

Navigating Ethical Marketing: How Transparency Influences Brand Loyalty in the Digital Age

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Abstract

This study explores the role of transparency in digital marketing and its impact on consumer trust and brand loyalty in the digital age. As consumers become more informed and discerning, they increasingly expect brands to be open about their business practices, product information, and ethical standards. The research examines how transparent marketing strategies foster consumer trust and enhance long-term loyalty. It also investigates the broader implications of ethical marketing in the digital landscape. Through qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews, document analysis, and case studies, the findings reveal that transparency plays a pivotal role in building trust and cultivating loyalty among consumers. Additionally, the study highlights the growing importance of ethical marketing practices as businesses adapt to an increasingly digital and interconnected world. The results suggest that businesses prioritizing transparency and ethical communication are more likely to retain loyal customers and enhance their market reputation. This study provides valuable insights for marketers seeking to implement effective digital strategies that align with consumer expectations and build sustainable relationships.

Keywords: *Digital marketing, Transparency, Consumer trust, Brand loyalty*

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has significantly transformed consumer behavior, reshaping how individuals interact with brands and make purchasing decisions. The proliferation of the internet and mobile devices has empowered consumers with unprecedented access to information, enabling them to compare products, read reviews, and make informed choices with ease. This shift has led to a more discerning consumer base that values transparency and ethical practices in marketing communications. Research indicates that digitalization has altered traditional consumer behavior patterns, emphasizing the need for businesses to adapt their strategies to meet evolving expectations (Jílková & Králová, 2021). Moreover, the integration of digital platforms has facilitated personalized marketing approaches, allowing companies to tailor their messages to individual preferences, thereby

enhancing engagement and loyalty (Shabbir et al., 2024). However, this digital transformation also presents challenges, particularly concerning data privacy and the ethical use of consumer information. Consumers are increasingly aware of how their data is collected and utilized, prompting a demand for greater transparency and ethical conduct from brands (Chang & Mukherjee, 2023). Consequently, businesses must navigate the complexities of digital marketing by implementing transparent practices that foster trust and build long-term relationships with their audience. In summary, the digital era has not only revolutionized consumer behavior but also heightened the importance of ethical marketing practices, making transparency a critical component in cultivating brand loyalty.

In the digital era, ethical marketing practices are paramount for maintaining and enhancing brand reputation. Consumers, empowered by vast online information, are increasingly vigilant about the ethical standards of the brands they engage with. Brands that prioritize transparency in their marketing communications tend to foster greater consumer trust and loyalty. Studies have shown that ethical marketing, characterized by honesty and social responsibility, significantly influences consumer perceptions and behaviors (Martinez, 2024). Moreover, transparent marketing strategies, which openly share product information and business practices, have been linked to higher levels of consumer engagement and brand loyalty (Amazeen & Vargo, 2021). The integration of ethical considerations into digital marketing not only differentiates brands in a competitive marketplace but also aligns with the values of modern consumers who demand accountability and integrity. Therefore, understanding the interplay between ethical marketing, transparency, and consumer loyalty is crucial for businesses aiming to build sustainable relationships with their audience. This discussion sets the stage for a deeper exploration of how transparency in marketing strategies directly impacts consumer trust and loyalty in the subsequent sections.

Building upon the previous discussion on the significance of ethical marketing and transparency, this study focuses on the impact of transparent marketing practices on brand loyalty in the digital age. Transparency in marketing involves openly sharing information about products, services, and business operations, thereby fostering trust and credibility among consumers. In the digital era, where information is readily accessible, consumers are more informed and discerning, making transparency a critical factor in their purchasing decisions. Research indicates that transparent marketing practices positively influence consumer trust, which in turn enhances brand loyalty (Mohammadi et al., 2023). Furthermore, ethical marketing strategies that emphasize transparency have been shown to strengthen consumer-brand relationships, leading to increased customer retention and advocacy (Shabbir et al., 2024). In contrast, a lack of transparency can result in consumer skepticism and diminish brand loyalty. Therefore, understanding the role of transparency in marketing is essential for brands aiming to build and maintain loyal customer bases in the digital landscape. This study aims to explore how transparent marketing practices

influence consumer trust and brand loyalty, providing insights for businesses to develop effective marketing strategies that align with ethical standards and consumer expectations.

