

CONTENT MARKETING AND CUSTOMER LOYALTY: THE ROLE OF ENGAGEMENT IN CULINARY SMES IN THE DIGITAL ERA

Ifin Naim¹⁾

Wa Ode Nursaadha Rajuddin²⁾

1) Universitas Sulawesi Tenggara, Kendari, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia

2) Universitas Sulawesi Tenggara, Kendari, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia

ifin_rheavy@yahoo.com¹⁾ ; waodenursaadha@gmail.com²⁾



e-ISSN 2686-0058
p-ISSN 2715-7695

Informasi Artikel

Tanggal masuk

29 Maret 2025

Tanggal revisi

28 Mei 2025

Tanggal diterima

24 Juni 2025

Kata Kunci:

*content marketing,
customer engagement,
customer loyalty,
culinaryn SMEs,
digital strategy*

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effect of content marketing on customer loyalty through the mediating role of customer engagement in the context of culinary MSMEs in the digital era. Using a quantitative approach and structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) with data from 200 respondents, the results reveal that content marketing does not directly influence customer loyalty. However, it significantly impacts customer engagement, which in turn positively affects loyalty. Furthermore, customer engagement fully mediates the relationship between content marketing and loyalty. These findings highlight the critical role of engagement in transforming content strategies into long-term customer relationships. The study offers valuable implications for MSME practitioners aiming to optimize digital content to build loyalty.



INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly evolving digital landscape, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), particularly in the culinary sector, are increasingly leveraging digital marketing strategies to remain competitive and sustainable (J. B. Halik, Parawansa, et al., 2023; J. B. Halik & Halik, 2024). Among these strategies, content marketing has emerged as a powerful tool for building meaningful connections with customers (A. S. Londong et al., 2024). Content marketing involves the creation and distribution of valuable, relevant, and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly defined audience—ultimately driving profitable customer action (Pulizzi, 2014). In the context of culinary micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), where competition is high and brand differentiation is crucial, content marketing provides a cost-effective approach to strengthen customer relationships and foster brand loyalty (Holliman & Rowley, 2014).

Customer engagement plays a pivotal mediating role in this relationship. Engagement refers to the depth of the emotional and cognitive connection that customers develop with a brand through repeated interactions (Ng et al., 2020). Recent studies have highlighted that increased engagement can significantly enhance customer loyalty by fostering trust, emotional attachment, and a sense of belonging (Julaeha, 2024). In the culinary industry, where sensory experience and emotional satisfaction are key, digital engagement—through interactive social media content, storytelling, and responsive customer service—has become a determining factor in securing long-term customer relationships (Pareang et al., 2025).

Despite the growing importance of digital strategies, many culinary SMEs in developing economies still struggle to implement effective content marketing practices due to limited resources and digital literacy (Roreng et al., 2024). Moreover, there is a gap in empirical research exploring how content marketing influences customer loyalty via customer engagement, particularly within the context of local food-based SMEs in the digital era. Most existing studies focus on large-scale enterprises or general e-commerce platforms, leaving SMEs underrepresented in academic discourse (Dwivedi et al., 2021).

This study is urgent and relevant given the increasing reliance of culinary SMEs on digital channels for survival and growth in the post-pandemic economy. With the proliferation of social media and shifting consumer behaviour, understanding the mechanism through which content marketing impacts customer loyalty—mediated by customer engagement—offers valuable insights for business practitioners and policymakers alike. Identifying these dynamics is crucial to enhancing digital marketing literacy and competitiveness among local food entrepreneurs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Content Marketing and Customer Loyalty

Content marketing has increasingly become a core element in digital marketing strategies due to its ability to attract and retain customers by providing value beyond traditional promotional tactics. Defined as the strategic creation and distribution of relevant, consistent, and valuable content, content marketing aims to stimulate consumer interest without overtly selling a product or service (Pulizzi, 2014). It focuses on building trust and long-term relationships by offering informative, entertaining, or inspiring content tailored to the target audience's needs and preferences (Holliman & Rowley, 2014). The link between content marketing and customer loyalty has received growing attention in both academic and practical domains. Loyalty, often conceptualized as the customer's willingness to continue purchasing from and engaging with a brand over time, is influenced by the perceived value and emotional resonance customers experience throughout their interactions with the brand (Kotler & Keller, 2016). In this context, content marketing plays a pivotal role in shaping those perceptions. Consistent and high-quality content helps brands establish credibility, reinforce brand values, and create a sense of familiarity and trust—all of which are essential precursors to customer loyalty (Julaeha, 2024).

Empirical studies support this connection. For instance, (Sarker et al., 2025) found that engaging and personalized content significantly enhanced brand trust and emotional attachment, which in turn improved customer retention rates. Similarly, (J. P. Londong, 2024) emphasized that content designed to meet informational and emotional needs can strengthen relational bonds, making customers more likely to repurchase and advocate for the brand.

Furthermore, in the context of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), content marketing offers a cost-effective strategy to compete with larger firms by establishing a distinctive voice and cultivating loyal niche communities (Gladysz et al., 2023). For culinary SMEs, in particular, content that showcases behind-the-scenes stories, local ingredients, or customer testimonials can enhance emotional engagement and foster repeat patronage (J. B. Halik et al., 2025). Despite these insights, the specific mechanisms by which content marketing contributes to loyalty, particularly in SMEs and developing digital markets, remain underexplored. There is a need for more contextualized studies that consider how small food businesses utilize content to maintain relevance and build loyalty in an increasingly crowded digital space.

