

Drew University

College of Liberal Arts

Trending Now, Forgotten Tomorrow?
Social Media Virality and the Sustainability of Brand Loyalty

A Thesis in Marketing

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Bachelor in Arts
With Specialized Honors in Marketing

May 2026

Abstract

The rise of social media has transformed marketing into a highly participatory and algorithm-driven environment, where trends and viral content play a central role in shaping brand visibility. As brands increasingly rely on trend-based campaigns to capture attention and signal cultural relevance, questions remain about the long-term effectiveness of these strategies in fostering meaningful consumer–brand relationships. This study investigates whether engagement with social media trends contributes to sustained brand loyalty or primarily generates short-term interaction.

Using a mixed-survey design, this research draws on responses from undergraduate students at Drew University to examine patterns of social media usage, trend participation, and brand perception. The first survey explores general engagement behaviors and motivations for interacting with trends, while the second focuses on brand trust, emotional connection, purchasing behavior, and long-term loyalty. By combining behavioral and attitudinal data, the study provides a comprehensive analysis of how consumers interpret and respond to trend-based marketing.

The findings reveal a clear distinction between visibility and loyalty. While participants reported high levels of social media use and frequent exposure to trends, most demonstrated low levels of active participation and limited purchasing behavior driven by trends. Engagement was primarily motivated by aesthetics and entertainment rather than brand attachment, and emotional connection to brands remained relatively weak. Although trends were found to influence brand perception to some extent, their impact was often temporary and dependent on factors such as authenticity and execution.

Importantly, the study identifies product quality, consistency, and alignment with consumer values as the primary drivers of long-term brand loyalty. Engagement with trends was shown to decline rapidly after their peak, with most participants losing interest within a short period. These results suggest that while trends are effective at generating awareness and initial interest, they do not independently sustain consumer relationships.

Overall, this research supports the argument that social media trends function as entry points into consumer awareness rather than as mechanisms for building lasting loyalty. The findings contribute to ongoing discussions in marketing and media studies by highlighting the limitations of engagement-based metrics and emphasizing the importance of long-term value creation in digital marketing strategies.

Acknowledgements

This thesis represents not only the culmination of my academic work, but also the support, encouragement, and care of many people who made this journey possible.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my thesis committee, Professor Ann Mills, Dr. Christopher Andrews, and Dr. Jeremy Blatter, for their guidance, insight, and encouragement throughout this process. I am especially appreciative of their patience and generosity with their time, as well as their commitment to helping me grow as a scholar.

I am deeply thankful for my friends, Azra and Katelyn, whose constant encouragement, humor and occasional delusion carried me through both the most stressful and the most rewarding moments of this journey. You reminded me, often convincingly, that everything would work out, even when I had strong evidence to the contrary. Your presence made even the hardest days feel manageable, and a lot more fun than they had the right to be. I will forever be grateful to WMNJ for bringing KLA together!

I would also like to extend a sincere (and slightly unserious) thank you to Ryan Coogler and Michael B. Jordan for *Sinners*. Throughout the thesis process, the film served at different moments as a reward, a distraction, and a reminder of the fruits of hard work and dedication, ideas that resonate with this project. For that, I am genuinely grateful.

A special acknowledgement goes to Stark, my dog, whose unwavering companionship brought comfort, joy, and much-needed breaks. Whether during long writing sessions or moments of frustration, Stark was a steady and grounding presence.

Finally, I owe my deepest thanks to my family for their unconditional love, patience, and belief in me. Their support has been the foundation that made all of this possible, even in moments when I doubted myself. To my parents, thank you for every sacrifice you have made to

give me the opportunities I have today. Your hard work, encouragement, and constant reassurance have carried me through more than you probably realize. I know I always say this, but you truly are the best parents I could ever ask for. To George, thank you for bringing humor and distraction at exactly the right moments. Whether it was attempting to teach me how football works when I absolutely should have been working on this thesis, or just making me laugh when I needed it most, you reminded me not to take everything so seriously. Maybe one day I will understand what you are saying, but for now, I appreciate the effort. Y mi Abuelito, gracias por tu amor, tu apoyo, y por siempre creer en mí. Aunque no siempre tenga las palabras correctas, quiero que sepas cuánto significas para mí. Todo lo que hago también es para hacerte sentir orgulloso. Tu fuerza, tus historias, y tu presencia han sido una inspiración constante en mi vida, y llevaré eso conmigo siempre. To my entire family, near and far, thank you for being my support system in every sense of the word. This accomplishment is not mine alone, it belongs to all of you who have encouraged me, supported me, and stood by me throughout this journey.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Introduction.....	8
Literature Review.....	11
Social Media Algorithms and the Dynamics of Trend Formation.....	12
Understanding “Trends” in the Scroll Economy.....	18
Brand Engagement in the Age of Branded Content.....	20
From Engagement to Loyalty: Sustaining Connection Beyond the Trend.....	24
Emerging Frameworks for Measuring Longevity.....	28
Synthesizing Engagement, Algorithms, and Brand Longevity.....	30
Research Gap and Direction For Present Study.....	32
Research Design.....	33
Participants.....	33
Recruitment Procedure.....	33
Consent.....	34
Materials and Measures.....	34
Procedures.....	36
Data Management and Confidentiality.....	36
Debriefing.....	38
Data Analysis.....	38
Findings & General Discussions.....	40
Social Media Usage and Platform Engagement.....	40
Engagement With Brand Content.....	40
Trend Participation and Motivations for Engagement.....	42
Trend Influence, Brand Perception, and the Limits of Sustained Attention.....	44
Brand Loyalty and Perception.....	48
Implications.....	54