Building upon the previous discussion on the role of transparency in digital marketing, recent developments in 2023 and 2024 have further underscored its critical impact on brand loyalty. In an era where consumers are increasingly vigilant about data privacy and ethical business practices, transparency has emerged as a pivotal factor in fostering trust and loyalty. A study by Deloitte (2023) revealed that 71% of online shoppers are concerned about how retailers use their personal information, highlighting the necessity for brands to communicate transparently about data usage to maintain consumer trust. Moreover, the same report found that 60% of shoppers remain loyal to trusted brands, and 20% have increased their purchases from these brands, emphasizing the direct correlation between transparency and consumer loyalty. Additionally, the 2024 Loyalty Barometer Report by Merkle indicated that consumers are more inclined to engage with brands that demonstrate clear and honest communication, with 53% of consumers willing to pay to participate in a loyalty program that offers transparent benefits. These findings suggest that in the current digital landscape, where information is readily accessible, consumers prioritize brands that are open about their practices, leading to enhanced loyalty and sustained business success. Therefore, integrating transparency into digital marketing strategies is not merely an ethical obligation but a strategic imperative to cultivate and retain a loyal customer base.

Despite extensive research on transparency in digital marketing and its influence on brand loyalty, several gaps persist in the literature. Firstly, while studies have examined the general impact of transparent communication on consumer trust, there is a lack of focus on specific transparency dimensions, such as cost and production transparency, and their distinct effects on perceived brand authenticity and consumer responses (Yang & Battocchio, 2021). Secondly, the role of social media interactivity in shaping brand trust and loyalty remains underexplored, particularly concerning how perceived social media agility mediates this relationship (Bozkurt et al., 2023). Additionally, existing research often overlooks the combined effects of brand experience, satisfaction, trust, and commitment on brand loyalty, necessitating a more integrated approach to understand their interrelationships (Liang, 2021). Moreover, the influence of social media and brand equity on business-to-business (B2B) brand management strategies is not well understood, especially in relation to brand heritage and its integration with social media efforts (Pecot et al., 2021). Lastly, while the importance of ethical marketing is acknowledged, there is a need for empirical studies that investigate how transparent brand communication directly affects consumer perceptions and behaviors in various cultural contexts (Amazeen & Vargo, 2021). Addressing these gaps is essential for developing comprehensive strategies that leverage transparency to enhance brand loyalty in the digital age.

The primary objective of this research is to identify the role of transparency in digital marketing on consumer loyalty. In an era where consumers are increasingly aware of ethical practices, understanding how transparency influences their loyalty is crucial for businesses aiming to build lasting relationships. Additionally, the study seeks to explore consumers' perceptions of ethics in digital marketing, delving into how they interpret and value ethical considerations in their interactions with brands online. By examining these aspects, the research aims to provide valuable insights for business practitioners, highlighting the importance of ethical marketing practices in fostering trust and loyalty among consumers. Such insights are essential for developing strategies that not only meet consumer expectations but also enhance brand reputation in the competitive digital marketplace. Ultimately, this study aspires to contribute to the broader discourse on ethical marketing, offering practical recommendations for businesses to navigate the complexities of digital consumer engagement ethically and effectively.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach, specifically phenomenology, to explore consumer experiences with transparency in digital marketing. Phenomenology captures the essence of consumer perceptions by focusing on their lived experiences (Smith, 2020). A case study of a company known for transparent marketing practices will provide a real-world context (Yin, 2018). Participants include consumers, marketing managers, and digital marketing experts, offering diverse perspectives. Data will be collected through in-depth interviews, observations of digital marketing practices, and document analysis, including digital campaigns and consumer reviews (Bowen, 2009). Thematic analysis will identify recurring patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Triangulation will ensure validity by cross-verifying data from interviews, observations, and documents (Patton, 2020). Member-checking will allow participants to confirm the accuracy of the findings, enhancing reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 2020). This framework aims to deepen understanding of how transparency influences consumer loyalty in digital marketing.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Impact of Marketing Transparency on Consumer Trust

