

Enhancing Msmes Customer Loyalty Through Social Media Marketing, Electronic Word Of Mouth, And Trust Moderation

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the influence of social media marketing on customer loyalty with the role of electronic word of mouth as the main influence channel, as well as test trust as a moderation variable in strengthening the influence of electronic word of mouth on customer loyalty in the context of MSMEs in Kendari City. The study uses an explanatory quantitative approach with Structural Equation Modeling analysis based on Partial Least Squares. The respondents are active customers of MSMEs in Kendari City as many as 185 people. Data processing was carried out using SmartPLS to evaluate the measurement model through validity and reliability tests, then tested the structural model to assess the strength and significance of the influence between variables. The test results show that trust does not have a significant effect directly on customer loyalty. On the other hand, social media marketing has a positive and significant effect on customer loyalty and has a very strong and significant influence on electronic word of mouth. Electronic word of mouth also has a positive and significant effect on customer loyalty. In addition, trust has been shown to significantly moderate the relationship between electronic word of mouth and customer loyalty, so that the impact of electronic word of mouth becomes stronger when the level of customer trust is higher. This finding confirms that the strategy of increasing MSME customer loyalty needs to prioritize strengthening the quality of social media marketing to encourage positive electronic word of mouth, as well as building trust so that the influence of customer communication is more optimal in forming loyalty.

Keywords: Social Media Marketing, Electronic Word Of Mouth, Trust, Customer Loyalty

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis pengaruh pemasaran media sosial terhadap loyalitas pelanggan dengan peran electronic word of mouth sebagai saluran pengaruh utama, serta menguji kepercayaan sebagai variabel moderasi dalam memperkuat pengaruh electronic word of mouth terhadap loyalitas pelanggan dalam konteks UMKM di Kota Kendari. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kuantitatif eksploratif dengan analisis Structural Equation Modeling berbasis Partial Least Squares. Responden adalah pelanggan aktif UMKM di Kota Kendari sebanyak 185 orang. Pengolahan data dilakukan menggunakan SmartPLS untuk mengevaluasi model pengukuran melalui uji validitas dan reliabilitas, kemudian diuji model struktural untuk menilai kekuatan dan signifikansi pengaruh antar variabel. Hasil pengujian menunjukkan bahwa kepercayaan tidak memiliki pengaruh signifikan secara langsung terhadap loyalitas pelanggan. Di sisi lain, pemasaran media sosial memiliki pengaruh positif dan signifikan terhadap loyalitas pelanggan dan memiliki pengaruh yang sangat kuat dan signifikan terhadap electronic word of mouth. Electronic word of mouth juga memiliki pengaruh positif dan signifikan terhadap loyalitas pelanggan. Selain itu, kepercayaan telah terbukti secara signifikan memoderasi hubungan antara electronic word of mouth (EW) dan loyalitas pelanggan, sehingga dampak EW menjadi lebih kuat ketika tingkat kepercayaan pelanggan lebih tinggi. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa strategi peningkatan loyalitas pelanggan UMKM perlu memprioritaskan penguatan kualitas pemasaran media sosial untuk mendorong EW yang positif, serta membangun kepercayaan sehingga pengaruh komunikasi pelanggan lebih optimal dalam membentuk loyalitas.

Kata Kunci: Pemasaran Media Sosial, Electronic Word Of Mouth, Kepercayaan, Loyalitas Pelanggan

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INTRODUCTION

The development of social media has changed the way businesses interact with customers, including in the context of MSMEs. The increasing use of digital platforms such as Instagram,

Facebook, and WhatsApp by customers encourages small businesses to adapt to social media-based digital marketing strategies. MSMEs no longer only rely on traditional promotions, but are also required to create active, responsive, and community-based communication with their customers online (Puspaningrum, 2020). The high interaction between customers and brands through social media has also given birth to the phenomenon of electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) which has a significant impact on consumer decision-making. Through e-WOM, customers influence each other by sharing experiences and opinions openly in the digital space. The effectiveness of marketing strategies through social media is now measured not only by how often brands appear on the timeline, but also by how much of an influence they have in driving customer engagement and loyalty through digital conversations (Noufa et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2024).

