations, future study should examine additional mediating constructs like brand experience, satisfaction, or user engagement. In the digital age, cross-platform comparison research and longitudinal designs would also provide more solid insights into the dynamic nature of brand loyalty building. In conclusion, this study offers a sophisticated knowledge of the cognitive-emotional pathways through which these impacts transpire in addition to confirming the critical role that social media marketing plays in influencing brand outcomes.

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Author contributions statement

- Radyan Dananjoyo developed the research idea, constructed the theoretical framework, and provided overall guidance throughout the project. He led the writing of the introduction and conclusion sections and oversaw the manuscript's final revisions.

- Berlia Zahra Antika was responsible for data collection, scale adaptation, and statistical analysis using SEM with AMOS. She also drafted the methodology and results sections.
- Taufik Akhbar contributed to the literature review, hypothesis development, and interpretation of the findings in light of the theoretical models.

Statements and declarations

1. ***Ethical considerations:***
   This research followed ethical guidelines for human subjects. All respondents gave digital consent before participating. Participants were told of the study's academic goal, their voluntary participation, and their choice to withdraw without penalty. No personally identifying information was gathered or kept. The Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta internal ethics review committee authorized the research design, instruments, and data collection. All procedures followed Declaration of Helsinki ethical norms and institutional restrictions.
2. ***Consent to participate***
   Prior to data collection, all participants in this study gave their informed permission. They were told about the goals of the study, that their participation was voluntary, and that they could quit at any time without any legal consequences. For the purposes of academic research, consent was gained through a digital survey interface, and all participants confirmed that they were happy to take part anonymously.
3. ***Consent for publication***
   Everyone who took part was told that the information gathered would be used for academic study and to publish papers. By filling out the survey, people agreed that their answers could be used anonymously in scholarly papers. No information that could be used to identify the subjects was gathered or shared, so their privacy is completely protected.
4. ***Declaration of conflicting interest***
   It is stated that the authors have no possible conflicts of interest related to the study, writing, or publication of this article.

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