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The Impact of Digital Content Quality and Network Externalities on the Development of Young Consumers' Online Brand Trust and Loyalty

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Abstract

Studies have shown that young consumers continue to be the target of digital marketing communications. They are also a source of revenues from online platforms that provide digital content. This research aimed to investigate whether young consumers' online brand trust and online brand loyalty would be significantly influenced by such independent variables as creators' digital content quality and network externalities. The study employed purposive sampling of 402 Thai undergraduate respondents who regularly view contents from their followed or subscribed channels. The research results were statistically analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling. The analysis revealed that creators' digital content quality (.745, $p < .001$) and network externalities (.152, $p < .001$) had a significant impact on online brand trust. Furthermore, online brand trust (.960, $p < .001$) also had a significant impact on online brand loyalty. The findings provide empirical evidence for social media and digital marketing communications. In addition, the findings reveal that enhancing trust is still crucial to branding.

Keywords: *Digital quality, network externalities, brand trust, loyalty*

Introduction

Digital content creation trend is on the rise. Social media users take time to view online content and some of them have become digital content creators. Brands or influencers have been using social media to establish relationships with customers or followers. Besides, digital content creators generate a lot of advertising revenues from the number of followers who view their content. However, creating quality content is a challenge as creators need to understand what drives follower or subscriber engagement and makes them loyal to their channels.

According to the Associated Press (2024), there are major trends of future digital content, namely artificial intelligence and machine learning (e.g., ChatGPT, a natural language processing model that can generate ideas, articles, titles, social media posts), mixed realities such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) that offer a computer-enhanced virtual space for users to consume and interact with content in entirely new ways, short-form video (e.g., TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube Shorts that encourage user participation, that are easy to produce and highly personalized), reactive content (real-time content or live cast), podcasting (on-demand audio shows on popular topics ranging from breaking news to sports, special interests, and more), and first-party data collection (i.e. content based on data collected from volunteered users).

Scope of the Study

Young Thai consumers were the focal respondent group for this study, as they are becoming the main source of modern business revenues. According to Dewinatalia and Irwansyah (2022) and Tunsakul (2018), studies on young consumers have been increasingly conducted as they are targeted by many brands and digital content creators. From previous studies, the term "young consumer" is identified by age group rather than as a specific generation. Kowalska (2012) explained that young people can be divided into three groups: young teenagers (13–15 years old), older teenagers (16–18 years old), and young adults (19–24 years old). Chan and Zhang (2007) and Škrinjarić (2021) mention that young consumers are people who are not yet mature, and who are aged from 18–24 years old. In this study, the latter definition was adopted, and the respondents consisted of undergraduate students aged between 18–24 years old.

This study focused on online brand trust in and brand loyalty to digital content creators. After reviewing the related literature, two interesting factors were found, content quality and network externalities, which can influence brand trust and loyalty (Wang et al., 2013; Simanjuntak et al., 2022).

Research Objectives

This research study aimed to investigate the predictive power of creators' digital content quality and network externalities on young consumers' online brand trust, along with its impact on online brand loyalty.

Significance of the Study

This study's findings may benefit digital businesses–startups, as well as digital content creators–that produce digital contents in order to attract social media users, especially young consumers whose contributions to revenues are considerable. Furthermore, the research implications will add to academic knowledge and empirical evidence in the areas of digital marketing and modern business management. Increasing brand trust and brand loyalty means business growth. In addition, sources of brand trust and brand loyalty were identified and tested in this research.

Conceptual Framework and Hypothesis Development

Independent Variables: Digital Content Quality and Network Externalities

Digital content refers to bit-based objects, especially online information and knowledge, distributed through electronic channels (Rowly, 2008). The concept of content quality is based on information quality. Content quality is the degree to which content material has characteristics that are valuable for the audience or users (O'Brien & Marakas, 2013). According to Kotler and Armstrong (2018), quality is not only related to products but to whether customers return to a company. From different literature about quality of information or contents, dimensions of quality can be identified as consisting of three main parts (a) time: frequency, currency, and up-to-dateness; (b) content: reliability, usefulness, completeness, conciseness, and objectivity; (c) presentation: format and media (Elliot et al., 2013; O'Brien & Marakas, 2013; Zheng et al., 2013; Batini & Scannapieco, 2016).