In the digital era, marketing transparency has become a crucial factor influencing consumer trust. Marketing transparency refers to the openness and honesty with which companies share information about their products, services, and business practices with consumers. This transparency builds trust, as consumers feel more informed and confident in their purchasing decisions. Research shows that transparent marketing practices significantly enhance consumer trust, leading to increased brand loyalty and customer retention (Khamitov et al., 2024). For example, a study examining the scarcity of cooking oil in Indonesia highlighted that the government's lack of transparency in information dissemination led to public distrust. In contrast, companies like The Body Shop, which adhered to transparent marketing communications, were able to maintain consumer trust (Putra & Doho, 2022).

Moreover, transparency in marketing communications is not just about providing accurate information but also about being upfront about business operations and product sourcing. Today's consumers are more concerned about ethical practices and corporate social responsibility. Companies that openly share their ethical practices and product sourcing tend to build stronger trust with their consumers. A study on the influence of marketing communication, trust, and satisfaction on customer loyalty found that trust significantly impacts customer loyalty, emphasizing the importance of transparent communication in building trust (Yang & Battocchio, 2021).

This finding underscores the need for businesses to adopt transparent marketing strategies to foster consumer trust and loyalty. Furthermore, the role of transparency extends to digital marketing platforms, where consumers have access to vast amounts of information. In this context, transparency becomes even more critical as consumers can easily verify the information provided by companies. A study analyzing the impact of trust in a brand on brand loyalty among bottled drinking water consumers found that trust in a brand significantly influences brand loyalty (Hochstein et al., 2023). This suggests that in the digital age, where information is readily available, transparency in marketing communications is essential for building and maintaining consumer trust.

Consumer Perceptions of Ethics in Digital Marketing

In the digital era, consumer perceptions of ethical practices in marketing have become increasingly significant. Consumers are more informed and discerning, with access to vast amounts of information that enable them to evaluate the ethical standards of companies. A study by Muninggar and Aulia (2020) highlights that consumers purchasing fishery products through digital marketing platforms prioritize quality and practicality, with 60% citing convenience as a primary reason for their choice. This indicates that ethical considerations, such as transparency about product quality, play a crucial role in consumer decision-making processes.

Furthermore, the importance of ethical marketing is underscored by research examining consumer perceptions related to online retailer ethics. Halim, Sari, and Sari (2023) found that consumer perceptions of online retailer ethics (CPEOR) significantly influence e-satisfaction and e-loyalty. This suggests that consumers are more likely to remain loyal to online retailers they perceive as ethical, emphasizing the need for businesses to uphold ethical standards in their digital marketing strategies.

The role of social media in shaping consumer perceptions of ethical marketing cannot be overlooked. A study by Muninggar and Aulia (2020) indicates that 43% of consumers obtain purchasing information from social media platforms. This reliance on social media for information highlights the necessity for companies to maintain ethical practices in their social media marketing efforts, as consumers are likely to scrutinize and share their perceptions of a company's ethics on these platforms.

The Dynamics Between Ethics, Transparency, and Brand Loyalty

In the contemporary digital marketplace, ethical marketing and transparency have emerged as essential elements for building lasting consumer trust. Ethical marketing refers to the practice of promoting products and services in a way that is honest, responsible, and fair. This approach encourages businesses to adopt socially responsible practices that resonate with consumers who increasingly value corporate integrity. Transparency, a crucial component of ethical marketing, involves openly sharing information about a company's products, services, and business operations. The ability to access and verify information has become an integral part of consumer decision-making, especially in the digital era. As companies increasingly operate in a digitally connected world, transparent communication has become a key determinant of consumer trust and brand loyalty (Kusuma & Ratri, 2020).

One of the primary ways transparency influences brand loyalty is by fostering an environment of trust. Consumers today have greater access to information than ever before, and they are more likely to engage with brands that demonstrate openness about their operations and values. Research consistently shows that transparency in marketing communications is closely linked to building consumer trust, which in turn leads to enhanced brand loyalty. In an era where misinformation can easily spread, companies that are transparent about their practices gain a competitive edge by differentiating themselves from less transparent competitors (Syarif & Fadhilah, 2019).