Limitations and Further Research.....	57
Conclusion.....	59
References.....	63
Appendix.....	68
Appendix A: Informed Consent Form.....	68
Appendix B: Debriefing Form.....	71
Appendix C: Initial Survey.....	73
Appendix D: Follow-Up Survey.....	76

Introduction

The rise of social media has fundamentally reshaped the relationship between brands and consumers, transforming marketing into a highly visible, fast-paced, and algorithmically driven ecosystem. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter) have shifted communication from a one-directional model to an environment where content is continuously circulated, reinterpreted, and amplified by users. Within this landscape, social media trends, particularly viral challenges and participatory formats, have become central to how brands generate attention. These trends promise rapid visibility and mass engagement, positioning participation as a key indicator of marketing success and cultural relevance.

However, the prominence of trend-based marketing raises an important question about its long-term effectiveness. While trends can produce high levels of interaction in the short term, it remains unclear whether this engagement translates into meaningful and lasting consumer–brand relationships. This study addresses the central research question: To what extent does engagement with social media trends contribute to the development of long-term brand loyalty among consumers? As digital marketing increasingly prioritizes immediacy, scalability, and virality, understanding the durability of these interactions has become critical.

Existing research suggests that engagement within digital environments is shaped by more than exposure alone. Algorithms structure what users see, often amplifying repetitive, emotionally resonant, and easily replicable content. At the same time, users engage with trends for a variety of reasons, including entertainment, aesthetics, and participation in shared cultural moments. In this context, interaction with branded trends may reflect temporary involvement in a broader social experience rather than a meaningful attachment to the brand itself. This dynamic complicates traditional understandings of brand loyalty, which emphasize trust, consistency, and

long-term identification with brand values. Recent scholarship has begun to question whether commonly used engagement metrics, such as likes, shares, and views, are reliable indicators of loyalty. These metrics capture visibility and interaction but often fail to account for depth, duration, or emotional significance. As a result, there is a growing need for empirical research that examines how consumers themselves interpret and respond to trend-based marketing over time. This gap is particularly relevant among undergraduate populations, who are among the most active users of social media and frequent participants, or observers, of trends.

This honors thesis seeks to address this gap by examining how engagement with social media trends relates to the development of brand loyalty. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives from marketing, media studies, and consumer behavior, the study focuses on key factors that may influence this relationship, including authenticity, emotional connection, and value alignment. To explore these dynamics, this research employs a mixed-survey design involving undergraduate students at Drew University. The first survey investigates patterns of social media use, trend exposure, and participation, while the second examines brand perceptions, trust, purchasing behavior, and long-term engagement.

The findings of this study reveal a consistent pattern: while participants are highly exposed to social media trends, their active participation is limited, and their engagement is primarily driven by content-related factors such as aesthetics and entertainment rather than brand attachment. Furthermore, trend-based interactions rarely translate into purchasing behavior, emotional connection, or sustained interest once the trend fades. Instead, long-term loyalty is shaped by factors such as product quality, consistency, and alignment with consumer values.

By centering the consumer's perspective, this thesis contributes to ongoing debates about the role and effectiveness of trend-based marketing strategies. It challenges the assumption that

visibility equates to loyalty and instead emphasizes the distinction between short-term engagement and long-term relational value. Ultimately, this research demonstrates that while trends can introduce brands and generate immediate attention, they do not, on their own, sustain meaningful consumer–brand relationships, highlighting the need for marketing strategies that extend beyond the moment of virality.

Literature Review

Social media challenges and trend-based campaigns have emerged as one of the most visible and influential strategies in contemporary digital marketing. Enabled by platform algorithms that prioritize shareability, replication, and emotional resonance, these challenges allow brands to achieve rapid visibility and widespread audience participation at an unprecedented scale. From hashtag challenges to short-form video trends, brands increasingly rely on viral participation as evidence of relevance, cultural alignment, and consumer engagement. As a result, metrics such as views, shares, and user-generated content have become central indicators of campaign success within digital marketing practice.