Based on the theoretical and empirical evidence presented, it is reasonable to propose a direct positive relationship between content marketing and customer loyalty. Content that is valuable, authentic, and engaging strengthens the emotional and cognitive ties between the customer and the brand, thereby increasing the likelihood of repeat engagement and long-term loyalty.

H1: Content marketing has a positive and significant effect on customer loyalty.

Content Marketing and Customer Engagement

In the digital era, customer engagement has emerged as a vital construct in understanding how brands build sustained relationships with their audience. Defined as the level of a customer's cognitive, emotional, and behavioural investment in brand interactions, engagement is more than mere transactional behaviour—it reflects a deeper psychological connection (Hollebeek, 2019). As businesses increasingly operate within highly interactive online ecosystems, content marketing has become a key driver of customer engagement (Latiep et al., 2023).

Content marketing fosters engagement by delivering personalized, relevant, and interactive content that encourages customers to participate in brand-related experiences. This could include commenting on social media posts, sharing branded content, or engaging in brand-led storytelling. When executed effectively, content marketing transforms passive audiences into active participants, facilitating two-way communication and emotional resonance (Ho et al., 2022). These interactive experiences contribute to stronger brand relationships and encourage customers to spend more time and attention on brand channels.

From a theoretical standpoint, the relationship marketing and uses and gratifications perspectives explain why customers engage with content. Relationship marketing emphasizes trust and mutual value creation, which content marketing supports by offering content that informs, entertains, or solves problems (ANASTASIA et al., 2023). The uses and gratifications theory suggests that consumers actively seek content that satisfies their needs—whether informational, emotional, or social (Sahetapy et al., 2025). Thus, content marketing that aligns with these motivations is more likely to elicit customer engagement.

Empirical research reinforces this link. For example, (Marc & Rasul, 2022) demonstrated that content quality, originality, and interactivity significantly increase customer engagement on social media platforms. Similarly, (Bitrian et al., 2021) found that engaging content enhances users' experiential value, leading to higher levels of attention, satisfaction, and brand involvement. Particularly in the context of SMEs, customized content that highlights local identity or authenticity tends to resonate more deeply, enhancing engagement through cultural and emotional relevance (Gladysz et al., 2023).

In the culinary SME sector, content marketing practices such as sharing recipes, highlighting customer stories, or showcasing food preparation processes can create immersive digital experiences. These experiences invite consumers to connect with the brand beyond the product, turning content into a medium of relational bonding. Despite limited marketing budgets, SMEs can effectively leverage content marketing to stimulate customer engagement through creativity, storytelling, and authenticity (J. B. Halik et al., 2025).

Given this theoretical and empirical foundation, it is reasonable to posit a positive and direct relationship between content marketing efforts and customer engagement.

H2: Content marketing has a positive and significant effect on customer engagement.

Customer Engagement and Customer Loyalty

In contemporary marketing discourse, customer engagement has become a key construct in understanding how firms cultivate long-term relationships and drive customer loyalty. Engagement is typically characterized by a customer's voluntary, interactive, and emotional involvement with a brand, going beyond mere transactions to include behaviours such as sharing feedback, participating in brand communities, and co-creating value (Ho et al., 2022). As such, it represents a multidimensional concept encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions (Hollebeek, 2019). Loyalty, meanwhile, is broadly defined as a customer's intention and commitment to continue purchasing and recommending a brand over time (Kotler et al., 2021). It reflects both attitudinal and behavioural components—repeat purchases and positive word-of-mouth being two of the most salient manifestations. Engagement plays a foundational role in fostering this loyalty, as it

deepens the emotional and psychological bond between the customer and the brand (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

Numerous empirical studies affirm that higher levels of engagement significantly predict increased customer loyalty. For example, (Ng et al., 2020) found that engaged customers exhibit greater satisfaction, trust, and emotional attachment—factors that contribute to enduring loyalty. Similarly, (Sharabati et al., 2024) emphasized that customer engagement fosters a sense of brand belonging and advocacy, which not only leads to repeat patronage but also influences others' perceptions through word-of-mouth. In digital contexts, especially within service industries like culinary SMEs, engagement via interactive content and personalized communication strengthens emotional resonance, which in turn promotes loyalty behaviours (Rane et al., 2023). From a theoretical standpoint, the relationship marketing and service-dominant logic frameworks suggest that engagement acts as a relational mechanism that converts short-term interactions into long-term value (Ng et al., 2020). By involving customers in brand narratives and experiences, firms can transform passive consumers into active participants, thereby reinforcing loyalty through continuous value co-creation.

In the context of SMEs in the culinary sector, customer engagement may take various forms, including commenting on food posts, participating in promotions, or sharing dining experiences online. These behaviours create a loop of mutual interaction and recognition that strengthens customer-brand ties and enhances the likelihood of sustained loyalty.

Given this theoretical and empirical support, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Customer engagement has a positive and significant effect on customer loyalty.