The concept of network externalities or network effects is based on social influence theory by Kelman (1958). Social influence explains how individuals' behavior is affected by others' in social settings (Venkatesh & Brown, 2001). In a social group where there are norms, individuals may engage in a particular behavior to follow the expectations of other people (Gerow et al., 2010). Lin (2010) found that social norms have an important effect on loyalty behavior in virtual communities. Chan and Hahn (2007), as well as Dickinger et al. (2008), have pointed out that network externalities increase when more people use a particular product or service. Dickinger et al. (2008) also pointed out that social norms play an important role in driving individuals' perceived enjoyment and usefulness of highly interactive services. In conclusion, network externalities within a social setting increase when people influence one another to engage in a particular behavior.

Mediator: Online Brand Trust

Trust is the willingness to rely on someone (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018). Berman and Evans (2012) noted that it has three components: (1) ability, (2) benevolence, and (3) integrity. Previous research shows that trust leads to willingness to disclose personal information (Mansur et al., 2021), make purchasing decisions (Ricardianto et al., 2022), and demonstrate brand loyalty (AlHaddad, 2015; Atulka, 2020).

Previous studies have also confirmed that both content quality (Elliot et al., 2013; Akoglu & Özbek, 2021; Simanjuntak et al., 2022) and network externalities have significantly affected brand trust (Chun & Hahn, 2007; Wang & Chen, 2012; Wang et al., 2013).

According to the information above, the research hypotheses H_1 and H_2 are formulated as follows:

H_1: Creators' content quality has a significant impact on online brand trust.

H_2: Network externalities have a significant impact on online brand trust.

Dependent Variable: Online Brand Loyalty

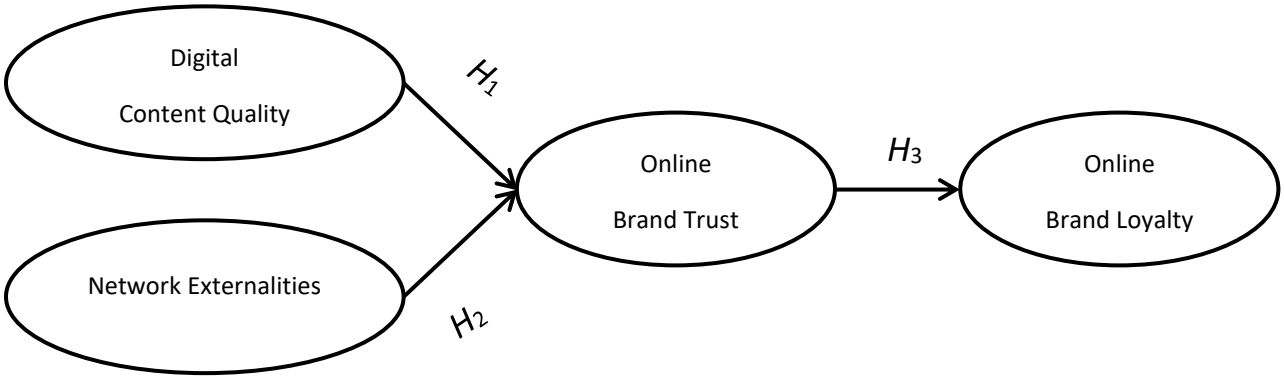
Brand loyalty is defined as "a situation which reflects how likely a customer will be to switch to another brand, especially when that brand makes a change, either in price or in product features" (Aaker, 1991, pp. 44–45). Oliver (1999, p. 36) defined brand loyalty as "a deeply held commitment to re-buy or repatronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same-brand set purchasing despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior." According to Dick and Basu (1994), brand loyalty has two different components: attitudinal and behavioral loyalty. Attitudinal loyalty refers to the degree of individuals' cognitive loyalty, while behavioral loyalty refers to continuous purchasing from the same seller by consumers, resulting in an enhanced relationship between the seller and the buyer (repurchase and advocacy). This research focuses on behavioral loyalty. Previous studies have revealed that a positive relationship exists between consumer trust and loyalty (Wang et al., 2013; AlHaddad, 2015; Atulka, 2020).

Thus, research hypothesis H_3 is stated as follows:

H_3*:* Online brand trust has a significant impact on online brand loyalty.

Figure 1 represents the conceptual model of this study, depicting relationships among all the hypotheses.