Social media marketing has proven to play an important role in building brand trust and customer loyalty. Interactions built through visual content, promotional campaigns, and direct communication with customers create an emotional connection and increase trust in the brand. Puspaningrum (2020) emphasizes that social media marketing helps form strong communication channels between brands and customers, leading to increased brand trust and loyalty. Evelina et al. (2023) support this with the finding that social media marketing has a significant impact on customer trust, which in turn strengthens loyalty. Susanti and Rodhiah (2023) found that social media interactivity can increase customer engagement, which is the main basis for forming loyalty. Hazzam (2021) added that digital customer engagement is the main driver of brand loyalty, especially among the younger generation who are attached to digital platforms.

Electronic word of mouth is also an important variable that bridges social media marketing strategies with customer loyalty. e-WOM activities such as customer reviews, testimonials, and comments on social media have been proven to be able to influence the perception and purchase intention of other consumers. Noufa et al. (2022) found that social media marketing encourages the formation of e-WOM which is significant in influencing purchasing behavior. Khan et al. (2024) explain that customers are driven to share their experiences digitally due to the influence of the social media strategies that brands run. Musa et al. (2023) show that the perception of the credibility of marketers on social media can increase the tendency of customers to engage in e-WOM. Rizq and Muslichah (2023) added that increasing brand equity through social media strengthens positive e-WOM. In addition, Immawati and Anggi (2023) emphasized that e-WOM has a wider and faster effect than traditional word of mouth, making it a vital element in maintaining customer loyalty.

Research on the influence of social media marketing on customer loyalty has been conducted, but the majority focuses on large companies or the national e-commerce sector. Local contexts such as MSMEs in Kendari City are still not widely used as objects of study. Though the characteristics of local customers, digital interaction habits, and their level of trust in the brand can be very different from customers in big cities. The absence of this locally-based study shows that there is a relevant research gap to be answered, especially in the context of MSMEs that use social media as the only main

promotional channel (Rini & Hasbi, 2024). In addition, most previous studies have examined the direct influence of social media marketing on customer loyalty without considering the role of trust as a factor that strengthens or weakens the relationship. Dewi and Wardana (2023) show that brand trust plays an important role in mediating the influence of social media marketing on brand loyalty. Jun and Yi (2020) added that a low level of customer trust can reduce the effectiveness of digital marketing strategies. Therefore, trust needs to be studied as a moderation variable to understand more deeply how customer trust affects the relationship between social media activity and loyalty.

The model in this study integrates social media marketing as an independent variable, electronic word of mouth as a mediation variable, and trust as a moderation variable for customer loyalty. This structure is designed to capture the more complex dynamics of the relationship between digital marketing and loyalty in the context of MSMEs. Nofrizal et al. (2023) state that customer trust has a direct influence on purchasing decisions and brand loyalty. Kania and Salsabila (2023) also prove that trust is a strong determinant in the relationship between customer interaction on social media and long-term loyalty.

The study also emphasizes the importance of e-WOM as a connecting channel between social media marketing and customer loyalty. Winarno and Indrawati (2022) found that positive e-WOM can increase purchase intent and loyalty. Rizq and Muslichah (2023) stated that e-WOM has a significant impact on customer perception and decision-making. By including trust as a moderator and e-WOM as a mediator, this model is expected to provide a more complete understanding of how digital marketing strategies work in shaping customer loyalty, especially in the MSME ecosystem that has limited resources.

Kendari City as the capital of Southeast Sulawesi Province is experiencing quite rapid MSME growth, especially in the food and beverage, local fashion, and creative services sectors. The high penetration of social media use among consumers in Kendari makes social media the main channel of interaction between MSMEs and their customers. MSMEs in Kendari are starting to leverage platforms such as Instagram and WhatsApp Business to promote products, respond to customer inquiries, and build long-term relationships. Limited access to formal promotions makes MSMEs in Kendari highly dependent on organic interaction with customers through social media. In this context, the power of customer testimonials or e-WOM is a key element in attracting new customers and retaining old ones. Research focusing on MSME customers in Kendari will make an important contribution to understanding how digital marketing strategies work specifically in the region.

This study aims to analyze the influence of social media marketing on MSME customer loyalty with electronic word of mouth as a mediation variable and trust as a moderation variable. This study also aims to understand how trust can strengthen or weaken the influence of social media marketing in building customer loyalty. The contribution of this research lies in the enrichment of the literature on digital marketing in the context of regional MSMEs, especially in Kendari which has not been widely researched. This research also provides practical contributions in the form of recommendations for

MSME actors in developing effective, trust-based digital communication strategies and strengthening e-WOM. In addition, the proposed conceptual model can be used as a reference in future research in the digital-based MSME sector in other regions.