The Mediating Role of Customer Engagement Between Content Marketing and Customer Loyalty

While content marketing has been widely acknowledged as a strategic tool for cultivating customer loyalty, recent research emphasizes that its influence may not be purely direct. Instead, the effectiveness of content marketing in building loyalty is increasingly understood through its impact on customer engagement—a dynamic and multidimensional construct that reflects the degree of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural investment a customer places in a brand (Ho et al., 2022; Hollebeek, 2019).

Content marketing, by design, encourages active participation and emotional connection through storytelling, valuable information, and interactive experiences. These elements foster engagement by creating a sense of involvement and resonance with brand values (Hollebeek, 2019). Engaged customers are more likely to interact with content, participate in conversations, and contribute to brand communities—behaviours that deepen their psychological commitment and increase the likelihood of loyalty (Marc & Rasul, 2022).

From a theoretical perspective, the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model provides a relevant lens. In this framework, content marketing acts as a stimulus that affects the customer's internal state (organism)—in this case, engagement—which then leads to a response, such as loyalty behaviours (Hussain et al., 2022). This sequential mechanism suggests that customer engagement may serve as a crucial mediator linking content marketing to loyalty outcomes.

Empirical studies further support this mediating role. For example, (Rizkia et al., 2024) found that customer engagement significantly mediates the relationship between content-driven brand interactions and customer loyalty, especially in digital environments. Likewise, (Kusdianti & Wilujeng, 2024) observed that engaging content not only improves perceived value but also enhances emotional involvement, which strengthens loyalty through continued interaction and satisfaction.

In the context of small, and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), particularly in the culinary sector, content that invites customer participation—such as recipe submissions, behind-the-scenes videos, or user-generated reviews—can enhance engagement. When customers are emotionally and behaviourally involved, they are more inclined to return, recommend, and develop loyalty toward the

brand. Thus, for SMEs operating in highly competitive digital landscapes, engagement becomes a strategic bridge between content efforts and long-term loyalty (J. B. Halik, Nurlia, et al., 2023).

Based on these theoretical and empirical foundations, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Customer engagement mediates the relationship between content marketing and customer loyalty.

Based on the literature review discussed above, this study proposes a conceptual framework that illustrates the relationships among content marketing, customer engagement, and customer loyalty. As shown in Figure 1 below, the model positions customer engagement as a mediating variable that explains how content marketing influences customer loyalty.

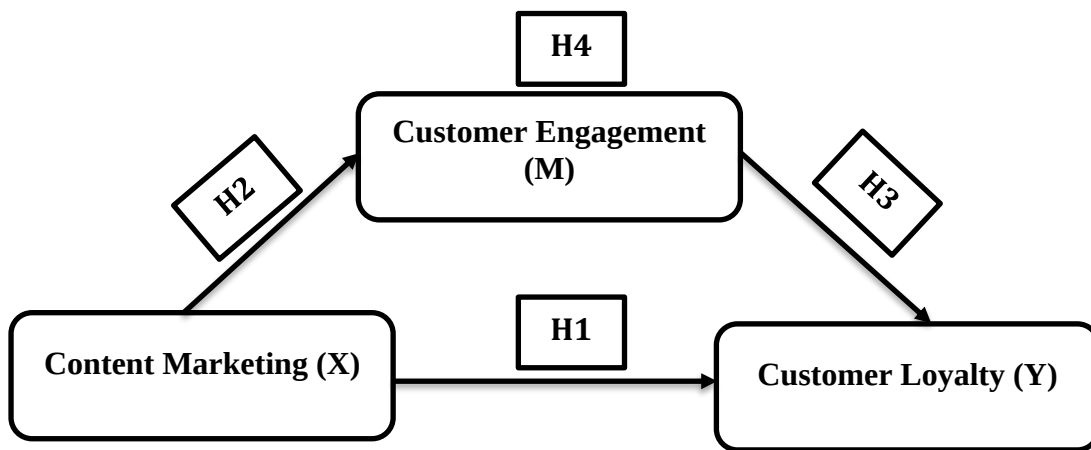


Figure 1. Research Concept Framework

Source: Author's Personal Thoughts (2025)

METHODS

This study adopts a quantitative research design using a causal-explanatory approach to examine the influence of content marketing on customer loyalty through the mediating role of customer engagement. The selection of this design is based on the study's objective to test relationships among variables and to validate a conceptual model derived from theoretical assumptions (Singarimbun, M & Effendi, 2008; Susilana, 2015). Data were collected using a structured questionnaire distributed to respondents who met predefined criteria, and the analysis was conducted to test the proposed hypotheses.

The population of this research consists of customers of culinary small, and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) operating in the digital environment, particularly those who actively follow or engage with food businesses on social media platforms. These include Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok, which are the primary channels for content marketing among culinary MSMEs in Indonesia. The sample was selected using purposive sampling, targeting individuals who had interacted with culinary SMEs' digital content (e.g., liking, commenting, sharing, or making a purchase) within the past six months. A total of 200 valid responses were collected and analysed, which meets the recommended minimum sample size for Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) analysis using Partial Least Squares (PLS) (Hair et al., 2021).