Figure 1 *The Conceptual Model*



Research Methodology

Study Respondents and Sampling Procedure

The target population was young consumers aged between 18–24 years old as defined by Chan and Zhang (2007). The target respondent's attributes included university undergraduates from a private university, who followed or subscribed content creators and viewed the contents regularly. The selection of target respondents was based on a purposive sampling method based on the target population's criteria so that the sample would be representative of it. As the target respondents were the researcher's students, they were approached in classrooms using a QR code with a link to the questionnaire. They were asked before answering the questions if they met the study's criteria.

Research Instruments / Questionnaire

This research study used both qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative method included exploratory study to identify the factors, as well as literature review. The quantitative method was the use of a questionnaire to collect data. The questionnaire consisted of two parts: the demographic profile (four closed-ended questions) and the research variables (14 five-point Likert scale questions).

Regarding the variables, the respondents were asked to indicate their response to all questions on a scale of 1 to 5, consisting of 1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Neutral*, 4 = *Agree*, and 5 = *Strongly Agree*. The measurements of digital content quality (five items, Cronbach's α = .821) were

adapted from those of Zheng et al. (2013), O'Brien and Marakas (2013) and Elliot et al. (2013); network externalities (two items, Cronbach's α = .858) were adapted from those of Wang and Chen (2012). For online brand trust, the measurements were adapted from those of Swan et al. (1988), with four items (Cronbach's α = .824). And the measurements of online brand loyalty (three items, Cronbach's α = .816) were adapted from those of Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) and Jang et al. (2008).

Table 1 depicts the measurements of all variables, including the number of items and Cronbach's Alphas (α) coefficients. The Cronbach's Alpha (α) coefficients for all items (*N* = 402) ranged from .816 to .858, which are considered as being reliable according to Maholtra (2007).

Table 1 *Summary of Measures and Item Reliability* (*N* = 402)

Measures	Items	Cronbach's α
Digital Content Quality	5	.821
1. Digital contents from the creators I follow are accurate.		
2. Digital contents from the creators I follow are useful for me.		
3. Digital contents from the creators I follow are unbiased.		
4. Digital contents from the creators I follow are concise.		
5. Digital contents from the creators I follow are up-to-date.		
Network Externalities	2	.858
1. The content creators have many followers including my friends.		
2. The content creators have many followers including people I know.		
Online Brand Trust	4	.824
1. I feel comfortable to view contents from the creators I follow.		
2. I view a lot of contents from the creators I follow.		
3. The content creators that I follow are trustworthy.		
4. The content creators I follow always deliver what they promise.		
Online Brand Loyalty	3	.816
1. I will keep viewing contents from the creators I follow.		
2. I will keep viewing contents from the creators I follow even though there are new creators.		
3. I will recommend the content creators I follow to others.		

Data Gathering Procedure

Primary data were gathered via self-administered questionnaires from the respondents. A link to the online questionnaire was sent to all target respondents in classrooms through scanning a QR code. The process of data gathering took 5 days during December 2023. In total, 402 responses met the criteria, which was a number higher than the minimum requirement for an appropriate sample size as recommended by Berenson and Levine (1999). All questions were answered because they were required and could not be skipped.

Research Results

Demographic Profile of Respondents

The demographic profiles in this study were comprised of four main sections: gender, the social media platform most used by a respondent, the type of content most viewed by a respondent, and the device most used by a respondent to view digital content. The descriptive data, including frequency and percentage, are shown in Table 2.

According to Table 2, a majority of the 402 respondents were female (247 respondents, or 61.4 %), while 155 respondents (38.6%) were male. Regarding social media platform most used by respondents, a majority (201, or 50%) viewed content on TikTok. With respect to the type of social media content most frequently viewed by respondents, the majority, 148 or 36.8%, viewed entertainment content. Finally, smartphones were the devices most frequently used by a majority of the respondents (323, or 80%).