METHODS

This study uses a quantitative approach to test the relationships between variables in the conceptual model that has been formulated, with analysis using Structural Equation Modeling based on Partial Least Squares (SEM PLS) because it is suitable to test latent relationships between constructs with relatively complex indicators and moderate sample sizes. The study respondents were active customers of MSMEs in Kendari City with a sample of 185 respondents, and the test results showed all relationship lines in a significant model. Data was collected through a structured questionnaire distributed to respondents, with each statement measured using a five-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The constructs studied include social media marketing, electronic word of mouth, trust, and customer loyalty, each of which was measured through several indicator items adapted from previous research and adjusted to the context of local MSMEs. The analysis stage includes testing the validity and reliability of the instrument on the measurement model, then continuing with structural model testing to assess the strength and significance of the influence between variables according to the research hypothesis.

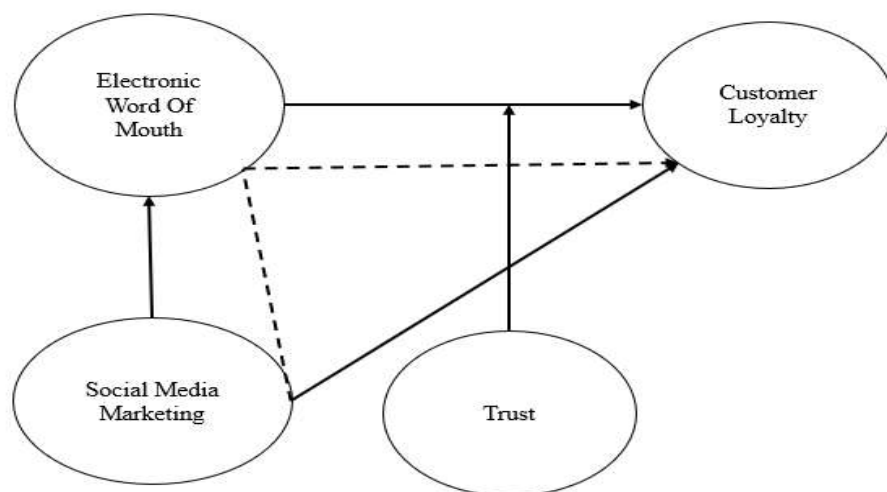


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The characteristics of the respondents of this study amounted to 190 active MSME customers in Kendari City (100.00 percent). It is known that the general profile of MSME customers, respondents are dominated by 102 women (53.68 percent) and 88 men (46.32 percent). Based on age group, the majority are in the productive age, namely 25 to 34 years old as many as 74 people (38.95 percent),

followed by 35 to 44 years old as many as 55 people (28.95 percent), 18 to 24 years old as many as 28 people (14.74 percent), 45 to 54 years old as many as 25 people (13.16 percent), and 55 years and older as many as 8 people (4.21 percent). In terms of education, respondents generally have a bachelor's degree (43.16 percent), then high school or equivalent 60 people (31.58 percent), 34 people with diplomas (17.89 percent), and 14 master's degrees (7.37 percent). This profile illustrates that the study respondents are dominated by productive age customers with secondary to higher education backgrounds, so it is relevant to assess the influence of social media marketing, electronic word of mouth, trust, and customer loyalty in the context of local MSMEs.

Table 1. Measurement items and Constructs

Variables	Items	Loading	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted
Trust	M.1	0,936	0,945	0,951	0,858
	M.2	0,908			
	M.3	0,933			
	M.4	0,929			
Social Media Marketing	X.1	0,946	0,947	0,948	0,863
	X.2	0,925			
	X.3	0,922			
	X.4	0,923			
Customer Loyalty	Y.1	0,931	0,963	0,964	0,871
	Y.2	0,928			
	Y.3	0,912			
	Y.4	0,949			
	Y.5	0,945			
Electronic Word Of Mouth	Z.1	0,923	0,967	0,968	0,883
	Z.2	0,942			
	Z.3	0,954			
	Z.4	0,933			
	Z.5	0,947			