The research was conducted in Kendari, Indonesia, as the selected urban setting provides a rich ecosystem of digital-based culinary SMEs with active social media presence. The data collection process was carried out over a four-month period from January to April 2025. This timeframe allowed sufficient outreach and ensured that participants had recent and relevant experiences with the subject matter under investigation.

For data analysis, this study employed Structural Equation Modelling using the Partial Least Squares (PLS-SEM) approach with the aid of the Smart-PLS 4 software. PLS-SEM was chosen due to its suitability for exploratory models and its ability to handle complex relationships involving mediation (Ghozali, 2021; Haryono, 2017). The measurement model was evaluated for validity and reliability, including convergent validity (using Average Variance Extracted), discriminant validity (Fornell-Larcker and HTMT criteria), and internal consistency (using Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability). The structural model was then tested to assess the direct and indirect effects among the variables, and bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples was performed to evaluate the significance of path coefficients and the mediating effect of customer engagement (Santosa, 2018).

To operationalize the variables in this study, a series of measurement items were developed and adapted from relevant prior literature. Each construct—Content Marketing, Customer Engagement, and Customer Loyalty—was measured using multiple indicators assessed on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Table 1 below presents a detailed list of the items used to measure each variable. These indicators were designed to ensure both conceptual clarity and empirical validity in the context of culinary SMEs in the digital era.

Table 1. Measurement Items

Variable	Code	Measurement Item
Content Marketing (X)	CM1	The content shared by the brand is informative and relevant to my interests.
	CM2	The brand frequently posts engaging content across its digital platforms.
	CM3	The content provided helps me make informed decisions about the brand's offerings.
	CM4	The brand's content is visually attractive and well-organized.
Customer Engagement (M)	CE1	I often like, comment, or share the brand's content on social media.
	CE2	I feel emotionally connected to the brand through its online content.
	CE3	I regularly follow updates or campaigns from this brand.
	CE4	I feel involved when engaging with the brand's digital presence.
	CE5	I would recommend the brand's content to others due to its value or creativity.
Customer Loyalty (Y)	CL1	I intend to continue purchasing from this brand in the future.
	CL2	I prefer this brand over others in the same category.
	CL3	I would recommend this brand to friends and family.
	CL4	I consider myself loyal to this brand.
	CL5	I am willing to spend more to buy from this brand due to my positive experiences.

Source: Compiled from various sources (2025)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Demographics

Below we present a description of the respondents who were the objects of this research in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Respondent Demographic Profile (N=200)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	78	39.0%
	Female	122	61.0%
Age	18–25 years	94	47.0%
	26–35 years	72	36.0%
	36–45 years	26	13.0%
	>45 years	8	4.0%

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Education Level	High school or equivalent	40	20.0%
	Diploma	36	18.0%
	Bachelor's degree	104	52.0%
	Postgraduate degree	20	10.0%
Occupation	Student	58	29.0%
	Private employee	82	41.0%
	Entrepreneur	38	19.0%
	Others	22	11.0%
Monthly Spending on Culinary	< IDR 500,000	68	34.0%
	IDR 500,000–1,000,000	90	45.0%
	> IDR 1,000,000	42	21.0%

Source: Primary data processed (2025)

The demographic profile of the respondents reveals a predominance of female participants (61.0%), indicating that women tend to engage more frequently with culinary content on digital platforms. In terms of age distribution, the majority of respondents fall within the 18–25 age group (47.0%), followed by those aged 26–35 (36.0%). This highlights the strong presence of younger, digitally native consumers in the culinary MSME ecosystem, who are likely to be active social media users and responsive to online content marketing.

Regarding educational background, over half of the respondents (52.0%) hold a bachelor's degree, suggesting a relatively well-educated consumer base that may be more discerning and information-seeking when engaging with culinary brands. The occupational data shows that private employees constitute the largest segment (41.0%), followed by students (29.0%), which may reflect varying purchasing capacities and motivations in engaging with content and making culinary purchases.

Spending behaviour also provides useful insights: 45.0% of respondents report monthly spending on culinary products between IDR 500,000 and 1,000,000, indicating a moderate yet consistent engagement with the culinary market. This level of expenditure, combined with high social media activity, positions this segment as particularly valuable for MSMEs employing strategic content marketing efforts.

Overall, the respondent profile suggests a digitally engaged, relatively young, and educated consumer base that interacts frequently with culinary MSMEs through online platforms. These characteristics are relevant for analysing how content marketing strategies influence customer engagement and ultimately foster loyalty within the digital culinary sector.

Outer Model Evaluation (Measurement Model)

To validate the reliability and validity of the constructs used in this study, the measurement model was evaluated through several tests: indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. The results of this assessment are presented in **Table 3**.

Convergent validity was assessed using Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Outer Loadings. All indicators achieved factor loadings above 0.70, and all AVE values exceeded the minimum threshold of 0.50, indicating good convergent validity (Hair et al., 2016). Additionally, both Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) values for each construct surpassed the recommended cutoff of 0.70, suggesting strong internal consistency reliability (Santosa, 2018).

Discriminant validity was verified through the HTMT (Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio) approach, where all HTMT values were below the maximum recommended threshold of 0.90. This confirms that the constructs are distinct from one another (Henseler et al., 2015).