Table 2 *Demographic Profile of Respondents* (N = 402)

Demographic Profile of Respondents		Descriptive Statistics	
		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Female	247	61.4
	Male	155	38.6
Social media platform most used by respondents	Tik-Tok	201	50.0
	Instagram	94	23.4
	YouTube	86	21.4
	Facebook	11	2.74
	X (Twitter)	10	2.48
Type of content most viewed by respondents	Entertainment (movie, music, funny clips)	148	36.8
	Food and travel reviews	87	21.6
	Technology and product reviews	55	13.7
	Sports and games	38	9.5
	Cooking/food recipes	33	8.2
	Education	25	6.2
	News and documentaries	11	2.7
	Pets/Animals	5	1.2
Device most used by respondents to view contents	Smartphone	323	80.3
	Tablet	57	14.2
	PC	22	5.5

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was used in the study to determine the degree of model fit. Two types of goodness-of-fit measures were used, Absolute Fit and Incremental Fit, as suggested by Hair et al. (2006) and Ho (2006). The key indices of Absolute Fit measures used included Chi-square statistics, Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), which were used to assess whether the proposed model fit the data. The Incremental Fit measures included the baseline comparison fit indices of Normed Fit Index (NFI), Relative Fit Index (RFI), Incremental Fit Index (IFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), and Comparative Fit Index (CFI), which were used to show improvement for the hypothesized model (default model).

Despite the rule of thumb which states that Chi-square statistics (χ^2) should not be more than two, Hair et al. (2006) and Ho (2006) noted that Chi-square ratio results increase with larger sample sizes, especially when the number of respondents is more than 200. Therefore, it is recommended to consider such key indices as GFI and RMSEA. The CFA results from this study (Table 3) with the use of modification fit indices showed that the model fit with the dataset, $\chi^2(N = 402, df = 68) = 2.551$, $p < .05$, and GFI showed an acceptable fit at 0.942, which was close to 1 (0 = poor fit, and 1 = perfect fit). For the RMSEA, the smaller values indicated a better model fit. Values ranging from .05 to .08 are considered acceptable, values from .08 to .10 indicate mediocre fit, and those greater than .10 indicate poor fit (Ho, 2006).

Table 3 *Summary of CFA Fit Indices of Measurement Model*

	Measures of Absolute Fit			Measures of Incremental Fit				
	χ^2/df	RMSEA	GFI	NFI	RFI	IFI	TLI	CFI
Requirement	< 2.0	Acceptable at .05–0.08	Close to 1	0.900	0.900	0.900	0.900	0.900
Model	2.551	0.062	0.942	0.941	0.921	0.963	0.951	0.963

For the Incremental Fit measures, the incremental fit indices should be above 0.90 (Hair et al., 2006; Ho, 2006); the baseline comparison fit indices of NFI), RFI, IFI, TLI and CFI for this study showed

improvement for the hypothesized model. When compared to the null model, from .037 (or 1–.963) to .079 (or 1–0.921) appeared to be so small as to be of little practical significance. Therefore, the model fits well with the dataset. Table 4 shows the Fit Indices of the path model, and also indicated that the model fit well with the dataset.

Table 4 *Summary of SEM Fit Indices of Measurement Model*

	Measures of Absolute Fit			Measures of Incremental Fit				
	χ^2/df	RMSEA	GFI	NFI	RFI	IFI	TLI	CFI
Requirement	< 2.0	Acceptable at .05–.08	Close to 1	.900	.900	.900	.900	.900
Model	2.414	.059	.944	.943	.925	.966	.955	.966

Hypothesis Testing

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used to test the hypotheses, and to investigate and explain the relationships among the independent and dependent variables.

The results of SEM as shown in Table 5 indicated that all the unstandardized regression weights were significant per the critical ratio test (CR > ±1.96, $p < .05$). From the results, creators' digital content quality and network externalities had a significant and positive impact on online brand trust as reflected by positive unstandardized and standardized regression weights, as well as *p*-values less than .05. Furthermore, online brand trust significantly and positively influenced online brand loyalty. These results were consistent with previous studies that were reviewed in this study.