Table 1 shows that the measurement model in this study has excellent quality based on the loading value, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and average variance extracted in each construct. All indicators in the trust variable had high loading in the range of 0.908 to 0.936, with Cronbach's alpha of 0.945 and composite reliability of 0.951 confirming very strong internal consistency, and AVE of 0.858 indicating convergent validity was met. The social media marketing variable also showed excellent measurement performance with loading 0.922 to 0.946, Cronbach's alpha 0.947, composite reliability 0.948, and AVE 0.863, so that the indicator indicator is considered to be able to represent the construct strongly. In the customer loyalty variable, all items had a very high loading of 0.912 to 0.949, supported by Cronbach's alpha 0.963, composite reliability 0.964, and AVE 0.871, which means that the customer loyalty construct is measured very reliably and validly. Similarly, the electronic word of mouth showed loading of 0.923 to 0.954 with Cronbach's alpha 0.967, composite reliability 0.968, and AVE 0.883, which confirms that the e WOM indicator indicator has a very high representation power. Overall, these results confirm that all constructs in the study have met the criteria of reliability and

convergent validity, making the instrument feasible to use for testing the relationships between variables in structural models

Table 2. Discriminant Validity

	1	2	3	4
Trust	0,926			
Social Media Marketing	0,400	0,929		
Customer Loyalty	0,329	0,740	0,933	
Electronic Word Of Mouth	0,418	0,812	0,796	0,940

The discriminant validity table shows that the discriminant validity of the model has been well fulfilled based on Fornell Larcker's criterion, namely that the square root value of AVE on the diagonal must be greater than the correlation between constructs outside the diagonal. This can be seen in the diagonal value of each variable, namely Trust of 0.926, Social Media Marketing of 0.929, Customer Loyalty of 0.933, and Electronic Word of Mouth of 0.940, all of which are higher than the correlation value with other constructs. For example, Trust only correlates 0.400 with Social Media Marketing, 0.329 with Customer Loyalty, and 0.418 with Electronic Word of Mouth, thus confirming that Trust is a different construct and does not overlap with other variables. Social Media Marketing has a fairly strong correlation with Electronic Word of Mouth of 0.812 and with Customer Loyalty of 0.740, but the correlation is still lower than the diagonal value of Social Media Marketing which is 0.929, which shows that this construct still has a strong uniqueness. Customer Loyalty also has a diagonal value of 0.933 which is greater than its correlation with Trust 0.329, Social Media Marketing 0.740, and Electronic Word of Mouth 0.796. Similarly, Electronic Word of Mouth has the highest diagonal value of 0.940 which surpasses its correlation with Trust 0.418, Social Media Marketing 0.812, and Customer Loyalty 0.796. Overall, these results confirm that each construct in the study has a clear difference from each other, so the instrument is declared discriminatically valid and suitable for further analysis on structural models.

Table 3. R Square

	R-square
Customer Loyalty	0,689
Electronic Word Of Mouth	0,659

Table 3 shows the value of R square which illustrates how much the predictor variable is capable of explaining the variation of endogenous variables in the structural model. The R-square value for Customer Loyalty of 0.689 indicates that 68.9 percent of the variation in customer loyalty can be explained by variables that affect it in the model, while the remaining 31.1 percent are influenced by factors outside the research model. Meanwhile, the R-square value for Electronic Word of Mouth of 0.659 showed that 65.9 percent of the variation in e WOM could be explained by the predictor variables associated in the model, and the remaining 34.1 percent were explained by other factors not included in the study. Overall, these two values indicate a strong clear power of the model because the proportion

of variance that can be explained is relatively high, so that the model has good predictive capabilities in explaining the formation of e WOM and customer loyalty in the context of MSMEs in Kendari City.

Table 4. Significant Test

	Original sample	P values
Trust -> Customer Loyalty	0,079	0,103
Social Media Marketing -> Customer Loyalty	0,259	0,019
Social Media Marketing -> Electronic Word Of Mouth	0,812	0,000
Electronic Word Of Mouth -> Customer Loyalty	0,492	0,000
Trust x Electronic Word Of Mouth -> Customer Loyalty	0,174	0,000

Based on the results of the significance test in Table 4, the relationship between variables in the model shows a significant or insignificant influence on customer loyalty. First, the effect of trust on customer loyalty has an original sample coefficient of 0.079 with a p value of 0.103, so this relationship is declared insignificant. These findings suggest that customer trust, when tested as a direct influence, has not been strong enough to increase loyalty independently, likely because loyalty is formed more through communication experiences and the influence of information circulating in the customer's environment. Second, social media marketing has a positive and significant effect on customer loyalty, as shown by a coefficient of 0.259 with a p value of 0.019. This means that the more effective the marketing activities through social media carried out by MSMEs, the greater the opportunity for customers to show loyalty, because social media can increase proximity, ease of access to information, and customer involvement with brands or products.