Table 3. Summary of Measurement Model Evaluation Results

Construct	Code	Loading Factor	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE	HTMT (Max)
Content Marketing	CM1	0.907	0.906	0.915	0.781	0.678
	CM2	0.916				
	CM3	0.889				
	CM4	0.818				
Customer Engagement	CE1	0.817	0.878	0.891	0.673	0.678
	CE2	0.792				
	CE3	0.896				
	CE4	0.868				
	CE5	0.719				
Consumer Loyalty	CL1	0.849	0.899	0.909	0.712	0.665
	CL2	0.879				
	CL3	0.826				
	CL4	0.857				
	CL	0.805				

Note: All values satisfy recommended thresholds: Outer Loadings > 0.70; AVE > 0.50; α & CR > 0.70; HTMT < 0.90 (Hair et al., 2019)

Source: Data processed with Smart-PLS (2025)

The outer model evaluation results confirm that the constructs used in this study exhibit high levels of reliability and validity. All observed items demonstrated strong loadings on their respective latent variables, and the internal consistency of the items within each construct was robust. Moreover, the constructs maintained adequate convergent and discriminant validity, indicating that the instruments accurately capture the intended theoretical constructs without overlapping with one another. This validation process ensures that the structural model can be tested with confidence in the accuracy and precision of the measurement instruments.

Structural Model Evaluation (Inner Model)

The structural model evaluation aims to test the hypothesized relationships between latent variables and to determine the model's predictive power. This step involves several key statistical tests including the coefficient of determination (R^2), effect size (f^2), and the significance of path coefficients (β) through bootstrapping procedures (Ghozali, 2021; Hair et al., 2019).

The R^2 -value reflects the degree to which the independent variables explain the variance in the dependent variable (Santosa, 2018). In this study, the Customer Engagement construct has an R^2 value of 0.380, indicating that 38% of its variance is explained by Content Marketing. Similarly, Customer Loyalty yielded an R^2 of 0.367, showing a moderate level of explanatory power from Content Marketing and Customer Engagement variables. (See **table 4**)

Table 4. R-Square Value

	R-Square	R-Square Adjusted
Customer Engagement	0.380	0.377
Customer Loyalty	0.367	0.360

Source: Data processed with Smart-PLS (2025)

Effect Size (f^2). The effect size (f^2) measures the relative impact of an exogenous construct on an endogenous construct. Table 5 below illustrates the F-Square relationship between each variable (Ghozali, 2021).

Table 5. F-Square Value

Variable	Content Marketing	Customer Engagement	Customer Loyalty
Content Marketing		0.613	0.013

Customer Engagement

0.272

Customer Loyalty

Source: Data processed with Smart-PLS (2025)

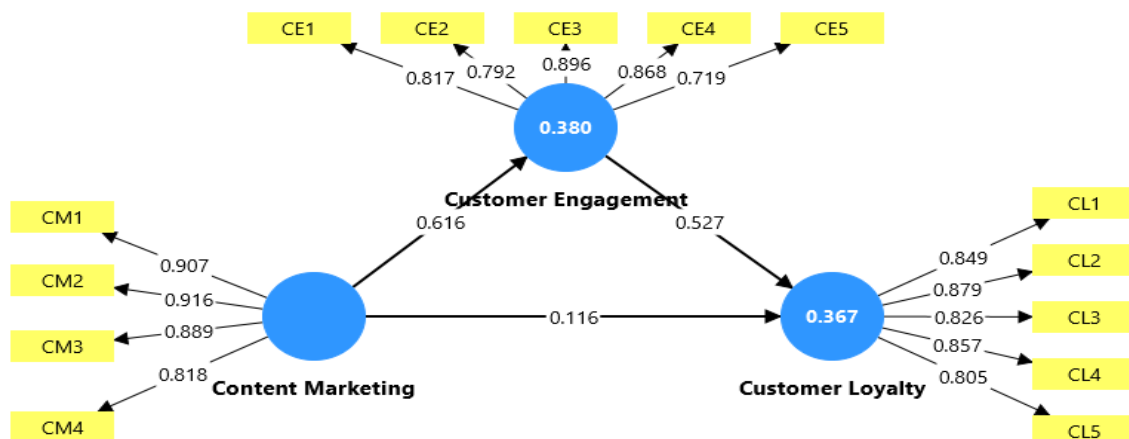
From the output above the results can be described as follows: The Content Marketing variable towards Customer Loyalty has an F-square value of 0.013, so the influence is classified as small/weak. The Content Marketing variable on Customer Engagement shows an F-square value of 0.613, so the influence is considered large/strong. The customer engagement variable on Customer Loyalty has an F-square value of 0.272, so its influence is considered moderate.

Table 6. Model Fit Result

	Saturated Model	Estimated Model
SRMR	0.062	0.062
d_ULS	0.401	0.401
d_G	0.244	0.244
Chi-square	282.849	282.849
NFI	0.859	0.859

Source: Data processed with Smart-PLS (2025)

The research model also demonstrates good relevance. The Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) value, as seen in Table 6, is 0.062, which is less than the recommended threshold of 0.080 (Hair et al., 2019). **Figure 2** shows the path coefficients for the structural equation model.