However, the growing reliance on virality raises a critical and unresolved question within marketing scholarship: to what extent do these bursts of attention translate into sustained brand engagement, loyalty, and long-term consumer relationships? While social media challenges often succeed in generating high levels of immediate interaction, scholars increasingly question whether such engagement reflects meaningful connection to the brand or merely momentary participation driven by novelty, social visibility, or algorithmic amplification. This tension between short-term engagement and enduring brand value forms the central problem addressed in this literature review.

Existing research suggests that digital engagement is shaped not only by marketing strategy but also by the structural and emotional conditions of platformed media environments. Algorithms curate visibility, reward imitation, and privilege trends that elicit rapid response, while users navigate these spaces through performances of identity, belonging, and cultural fluency. Within this context, brands operate as both cultural actors and data-driven systems, adapting their messaging in real time to audience behavior. These dynamics complicate

traditional understandings of brand loyalty, which were historically grounded in repeated purchase behavior, trust, and long-term identification with brand values.

Social Media Algorithms and the Dynamics of Trend Formation

Social media algorithms play a decisive role in the emergence, amplification, and decline of online trends by shaping what content users see, when they see it, and how often it is reinforced. Rather than functioning as neutral distribution tools, these systems actively structure attention and influence by prioritizing content that aligns with platform-specific engagement metrics. Saurwein, Brantner, and Möck (2025) conceptualize algorithms as “responsibility networks,” emphasizing that visibility and influence are increasingly determined through automated decision-making processes that operate beyond direct human editorial oversight. Within this framework, responsibility for content circulation is diffused across technical systems, platform policies, and user interactions, complicating traditional notions of agency and accountability in digital marketing environments.

Building on this perspective, Correia, Mandel, and Cullison (2025) demonstrate how recommendation engines, particularly on TikTok, produce rapid and intense attention cycles by clustering users around trending hashtags and audiovisual formats. These algorithmically generated surges are especially pronounced in visually driven industries such as beauty and cosmeceuticals, where aesthetic appeal and repetition are rewarded with increased exposure. While such dynamics can dramatically increase brand visibility in the short term, they also encourage homogeneity and speed, privileging trend conformity over sustained narrative or relational engagement with consumers.

However, the effectiveness of algorithmic amplification in fostering meaningful brand relationships remains contested. Kleinberg, Mullainathan, and Raghavan (2024) complicate dominant assumptions about engagement metrics by showing that optimization algorithms frequently operate on inconsistent and unstable user preferences. Their findings suggest that systems trained to maximize clicks, likes, or watch time may amplify fleeting curiosity rather than durable interest, resulting in engagement that is behaviorally intense but psychologically shallow. From a branding perspective, this implies that algorithmic success does not necessarily translate into genuine brand affinity or long-term loyalty, as visibility becomes decoupled from value.

Carah's (2017) concept of algorithmic branding provides a critical framework for understanding how brands are reshaped by the infrastructural logics of social media platforms. Rather than positioning brands as autonomous storytellers or meaning-makers, Carah argues that contemporary branding practices are increasingly organized around the operational requirements of algorithms that govern visibility and reach. Within this environment, brand communication is not primarily designed to express stable identity or values, but to perform well within systems that reward measurable engagement. This marks a significant shift in the locus of branding power, from brand managers and creative strategists to platform architectures that define what counts as successful communication.

In algorithmic branding, brands are compelled to adapt their messaging to platform-specific signals such as posting frequency, temporal relevance, trending formats, and engagement velocity. Content is optimized to trigger algorithmic recognition rather than to build cumulative narrative coherence. As a result, branding becomes modular and reactive: posts are produced as discrete, self-contained units designed to capitalize on momentary attention rather

than to contribute to a sustained brand story. Over time, this emphasis on novelty and responsiveness fragments brand identity, as consistency is subordinated to the need to remain visible within rapidly shifting trend cycles.

This dynamic has important consequences for how consumers experience and relate to brands. Because algorithmic systems repeatedly surface content that performs well according to engagement metrics, consumer interaction is often driven by exposure rather than by intentional interest or emotional attachment. Engagement, manifested through likes, shares, and brief viewing, becomes decoupled from trust, identification, or long-term commitment. In this sense, algorithmic branding privileges behavioral engagement over relational engagement, producing interactions that are frequent but shallow. Consumers respond not because the brand meaningfully aligns with their values or identity, but because the content is algorithmically persistent.

Moreover, Carah's framework highlights how algorithmic branding subtly redefines what authenticity means in digital contexts. As brands continuously adapt to trending aesthetics and formats, authenticity risks being reduced to a stylistic performance rather than a reflection of consistent values or purpose. When brands mirror trends too closely, they may appear opportunistic or indistinguishable from competitors engaging in the same algorithmic strategies. This erosion of differentiation undermines the symbolic function of branding, which traditionally relies on coherence, recognition, and trust built over time.