Third, social media marketing has a very strong and significant influence on electronic word of mouth, with a coefficient of 0.812 and a p value of 0.000. These results confirm that marketing on social media is a major driver of the formation of e WOM, as content, interaction, and digital communication encourage customers to share experiences, recommendations, or opinions widely. Fourth, electronic word of mouth has a positive and significant effect on customer loyalty, as seen from the coefficient of 0.492 with a p value of 0.000. These findings show that the stronger the positive e WOM, the higher the customer loyalty, because information from fellow users tends to be more trustworthy, forms more convincing perceptions, and drives repurchase decisions and recommendations.

Fifth, the results of the moderation test showed that the interaction between trust and electronic word of mouth on customer loyalty was significant, with a coefficient of 0.174 and a p value of 0.000. This means that trust strengthens the influence of e WOM on loyalty, so when customer trust levels are high, the impact of e WOM in forming loyalty will be stronger than when trust is low. Overall, these results confirm that the loyalty of MSME customers in Kendari City is more influenced by social media marketing and electronic word of mouth, while trust does not have a direct effect but plays an important role as a moderation variable that strengthens the influence of e WOM on loyalty. The implication is that the loyalty increase strategy will be more effective if MSMEs focus on strengthening the quality of social media marketing to encourage positive e-WOM, as well as building trust so that the influence of e-WOM on loyalty becomes more optimal.

Discussion

The results of the study show that social media marketing has a significant effect on the loyalty of MSME customers in Kendari City. These findings reinforce the previous view that social media is not only a communication tool, but also an effective strategy in building emotional relationships and trust with customers. When MSMEs consistently deliver relevant, interactive, and responsive messages on social media, customers feel more connected to the brand, which ultimately increases their loyalty. These results are in line with research by Puspaningrum (2020) and Evelina et al. (2023) which shows that effective marketing through social media can strengthen customer loyalty through increased brand trust and engagement.

In addition, the findings show that electronic word of mouth has a significant influence on customer loyalty. Customers who read or hear positive experiences from other customers tend to have a better perception of the brand and are more likely to remain loyal. In the context of MSMEs, e-WOM is very important because customers often rely on recommendations from their local communities before making a purchase. These findings support the results of studies by Noufa et al. (2022) and Rizq and Muslichah (2023) which emphasize the importance of e-WOM as a reinforcing element in creating long-term relationships between customers and brands.

Electronic word of mouth has also been shown to mediate the relationship between social media marketing and customer loyalty significantly. This means that marketing strategies carried out through social media not only have a direct impact on customer loyalty, but also indirectly through its influence on e-WOM. The more effective the social media strategy implemented by MSMEs, the greater the chance of creating a positive e-WOM which then encourages customer loyalty. These results confirm the proposed conceptual model and are consistent with the findings of Khan et al. (2024) and Winarno and Indrawati (2022) who state that e-WOM is an important channel in strengthening the impact of digital marketing on customer behavior.

Another equally important finding is that trust significantly moderates the relationship between social media marketing and customer loyalty. In this case, the level of customer trust in the brand reinforces the influence of social media marketing on loyalty. If customers have a high level of trust, then messages and promotions delivered through social media are more likely to be received positively and encourage loyalty. On the other hand, even if the digital marketing strategy used is effective, customer loyalty will remain low if they do not have trust in the brand. These results support the research of Dewi and Wardana (2023) and Jun and Yi (2020), which emphasize the importance of trust as a determining factor in the relationship between digital marketing and customer loyalty.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the research, it can be concluded that social media marketing has a significant influence on MSME customer loyalty, both directly and indirectly through electronic word of mouth. Additionally, trust has been shown to strengthen the relationship between social media

marketing and customer loyalty, which shows that trust plays a crucial role in the effectiveness of digital marketing strategies. These findings strengthen the position of social media marketing as an important strategy in building long-term relationships with customers, especially in the MSME sector that relies on digital interaction to retain consumers.

The implications of this study show that MSME actors need to manage social media actively and consistently, not only to convey information, but also to build trust and encourage positive e-WOM. It is important for MSMEs to create a good customer experience so that customers are encouraged to voluntarily recommend products on digital platforms. The next research is suggested to expand the scope of the area outside Kendari City or test other variables such as customer engagement or brand community as mediators or additional moderators, so that the research model can be more comprehensive in explaining customer loyalty in the digital era.

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