**Figure 2. Structural Equation Modelling**

Source: Data processed with Smart-PLS (2025)

Hypothesis testing. The SmartPLS 4 software's Bootstrapping capability is used to do hypothesis testing. It is generally acknowledged in economics and management studies that research should have a significance level of between 5 and 10 percent. If the T-statistic value is more than the minimal requirement of 1.960 and the significance level, represented by the P value, is equal to or less than 0.050, the hypothesis is deemed accepted. This suggests that exogenous and endogenous variables have a considerable impact. In contrast, the effect is deemed unimportant if the P-value is more than 0.050 and the T-statistic value is less than 1.960, suggesting that the relationship between exogenous and endogenous variables is unaffected. (Ghozali, 2021; Hair et al., 2019; Haryono, 2017).

Table 7. Path Coefficient and Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis	Relation	Original Sample	Mean	SD	T-Statistics	P-Values	Description
------------	----------	-----------------	------	----	--------------	----------	-------------

H1	CM → CL	0.116	0.114	0.089	1.302	0.193	Not Supported
H2	CM → CE	0.616	0.619	0.052	11.889	0.000	Supported
H3	CE → CL	0.527	0.530	0.079	6.688	0.000	Supported
H4	CM → CE → CL	0.325	0.329	0.059	5.482	0.000	Supported

Note: CM = Content Marketing, CE = Customer Engagement, CL = Customer Loyalty

Source: Primary Data Processed (2025)

The results of the hypothesis testing are summarized in Table 7. Based on the path coefficient analysis, the **first hypothesis (H1)**, which proposed a direct effect of content marketing on customer loyalty, is not supported ($\beta = 0.116$, $p = 0.193$). This indicates that content marketing alone does not significantly influence customer loyalty without the presence of mediating factors.

In contrast, the **second hypothesis (H2)**, which states that content marketing has a significant positive effect on customer engagement, is supported ($\beta = 0.616$, $p = 0.000$). This result suggests that well-executed content marketing strategies are effective in increasing customer interaction, emotional involvement, and behavioral participation.

The **third hypothesis (H3)**, which examines the relationship between customer engagement and customer loyalty, is also supported ($\beta = 0.527$, $p = 0.000$), demonstrating that higher levels of engagement can significantly foster customer loyalty.

Finally, the **fourth hypothesis (H4)**, which tests the mediating role of customer engagement in the relationship between content marketing and customer loyalty, is supported ($\beta = 0.325$, $p = 0.000$). This finding confirms that content marketing influences customer loyalty indirectly through its impact on customer engagement.

Discussion

The findings of this study offer important insights into the mechanisms through which content marketing contributes to customer loyalty within the context of culinary SMEs in the digital era. Although content marketing alone does not directly enhance customer loyalty (H1 not supported), it plays a critical indirect role by first fostering customer engagement (H2 supported), which in turn leads to increased loyalty (H3 and H4 supported).

The insignificant direct path from content marketing to customer loyalty implies that merely publishing content—even if frequent or aesthetically pleasing—may not be sufficient to generate loyal behaviours such as repeat purchases or brand advocacy. This finding aligns with recent studies emphasizing that engagement, not just exposure, is the true driver of loyalty in digital marketing contexts (J. B. Halik & Halik, 2024; A. S. Londong et al., 2024).

The strong, significant relationship between content marketing and customer engagement (H2) highlights the importance of designing content that is not only informative but also interactive, emotionally resonant, and tailored to the audience's interests. When customers feel connected and involved with a brand through digital content, their level of engagement increases—evidenced by likes, comments, shares, or active following (Ho et al., 2022; J. P. Londong, 2024).

Furthermore, the significant impact of customer engagement on customer loyalty (H3) reinforces prior research suggesting that engaged customers are more likely to develop affective bonds and exhibit loyal behaviours. This is particularly relevant for SMEs competing in a saturated digital market, where emotional connection and community-building can be a major differentiator.

Most notably, the mediating role of customer engagement (H4) demonstrates that content marketing contributes to loyalty through a relational process, rather than transactional communication. This underscores the strategic value of engagement-focused content in enhancing long-term customer relationships.

Taken together, these findings suggest that culinary SMEs should prioritize content marketing strategies that encourage active participation, emotional resonance, and community involvement—

rather than merely focusing on content volume or visual design. By doing so, they can build stronger engagement that ultimately drives customer loyalty.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on digital marketing by empirically examining the impact of content marketing on customer loyalty through the mediating role of customer engagement in the context of culinary SMEs. The findings highlight that while content marketing does not directly influence customer loyalty, it significantly enhances customer engagement, which in turn has a strong positive effect on loyalty. The indirect effect of content marketing—operating through engagement—demonstrates the relational nature of digital marketing, where building interactive and emotionally resonant content is more impactful than purely promotional messaging.

One of the main advantages of this study lies in its emphasis on engagement as a key mechanism that links marketing efforts to actual customer retention outcomes. This insight provides SMEs with a clearer roadmap for designing content strategies that go beyond visibility and focus instead on fostering sustained interaction and emotional connection. By prioritizing content that encourages customer participation and involvement, SMEs can more effectively build loyal customer bases in highly competitive digital environments.

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. First, the sample was restricted to consumers of culinary SMEs in Kendari, Southeast Sulawesi, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other sectors or geographic regions. Second, the study employed a cross-sectional design, which prevents any causal inference over time. Lastly, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce potential response bias.