The cumulative effect of these processes is the emergence of ephemeral engagement patterns. Consumers interact with branded content because it is repeatedly surfaced and socially validated within their feeds, not because it generates enduring meaning or loyalty. Visibility substitutes for value, and repetition substitutes for relationship. While algorithmic branding can

deliver impressive short-term metrics, it often fails to cultivate the deeper affective bonds required for sustained brand loyalty. This tension underscores a core concern of contemporary digital marketing: whether success within algorithmic systems ultimately strengthens brands or renders them interchangeable within an economy of attention.

Recent scholarship adds nuance to this largely critical view. Üliç Göreci, Ntapiapis, and Dağlı (2025) observe that Instagram's cyclical trend structures incentivize brands to continually chase virality, often at the expense of consistency and depth. Yet Obiegbu and Larsen (2025) argue that algorithmic personalization can, under certain conditions, support experiential loyalty by tailoring content to users' emotional, sensory, and contextual preferences. When personalization reinforces a coherent brand identity and aligns with consumers' self-concepts, it has the potential to strengthen attachment rather than dilute it. Nonetheless, both studies caution that excessive reliance on algorithmic feedback risks fragmenting brand identity into a series of optimized outputs, thereby undermining perceived authenticity and long-term trust.

Recent research in machine learning and artificial intelligence further deepens this discussion by clarifying how algorithmic infrastructures are technically designed to maximize engagement and shape collective attention. Hamed Taherdoost (2023) explains that contemporary social media platforms rely heavily on machine learning models, including deep neural networks, reinforcement learning systems, and predictive analytics, to continuously refine content ranking and recommendation processes. These systems learn from vast behavioral datasets, identifying patterns in clicks, dwell time, scroll speed, interaction frequency, and even sentiment signals to predict what content is most likely to sustain user attention. Rather than static rule-based filters, these adaptive systems recalibrate in real time, meaning that trend

formation is not merely amplified by algorithms but dynamically engineered through ongoing feedback loops between user behavior and model optimization.

This technical architecture intensifies the velocity of trend cycles described earlier. Because neural networks are optimized for engagement probability, content that triggers immediate emotional or cognitive reactions, such as surprise, humor, outrage, or aesthetic appeal, is more likely to be surfaced repeatedly. In visually driven sectors like beauty and cosmeceuticals, this translates into rapid amplification of specific aesthetics, product demonstrations, or influencer formats that align with learned engagement signals. As Taherdoost notes, the personalization capabilities of machine learning can significantly enhance user experience and marketing precision, yet they also risk narrowing exposure to content that aligns with previously demonstrated preferences. This creates algorithmically reinforced taste clusters, accelerating trend diffusion within micro-communities while potentially limiting diversity of exposure.

Complementing this technical perspective, Jitendra Dabral and Ayushi Tiwari (2024) examine how AI-enhanced social media algorithms shape public discourse. They argue that recommendation systems do more than optimize engagement, they structure the informational environment in which opinions are formed and circulated. By prioritizing content that maximizes interaction, AI systems may disproportionately amplify emotionally charged, polarizing, or sensational material, thereby influencing not only consumer behavior but also broader cultural conversations. In branding contexts, this suggests that trend visibility is partly contingent upon alignment with algorithmically favored emotional registers. Brands that successfully tap into high-arousal content formats may achieve rapid exposure, but this exposure is embedded within communicative ecosystems that privilege immediacy and intensity over deliberation and depth.

Importantly, Dabral and Tiwari highlight the feedback loop between algorithmic learning and user participation: as users engage with trending material, the system interprets this interaction as validation, further boosting similar content. This recursive dynamic reinforces the ephemeral engagement patterns discussed earlier. Trends rise quickly because algorithmic systems interpret early engagement spikes as predictive indicators of broader appeal. However, once engagement declines, visibility is rapidly withdrawn, causing trends, and the brands attached to them, to fade just as quickly. The logic of optimization therefore privileges acceleration and turnover rather than sustained narrative development.

Further extending this analysis, Sanjay Anakal et al. (2025) demonstrate how advanced optimization techniques, such as sentiment analysis combined with swarm-intelligence models like the Firefly Algorithm, are increasingly integrated into social media marketing strategies. Their findings show that sentiment-aware systems can detect nuanced emotional responses to branded content and automatically adjust targeting strategies in response. By identifying which emotional tones (e.g., excitement, trust, aspiration) correlate with higher engagement metrics, marketers can refine campaign design in near real time. While this enhances strategic efficiency, it also reinforces the instrumentalization of affect: emotional resonance becomes a quantifiable variable to be optimized rather than an emergent relational outcome.