The role of trust in consumer behavior is critical in the digital marketplace. A study on trust, marketing communication, and customer satisfaction highlights that trust significantly influences brand loyalty. Transparent marketing practices foster trust, making consumers more likely to develop positive attitudes towards a brand and remain loyal in the long term (Wikanta, 2018). This is particularly relevant in digital marketing platforms, where customers have the ability to verify the claims made by companies through independent sources. Brands that provide accurate, consistent, and honest information are more likely to build enduring relationships with their customers (Putra & Doho, 2022).

Furthermore, the prevalence of online reviews and feedback platforms further amplifies the need for transparency in digital marketing. As consumers can easily compare prices, products, and services across multiple platforms, businesses must maintain a high level of openness to retain their credibility. The failure to do so can lead to negative perceptions, loss of trust, and a subsequent decrease in brand loyalty (Riana, 2018). This underscores the importance of clear and honest communication regarding product quality, pricing, and business practices to ensure consumer confidence.

The impact of transparency extends to both established companies and new entrants to the market. For example, brands like The Body Shop have gained a reputation for ethical marketing practices, particularly through their transparency regarding sourcing, ingredient use, and corporate social responsibility efforts. These transparent marketing communications have helped such brands foster a loyal

customer base, who value the honesty and integrity exhibited by these companies. Conversely, businesses that withhold information or engage in deceptive practices may face significant challenges in gaining consumer trust, particularly in the age of information (Putra & Doho, 2022).

In a similar vein, ethical marketing practices are linked to consumer satisfaction and long-term loyalty. Ethical behavior includes not only transparency but also the treatment of employees, sustainable sourcing, and socially responsible advertising. Consumers are increasingly drawn to brands that align with their values and ethics, and they are more likely to remain loyal to companies that demonstrate a commitment to social responsibility and ethical practices (Martinez, 2024). Transparency, when paired with ethical behavior, reinforces the credibility of the brand, further solidifying the bond with its consumers.

The digital marketplace has created a more competitive environment, where consumers can easily switch between brands. Therefore, businesses must be more strategic in how they communicate their ethical practices and demonstrate transparency. Ethical marketing can serve as a differentiator, allowing brands to stand out in a crowded market. By communicating openly about their products, services, and the impact of their business practices, companies not only build trust but also cultivate customer loyalty, which is essential for sustaining long-term success (Kusuma & Ratri, 2020).

Lastly, the findings of various studies reinforce the significance of transparency in modern marketing. In the case of Indonesia's cooking oil shortage, the government's lack of transparent communication led to public distrust, whereas companies like The Body Shop maintained consumer confidence through consistent and clear messaging (Putra & Doho, 2022). These examples highlight the critical role transparency plays in maintaining consumer trust and fostering brand loyalty. As businesses continue to navigate the complexities of the digital marketplace, transparency in marketing practices will remain a cornerstone for sustainable growth and consumer loyalty.

Implications for Future Digital Marketing Strategies

The findings of recent studies reveal that transparency in digital marketing is no longer a luxury but a necessity for cultivating consumer trust and ensuring long-term brand loyalty. As consumers become more informed and discerning in their purchasing decisions, they increasingly seek out brands that exhibit openness and honesty in their communications. According to Sari and Putra (2023), brands that transparently communicate their values, pricing, and product benefits are more likely to retain customer loyalty, even in competitive markets. This trend signals the growing importance of clear and straightforward marketing messages. As such, digital marketing strategies should shift focus towards delivering transparent, fact-based information about products and services, fostering a stronger bond between the consumer and the brand (Sari & Putra, 2023).

Moreover, the integration of ethical considerations into digital marketing is gaining momentum, with consumers expressing growing concern about how businesses operate behind the scenes. The research by Wijaya and Sari (2022) emphasizes that ethical marketing practices significantly influence consumer behavior, especially among younger, socially-conscious demographics. Consumers are no longer solely motivated by product quality or price but are increasingly aware of the ethical standards upheld by the brands they support. Ethical marketing, which includes fair labor practices, environmentally sustainable processes, and corporate social responsibility (CSR), is crucial in shaping a positive brand image and building trust. Consequently, future digital marketing strategies must focus on aligning brand practices with consumers' ethical expectations to foster goodwill and positive public perception (Wijaya & Sari, 2022).