Nevertheless, the practical applications of this study are significant. SME operators, particularly in the culinary sector, can use these insights to refine their digital marketing strategies by focusing on content that promotes engagement—such as storytelling, user-generated content, or interactive campaigns. Policymakers and digital marketing consultants may also use these findings to develop training programs and digital empowerment initiatives for SMEs aiming to thrive in the digital economy.

Future research should consider a longitudinal approach to better capture changes in engagement and loyalty over time. Additionally, exploring other mediating or moderating variables—such as trust or brand image—may offer a more comprehensive understanding of the digital marketing–loyalty relationship.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ANASTASIA, R., RURUK, N., JAYA, A., HALIK, J. B., & LONDONG, J. P. (2023). Pengaruh Relationship Marketing dan Loyalitas Pelanggan Terhadap Keputusan Pembelian Konsumen Mixue Makassar. *YOS SOEDARSO ECONOMICS JOURNAL (YEJ)*, 5(2), 56–70. <https://ejurnal.uniyos.ac.id/index.php/ysej-server/article/view/yej5205>
- Bitrian, P., Buil, I., & Catalan, S. (2021). Enhancing user engagement : The role of gamification in mobile apps. *Journal of Business Research*, 132(July 2021), 170–185. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.04.028>
- Dwivedi, Y. K., Ismagilova, E., Hughes, D. L., Carlson, J., Filieri, R., Jacobson, J., Jain, V., Karjaluoto, H., Kefi, H., Krishen, A. S., Kumar, V., Rahman, M. M., Raman, R., Rauschnabel, P. A., Rowley, J., Salo, J., Tran, G. A., & Wang, Y. (2021). Setting the future of digital and social media marketing research : Perspectives and research propositions. *International Journal of Information Management*, 59(June 2020), 102168. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2020.102168>

- Ghozali, I. (2021). *Partial Least Square: Konsep, Teknik dan Aplikasi Menggunakan Smart PLS 3.2.9* (3rd ed.). Universitas Diponegoro.
- Gladysz, B., Matteri, D., Ejsmont, K., Bettoni, A., & Guerra, R. H. (2023). Platform-based support for AI uptake by SMEs: guidelines to design service bundles. *Central European Management Journal*, 31(4), 463–478. <https://doi.org/10.1108/CEMJ-08-2022-0096>
- Hair, J. F., Howard, M. C., & Nitzl, C. (2021). Review of Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) Using R: A Workbook. In *Structural Equation Modeling: A Multidisciplinary Journal* (Vol. 30, Issue 1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/10705511.2022.2108813>
- Hair, J. F., Hult, G. M., Ringle, C. & Sarstedt, M. (2016). *A Primer on Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). Second*. Los Angeles: SAGE.
- Hair, J. F., Risher, J. J., Sarstedt, M., & Ringle, C. M. (2019). When to use and how to report the results of PLS-SEM. *European Business Review*, 31(1), 2–24. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EBR-11-2018-0203>
- Halik, J. B., & Halik, M. Y. (2024). Open Innovation And Digital Marketing : A Catalyst For Culinary SMEs In Makassar. *Jurnal Manajemen*, 28(03), 588–612. <https://doi.org/10.24912/jm.v28i3.2059>
- Halik, J. B., Nurlia, & Latiep, I. F. (2023). Analisis Strategi Pemasaran Dalam Meningkatkan Jumlah Konsumen di Makassar Coffee House (MCH). *Journal of Marketing Management and Innovative Business Review*, 1(1), 48–60. <https://doi.org/10.63416/mrb.v1i1.163>
- Halik, J. B., Parawansa, D. A. S., Sudirman, I., & Jusni, J. (2023). Implications of IT Awareness and Digital Marketing to Product Distribution on the Performance of Makassar SMEs. *유통과학연구 Journal of Distribution Science*, 21(7), 105–116. <https://doi.org/10.15722/jds.21.07.202307.105>
- Halik, J. B., Patandean, E. H. B., Londong, J. P., Wattilete, L. C., & Mongan, C. J. (2025). *Inovasi UKM* (M. Y. Halik & W. Yuliani (eds.); 1st ed.). CV. Luminary Press Indonesia.
- Haryono, S. (2017). Metode SEM untuk penelitian manajemen dengan AMOS LISREL PLS. *Luxima Metro Media*, 450.
- Henseler, J., Ringle, C. M., & Sarstedt, M. (2015). A new criterion for assessing discriminant validity in variance-based structural equation modeling. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 43(1), 115–135. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-014-0403-8>
- Ho, J., Pang, C., & Choy, C. (2022). Content Marketing Capability Building: A Conceptual Framework. *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing*, 14(1), 133–151. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JRIM-06-2018-0082>
- Hollebeek, L. D. (2019). Exploring customer brand engagement: Definition and themes. *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, 19(7), 555. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0965254X.2011.599493>
- Holliman, G., & Rowley, J. (2014). Business to business digital content marketing: marketers' perceptions of best practice. *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing*, 8(4), 269–293. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JRIM-02-2014-0013>
- Hussain, A., Ting, D. H., Petronas, U. T., & Abbasi, A. Z. (2022). Integrating the S-O-R Model to Examine Purchase Intention Based on Instagram Sponsored Advertising. *Journal of Promotion Management*, August. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10496491.2022.2108185>
- Julaeha, L. S. (2024). *The Role of Content Marketing in Brand Loyalty: An Empirical Analysis*. 2(2), 117–132. <https://doi.org/10.59603/masman.v2i2.509>
- Kotler, P., & Keller, K. L. (2016). *Marketing Management* (15th ed.). Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Kotler, P., Kertajaya, H., & Setiawan, I. (2021). *Marketing 5.0: Technology for Humanity*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Kusdianti, S. E., & Wilujeng, I. P. (2024). Customer Engagement Memediasi Content Marketing Terhadap Brand Awareness pada Online Travel Agent. *EKOMABIS: Jurnal Ekonomi Manajemen Bisnis*, 4(02), 171–184. <https://doi.org/10.37366/ekomabis.v4i02.323>
- Latiep, I. F., Dewi, A. R. S., Syam, A., Halik, J. B., & Chakti, A. G. R. (2023). INOVASI BISNIS ONLINE. In B. Majid & H. Hardiyono (Eds.), *Chakti Pustaka Indonesia* (1st ed., Vol. 1).