The integration of sentiment analysis into algorithmic branding has significant implications for authenticity and loyalty. On one hand, data-driven emotional targeting can support more personalized and contextually relevant communication, potentially strengthening perceived alignment between brand identity and consumer self-concept. On the other hand, when emotional calibration is primarily guided by engagement metrics, brands may adopt whichever tone performs best within the algorithmic environment, even if it diverges from their established

identity. This contributes to the modular and reactive branding patterns previously discussed, where coherence is subordinated to optimization.

Taken together, these studies reinforce the central paradox identified in earlier scholarship. Machine learning-driven recommendation systems are exceptionally effective at identifying, amplifying, and monetizing attention patterns. They accelerate trend formation, refine targeting precision, and provide marketers with unprecedented analytical insight. However, because these systems are structurally oriented toward short-term engagement maximization, they may inadvertently undermine the conditions necessary for durable brand loyalty, namely consistency, authenticity, and sustained narrative meaning.

Thus, the dynamics of trend formation cannot be understood solely as cultural phenomena; they are computationally orchestrated processes shaped by predictive modeling, emotional analytics, and continuous optimization. While AI-enhanced algorithms expand the strategic toolkit available to digital marketers, they also intensify the tension between visibility and value. The same systems that enable rapid brand exposure may simultaneously erode differentiation and relational depth, reinforcing the broader concern that algorithmic success does not automatically translate into enduring consumer commitment.

Understanding “Trends” in the Scroll Economy

Dhawan and Singh (2025) characterize the contemporary social media environment as a “scroll economy,” in which user attention is fragmented, rapidly shifting, and perpetually contested. Within this economy, trends operate as emotional punctuations embedded in an otherwise continuous and overwhelming flow of content. These moments of disruption, often driven by humor, participatory formats, or algorithmic novelty, briefly arrest users’ attention and

invite low-effort interaction, such as likes, shares, or imitation. Brands that successfully insert themselves into these trends may generate what Dhawan and Singh term “brand love,” an affective response rooted in familiarity, relatability, or entertainment value. However, this form of attachment is inherently unstable. Without sustained reinforcement through coherent brand storytelling, consistent values, and recognizable identity markers, the emotional connection dissipates as quickly as the trend itself, rendering engagement episodic rather than enduring.

Hussain’s (2012) earlier empirical research helps explain why such engagement rarely translates into long-term brand loyalty. Hussain finds that participation in social media trends is motivated less by authentic interest in products or brands and more by desires for social visibility, peer recognition, and a sense of belonging within digital communities. In this context, users engage with branded trends not as consumers forming attachments but as performers curating identity in public-facing online spaces. Trend participation thus functions as a cultural and social signal, demonstrating humor, relevance, or platform literacy, rather than an endorsement of the brand itself. As a result, the brand often becomes incidental, serving merely as a vehicle through which the trend circulates.

Taken together, these findings suggest a structural limitation of trend-based marketing within the scroll economy. While trends can generate bursts of attention and surface-level affect, they frequently decenter the brand in favor of the trend’s performative logic. Engagement accrues to the cultural moment rather than the company behind it, reinforcing the idea that visibility should not be conflated with meaningful connection. This dynamic complicates claims that viral participation signals consumer loyalty, instead positioning trends as fleeting cultural acts that prioritize momentary relevance over sustained brand-consumer relationships.

Brand Engagement in the Age of Branded Content

Krowinska and Dineva (2025) argue that branded content is most effective at generating consumer participation when it is grounded in perceived authenticity and opportunities for co-creation, allowing audiences to feel like collaborators rather than passive recipients of marketing messages. Crucially, they differentiate between active engagement, short-term, observable interactions such as liking, sharing, commenting, or participating in branded challenges, and enduring engagement, which manifests as sustained brand advocacy, repeat interaction, and long-term identification with brand values. While viral challenges and trend-based campaigns are highly effective at stimulating active engagement due to their participatory and low-barrier nature, Krowinska and Dineva caution that these tactics rarely foster enduring engagement. The temporality of trends and their emphasis on replication over reflection often limit users' capacity to develop a lasting relationship with the brand beyond the moment of participation.

Building on this distinction, Ngoc Minh Nguyen, Nguyen, and Cao (2024) identify perceived informational value and perceived emotional value as critical mediating factors between online brand engagement and consumer loyalty. Their findings suggest that engagement becomes sustainable only when users consistently extract meaning, usefulness, or emotional resonance from a brand's digital presence. In the absence of such value, engagement remains transactional and fragile, dissolving once novelty fades or platform algorithms shift attention elsewhere. This framework further underscores why viral participation alone is insufficient: without a continuous provision of relevant content that aligns with users' informational needs or emotional expectations, engagement cannot mature into loyalty.