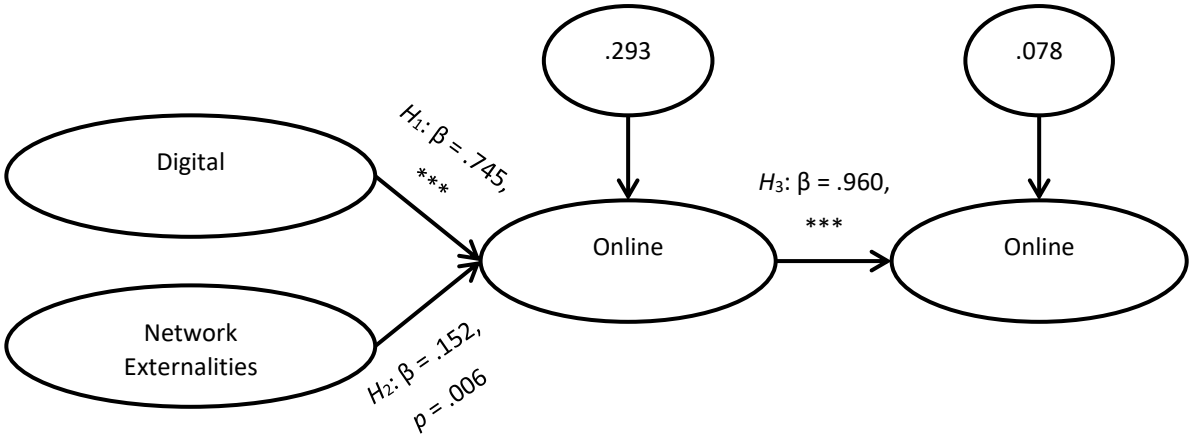
Table 5 *Summary of Hypothesis Testing*

No.	Path of Relationship	Unstandardized Regression Weight (B)	Standardized Regression Weight (β)	Critical Ratio (CR)	*p* Value	Hypothesis Supported
H_1	Creators' digital content quality has a significant impact on online brand trust.	0.731	0.745	8.846	.000	Yes
H_2	Network externalities have a significant impact on online brand trust.	0.095	0.152	2.729	.006	Yes
H_3	Online brand trust has a significant impact on online brand loyalty.	1.262	0.960	12.580	.000	Yes

Discussion and Conclusion

This study fulfilled its objectives, which were to investigate the predictive power of creators' digital content quality and network externalities on young consumers' online brand trust, along with its impact on online brand loyalty. The research results showed that digital content quality and network externalities significantly influenced online brand trust and brand loyalty. Figure 2 shows the structural path model with Hypotheses 1 to 3. The lines represent the hypotheses supported by the findings. The arrows pointing to online brand trust and online brand loyalty represent unexplained (residual) variances for these two factors. For this hypothesized model, 29.3% of variation in online brand trust is unexplained (calculated by subtracting the factors' squared multiple correlations (R^2) or explained variances), or 70.7% of the variance is accounted for by the joint influence of digital content quality and network externalities. Similarly, 7.8% of variation in online brand loyalty is influenced by other factors, so 92.2% of the variance is accounted for by the joint influence of the rest of variables.

Figure 2 *Structural Path Model with Summary of Findings*



Notes. *** $p < .001$

In conclusion, the explained variances for all independent variables are represented by the R^2. The percentage of variance explained ranges from 70.7% (online brand trust) to 92.2% (online brand loyalty). For all measurement variables, the residual variances (1-R^2) ranged from 29.3% to 7.8%.

Research Implications

This study provides some useful implications for enhancing online brand trust and brand loyalty. According to the research results, digital content quality and network externalities are quite meaningful for content creators. It is advised that all content creators, individuals or organizations, should develop digital contents with high accuracy (e.g. reliable information and without fake news), usefulness to the audience (worth the view), impartiality (e.g., avoiding content that causes high conflicts), conciseness (e.g. well-edited, not too intermittent), and timeliness (trendy and with updated information).

These findings were consistent with those of previous studies in that content quality significantly influenced brand trust (Elliot et al., 2013; Akoglu & Özbek, 2021; Simanjuntak et al., 2022). According to the author's observations, digital content with lots of viewers mostly met the criteria of content quality. Network externalities are also an important factor. Some people start following a content creator because of their friends, families, or reference groups. Content creators can develop their network externalities by paid or free communications, and also by enhancing their credibility, competence, and attractiveness as suggested by Eisend (2006). This is consistent with previous studies that network externalities significantly influenced brand trust (Chun & Hahn, 2007; Wang & Chen, 2012; Wang et al., 2013). Then brand trust can lead to future commitment and loyalty, consistent with the studies by Wang et al. (2013), AlHaddad (2015) and Atulka (2020). These results provide empirical evidence that adds to academic and business knowledge.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

The main limitation of this study was that it was conducted among young Thai consumers in a private university. Future research is encouraged to expand to other age groups or young consumers in different settings. Moreover, other factors such as influencer characteristics and platform quality may be further studied.

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