Chakti Pustaka Indonesia.

- Londong, A. S., Loda, M. N., Halik, J. B., Jaya, A., & Paridi, A. (2024). Moderation of open innovation on the impact of influencer marketing on decisions to purchase Hanasui cosmetic products at Tiktok Shop. *Brazilian Journal of Development*, 10(1), 621–643. <https://doi.org/10.34117/bjdv10n1-038>
- Londong, J. P. (2024). Perilaku Konsumen Di Era Digital. *MARIOBRE: Journal of Marketing Management and Innovative Business Review*, 02(2), 15–26. <https://doi.org/10.63416/mrb.v2i2.260>
- Marc, W., & Rasul, T. (2022). Customer engagement and social media : Revisiting the past to inform the future. *Journal of Business Research*, 148(May 2021), 325–342. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2022.04.068>
- Ng, S. C., Sweeney, J. C., & Plewa, C. (2020). Customer engagement : A systematic review and future research priorities. *Australasian Marketing Journal (AMJ)*, 28(4), 235–252. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ausmj.2020.05.004>
- Pareang, T., Mongan, B., & Halik, J. B. (2025). THE INFLUENCE OF FINANCIAL LITERACY AND FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT ON THE PERFORMANCE OF TAILORING SMES IN NORTH TORAJA. *JOURNAL OF ENTREPRENEUR, BUSINESS, AND MANAGEMENT*, 3(1), 1–17. <https://journal.amkop.id/jebm/article/view/165>
- Pulizzi, J. (2014). *Epic Content Marketing: How to Tell a Different Story, Break through the Clutter, and Win More Customers by Marketing Less*. Mc Graw Hill Professional.
- Rane, N. L., Achari, A., & Choudhary, S. P. (2023). Enhancing Customer Loyalty Through Quality of Service: Effective Strategies to Improve Customer Satisfaction, Experience, Relationship, and Engagement. *International Research Journal of Modernization in Engineering Technology and Science*, 05(05), 427–452. <https://doi.org/10.56726/IRJMETS38104>
- Rizkia, A. R., Akbar, M. A., & Lina, R. (2024). Customer Engagement Mediates the Effect of Content marketing on Purchase Intention. *Advances in Business & Industrial Marketing Research*, 2(3), 123–137.
- Roreng, P. P., Halik, J. B., Halik, M. Y., & Irdawati. (2024). Systematic Literature Review : Kondisi Makroekonomi Indonesia Pasca Pandemi Covid-19 dan Prospek di Masa Mendatang. *Journal of Marketing Management and Innovative Business Review*, 2(2), 56–67. <https://doi.org/10.63416/mrb.v2i2.306>
- Sahetapy, H., Halik, M. Y., Sino, H. W., & Bokau, J. R. S. (2025). Big Data and Artificial Intelligence : Implications and Strategies for Business Development in Indonesia. *Journal of Marketing Management and Innovative Business Review (MARIOBRE)*, 3(1), 65–77. <https://doi.org/10.63416/mrb.v3i1.321>
- Santosa, P. I. (2018). *Metode Penelitian Kuantitatif: Pengembangan Hipotesis dan Pengujiannya Menggunakan SmartPLS* (Giovanny (ed.); 1st ed.). Penerbit ANDI.
- Sarker, P., Hughes, L., Malik, T., & Dwivedi, Y. K. (2025). Examining consumer adoption of social commerce: An extended META-UTAUT model. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 212(December 2024), 123956. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2024.123956>
- Sharabati, A. A., Ali, A., Ali, A., Allahham, M. I., Hussein, A. A., Alheet, A. F., & Mohammad, A. S. (2024). The Impact of Digital Marketing on the Performance of SMEs : An Analytical Study in Light of Modern Digital Transformations. *Sustainability*, 16(8667), 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su16198667>
- Singarimbun, M & Effendi, S. (2008). *Metode Penelitian Survei*. LP3ES.
- Susilana, R. (2015). Metode Penelitian Sosial Kuantitatif. *Journal of Visual Languages & Computing*, 11(3), 287–301.