Carah's (2017) concept of "algorithmic brands" provides a structural explanation for this instability. Carah argues that contemporary brands increasingly function as adaptive, data-driven systems that respond in real time to audience behavior, platform metrics, and algorithmic feedback loops. This responsiveness enables personalization and heightened visibility, potentially enhancing engagement by aligning content with user preferences. However, Carah warns that such algorithmic adaptability can also hollow out brand identity, reducing it to a reactive assemblage of optimized content rather than a coherent expression of purpose or values. When branding decisions are governed primarily by engagement metrics, brands risk prioritizing short-term performance over long-term meaning, reinforcing cycles of fleeting interaction rather than cultivating enduring consumer relationships.

Extant engagement scholarship provides a more granular vocabulary for understanding why viral branded content often produces intensity without durability. Brooke G. Smith and Tiffany D. Gallicano (2015) conceptualize social media engagement as a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. Importantly, they distinguish between low-level interactions (e.g., liking or sharing) and deeper forms of relational engagement that involve dialogue, responsiveness, and mutual recognition between organizations and publics. Within this framework, many trend-based campaigns succeed primarily at stimulating behavioral engagement, visible, countable actions, while doing less to cultivate the cognitive investment or emotional connection required for sustained relational bonds. Metrics may therefore signal activity without necessarily indicating relationship strength.

Similarly, Bogna Schivinski, George Christodoulides, and Dariusz Dabrowski (2016) develop and validate a scale measuring consumers' engagement with brand-related social media content, identifying graduated levels ranging from passive consumption to active contribution

and co-creation. Their work reinforces the idea that engagement is not binary but hierarchical. Trend-driven branded content often generates consumption and contribution (views, reactions, comments), yet co-creative engagement, where consumers integrate the brand into their self-expression or identity, requires stronger affective and symbolic alignment. Without this deeper integration, engagement remains episodic rather than cumulative.

A complementary process-oriented perspective is offered by Rebecca Dolan et al. (2019), who propose a framework distinguishing between different social media engagement behaviors, consuming, contributing, and creating, and link these behaviors to specific content strategies. Their findings suggest that informational, entertaining, relational, and remunerative content each activate distinct motivational drivers. In the context of branded trends, entertaining and remunerative content (e.g., challenges, giveaways, influencer collaborations) are especially effective at triggering short-term spikes in contributing behavior. However, relational and value-driven content are more strongly associated with sustained engagement. This distinction helps explain why brands that rely predominantly on trend participation may struggle to convert visibility into long-term attachment.

Foundational branding theory further contextualizes this tension. Tanya Sammut-Bonnici (2015) defines a brand as a strategic asset composed of identity, meaning, associations, and value perceptions accumulated over time. Branding, in this classical sense, is inherently cumulative and coherence-dependent; it relies on consistent signals that allow consumers to build stable mental associations. When algorithmic environments incentivize rapid adaptation to fleeting trends, the temporal logic of branding (long-term equity building) collides with the temporal logic of platforms (short-term optimization). The risk is that brand meaning becomes fragmented into a series of context-dependent performances rather than an integrated narrative structure.

The relational consequences of this fragmentation are illuminated by Elaine Wallace et al. (2021), who demonstrate that strong brand relationships on social media, particularly those characterized by brand love, positively influence young consumers' value co-creation behaviors and willingness to pay. Their findings suggest that affective attachment functions as a bridge between engagement and economic outcomes. Importantly, brand love is not generated by isolated interactions but by sustained, emotionally resonant exchanges that reinforce identification and trust. Viral engagement without relational depth may therefore inflate interaction metrics without producing the attitudinal commitment necessary to drive premium willingness or advocacy.

Recent research on influencer content further complicates assumptions about engagement volume. Joris P. Van Der Harstand Spyros Angelopoulos (2024) advances a "less is more" argument, showing that lower posting frequency and more focused content strategies can yield higher-quality engagement. Excessive content production, often encouraged by algorithmic pressures, may dilute audience attention and reduce perceived authenticity. This insight aligns with critiques of algorithmic branding: optimizing for constant visibility can erode scarcity, distinctiveness, and perceived intentionality, all of which are critical to sustaining meaningful engagement.

Taken together, these studies enrich the distinction between active and enduring engagement introduced earlier. Active engagement is behaviorally visible and algorithmically rewarded, yet often shallow and context-bound. Enduring engagement, by contrast, requires cognitive processing, emotional attachment, and symbolic alignment, conditions that support brand love, co-creation, and willingness to pay. While trend-based branded content is well-suited

to stimulating consumption and contribution behaviors, it rarely provides the narrative coherence or relational continuity necessary for identity-level integration.

This synthesis underscores a structural contradiction at the heart of branded content in algorithmic environments. Social media platforms reward frequency, novelty, and immediate responsiveness, whereas branding theory emphasizes consistency, clarity, and long-term meaning accumulation. When brands prioritize algorithmic performance indicators over relational depth, engagement becomes performative rather than transformative. Conversely, when brands balance adaptive visibility with coherent identity and value provision, social media can function not merely as a distribution channel but as a relational infrastructure capable of sustaining authentic consumer–brand bonds over time.