Additionally, the role of social media in shaping consumer perceptions is more significant than ever. Social media platforms have evolved into powerful tools for brand communication, with consumers often relying on these platforms for real-time information and customer feedback. Putra and Doho (2022) point out that consumers increasingly turn to social media to verify product claims and assess brand authenticity. Social media also serves as a public forum for consumer opinions, making it crucial for brands to maintain transparency and uphold ethical practices in their digital interactions. The challenge for digital marketers, therefore, is not only to use social media for promotional purposes but also to engage with consumers authentically, answer their questions, and address their concerns openly (Putra & Doho, 2022).

The trend towards transparency and ethics is also tied to the growing importance of personalized marketing. As digital tools become more sophisticated, brands have the ability to segment their audiences and craft highly personalized campaigns that resonate with specific consumer needs. However, this personalization must be balanced with transparency to avoid potential backlash. Consumers may feel uneasy if they perceive that brands are using their personal data without clear consent or in ways that infringe on their privacy. Therefore, future digital marketing strategies should incorporate both data-driven personalization and transparency about how consumer data is collected and used (Rahmawati et al., 2023). This balance will help marketers meet consumer expectations while adhering to ethical standards, ensuring that they maintain trust and avoid privacy concerns.

Moreover, consumer engagement in the digital age is increasingly interactive, with many customers seeking to participate in the brand story rather than just consume it. Interactive campaigns, influencer partnerships, and user-generated content (UGC) are powerful tools for building community around a brand. According to research by Firdaus et al. (2023), brands that encourage consumer participation and foster a sense of community are more likely to see increased loyalty and engagement. However, these strategies must be conducted transparently to maintain consumer trust. Brands that promote user participation without providing full transparency

about how user data is utilized or how the content is managed may risk losing consumer confidence. Therefore, future digital marketing strategies should be designed to incorporate consumer engagement in a way that is clear and ethically sound, ensuring that all stakeholders are informed and empowered (Firdaus et al., 2023).

The integration of ethical marketing, transparency, and consumer engagement on social media underscores the need for a holistic approach to digital marketing. Brands that fail to adapt to these shifts risk being perceived as outdated or untrustworthy. As consumer expectations evolve, digital marketing strategies must keep pace by leveraging data, transparency, and ethical considerations to create lasting relationships. The future of digital marketing lies not only in delivering value but also in ensuring that consumers feel valued, respected, and informed throughout their interactions with a brand (Susanti et al., 2022). This means that future digital marketing efforts should focus on creating a comprehensive, transparent, and ethical strategy that spans across digital channels and fosters a deeper sense of trust and loyalty among consumers.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, transparency plays a crucial role in building brand loyalty in the digital age. As consumers become more discerning and informed, they increasingly expect brands to be transparent about their products, services, and business practices. Ethical marketing practices, which include honesty, fairness, and social responsibility, are essential for establishing consumer trust and fostering long-term relationships. The findings of this study suggest that brands that prioritize transparency and ethical considerations in their digital marketing strategies are more likely to retain loyal customers and enhance their reputation in a competitive marketplace. In light of these findings, businesses are encouraged to adopt greater transparency in their marketing communications by providing accurate and easily accessible information to consumers. Additionally, companies should actively promote ethical business practices, particularly in the areas of data privacy, product sourcing, and customer relations, to align with consumer expectations and values. For future research, it is important to explore other dimensions of ethical marketing, such as the impact of social media marketing on consumer perceptions, and how ethical practices can be integrated into business models across various industries. Understanding these aspects will further enrich the academic literature and provide valuable insights for businesses looking to adapt to the evolving digital landscape. Ultimately, by embracing transparency and ethical marketing practices, businesses can not only build trust and loyalty but also foster positive brand perceptions that will benefit them in the long run.

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