From Engagement to Loyalty: Sustaining Connection Beyond the Trend

Long-term brand engagement hinges on transforming algorithmically induced attention into trust-based loyalty. Dimitrieska (2024) underscores that authentic communication and consistency are the foundations of lasting consumer relationships. Riza Khusniah, Astuti, and Wilopo (2024) add that loyalty is cultivated when engagement leads to trust, something that requires ongoing relational investment rather than one-off campaigns.

Nosi, Syah, Wahyudi, and Anggraeni (2025) describe this as a marketing transformation through brand experience, emphasizing that sensory and emotional resonance yield longer-lasting effects than viral popularity. Damaschi, Aboueldahab, and D’Addario (2025) provide a complementary perspective by decomposing loyalty into cognitive, affective, and behavioral subcomponents. Their findings reveal that consumers’ willingness to pay and

repurchase intentions correlate more with affective loyalty, emotional attachment, than with behavioral repetition alone.

C. N., Mathew, and Thomas (2025) add that brand loyalty and customer loyalty must be understood as distinct but interdependent constructs: brand loyalty stems from symbolic and identity-based associations, while customer loyalty reflects satisfaction and perceived value. They introduce the concept of the brand custodian, a role that ensures consistency across digital touchpoints, to preserve loyalty over time.

Obiegbu and Larsen (2025) further highlight that algorithmic personalization can deepen loyalty when it complements rather than replaces authentic brand narratives. Their experiential perspective indicates that long-term engagement emerges when personalized experiences align with the consumer's evolving sense of identity and emotional memory.

Guru and Verma (2025) and Mishra and Changa (2025) similarly conclude that social media's influence on purchase behavior is conditional: it is effective only when the brand's digital persona aligns with perceived integrity and trustworthiness.

A robust body of loyalty research clarifies why the transition from engagement to enduring commitment requires more than algorithmic visibility. Greg F. Watson, Jeff T. Beck, Colleen M. Henderson, and Robert W. Palmatier (2015) conceptualize customer loyalty as a multidimensional asset comprising attitudinal loyalty (psychological commitment), behavioral loyalty (repeat purchasing), and relational loyalty (resistance to competitive offerings). Crucially, they demonstrate that firms profit most when loyalty is affectively grounded rather than merely behaviorally observed. Repeat purchase alone, especially when driven by convenience, habit, or promotional triggers, does not guarantee long-term profitability. This distinction is particularly

relevant in algorithmic environments where behavioral signals (clicks, views, purchases) are highly visible, yet attitudinal commitment may remain weak or unstable.

From a branding perspective, Tanya Sammut-Bonnici (2015) reiterates that brands function as repositories of accumulated meaning, trust, and differentiation. Loyalty, in this classical sense, is not a reaction to isolated stimuli but the outcome of consistent symbolic reinforcement over time. When social media strategies prioritize responsiveness to fleeting trends, the continuity required to build brand equity can be disrupted. Algorithmic amplification may accelerate exposure, but equity develops through repeated, coherent associations that stabilize consumer expectations and perceptions.

The affective dimension of loyalty is further illuminated by Noël Albert and Dominique Merunka (2013), who identify brand love as a central driver of enduring consumer–brand relationships. Brand love encompasses passion, attachment, positive evaluation, and declarations of affection toward a brand. Their findings indicate that brand love predicts loyalty-related outcomes such as advocacy, forgiveness of brand mistakes, and willingness to pay a premium. Importantly, brand love is cultivated through emotionally meaningful interactions rather than transactional engagement. In the context of trend-based marketing, this suggests that viral participation may spark temporary enthusiasm but rarely generates the depth of emotional integration necessary for long-term loyalty.

Broader analyses of digital marketing evolution reinforce this interpretation. Catherine Lamberton and Andrew T. Stephen (2016) trace the shift from firm-controlled communication to interactive, networked environments in which consumers actively shape brand meaning. They argue that while digital and social media expand opportunities for engagement, they also increase volatility and complexity. Brands must navigate fragmented attention, shifting platform norms,

and evolving consumer expectations. Within this landscape, sustained loyalty depends on integrating digital touchpoints into a coherent strategic framework rather than treating each interaction as an isolated optimization opportunity.

Expanding on this, Andrew T. Stephen (2016) emphasizes that digital and social media influence consumer behavior across the entire decision journey, from awareness and consideration to purchase and post-purchase advocacy. Loyalty emerges not at a single moment but through cumulative interactions that reinforce satisfaction, trust, and emotional resonance. Algorithmic personalization can support this process by delivering relevant content at critical stages; however, if personalization is perceived as manipulative, inconsistent, or purely performance-driven, it may undermine trust rather than strengthen it.

Platform-specific motivations also shape the engagement–loyalty transition. Marie J. Pelletier et al. (2020), drawing on uses and gratifications theory, demonstrate that consumers engage with different social media platforms for distinct purposes, information seeking, entertainment, social interaction, self-expression, or inspiration. A one-size-fits-all strategy therefore fails to convert engagement into loyalty because it neglects platform-specific expectations. Brands that align their content with the dominant gratifications of each platform are more likely to generate meaningful involvement. Conversely, mechanically replicating trend formats across platforms may boost short-term metrics while diluting contextual relevance and perceived authenticity.

Taken together, this scholarship reinforces the argument that loyalty is structurally and psychologically distinct from engagement. Engagement can be stimulated quickly through algorithmic amplification, influencer collaborations, or viral challenges. Loyalty, however,

requires attitudinal commitment, affective attachment, symbolic coherence, and perceived value consistency. It is built through cumulative relational exchanges rather than episodic visibility.

Thus, the transition “from engagement to loyalty” hinges on whether brands can transform algorithmically induced attention into emotionally grounded relationships. When engagement is embedded within a stable narrative, reinforced by authentic communication, and aligned with consumers’ identity needs, it can evolve into brand love and relational loyalty. When it is driven primarily by performance metrics and trend responsiveness, it remains behaviorally intense but psychologically shallow. In this sense, sustainable brand success in digital environments depends less on maximizing engagement spikes and more on orchestrating consistent, meaningful interactions that compound over time into trust, attachment, and enduring preference.

Emerging Frameworks for Measuring Longevity

Conventional social media engagement metrics, such as likes, comments, and shares, remain ill-equipped to capture whether audience interaction persists once a trend has run its course. While these indicators quantify visibility and immediate response, they offer little insight into post-trend loyalty, value alignment, or sustained brand-consumer relationships. In response to these limitations, scholars have begun to propose alternative frameworks that prioritize longevity, affective depth, and communal attachment over short-term performance.

Krowinska and Dineva (2025) argue for a shift toward measuring active engagement behaviors alongside community participation as more reliable indicators of sustained connection. Rather than treating all interactions as equal, their framework emphasizes repeated, voluntary engagement, such as ongoing dialogue with branded content, participation in brand-affiliated

communities, or user-initiated advocacy, as evidence of deeper relational investment. This approach reframes engagement as a process that unfolds over time, distinguishing fleeting participation from meaningful involvement.

Complementing this behavioral focus, Dhawan and Singh (2025) introduce the concept of emotional durability, defined as the persistence of positive affect toward a brand after the novelty and visibility of a trend have dissipated. Emotional durability captures whether consumers retain feelings of trust, affinity, or identification independent of algorithmic reinforcement. By centering affective continuity rather than peak engagement moments, this framework foregrounds the emotional consequences of branding strategies beyond the immediate life cycle of a trend.

Kleinberg et al. (2024) further complicate engagement measurement by highlighting the role of preference inconsistency in digital environments. They argue that consumer desires and emotional orientations evolve in nonlinear and often unpredictable ways that algorithmic optimization cannot fully anticipate. As a result, models that prioritize maximizing immediate responses risk misinterpreting volatility as disengagement or overfitting content to short-lived preferences. From this perspective, engagement longevity depends less on perfect personalization and more on a brand's capacity to offer stable meaning that remains interpretable across shifting emotional contexts.

Looking forward, Nosi et al. (2025) anticipate a broader transition toward experience-centered marketing frameworks that integrate algorithmic amplification with emotional resonance and community-led participation. Rather than using trends as isolated visibility tools, this approach positions brands as facilitators of ongoing experiences that invite reflection, belonging, and shared meaning. By balancing data-driven responsiveness with

human-centered values, experience-centered models aim to move brands away from cycles of short-term attention and toward sustained cultural relevance.

Synthesizing Engagement, Algorithms, and Brand Longevity

The body of literature reviewed in this chapter reveals a persistent and unresolved tension at the core of contemporary digital marketing: the disconnect between algorithmic optimization and the cultivation of authentic, enduring brand relationships. While social media platforms and their underlying algorithms enable brands to achieve unprecedented levels of visibility and participation, this exposure is frequently decoupled from emotional depth, experiential meaning, and long-term consumer commitment. Trend-based engagement, particularly in the form of viral challenges, privileges immediacy, replication, and performative participation, often at the expense of sustained relational value.

Across disciplines, scholars converge on the idea that algorithmic amplification reshapes not only how content circulates but also how engagement itself is defined and measured. Traditional metrics of success reward short-term interaction and scalability, reinforcing marketing strategies that prioritize visibility over coherence and responsiveness over purpose. As a result, brands risk becoming reactive entities governed by platform logics rather than intentional actors grounded in stable values and narratives. The literature suggests that this dynamic can erode brand identity, rendering engagement fleeting and loyalty fragile once novelty fades or algorithmic attention shifts elsewhere.

At the same time, the reviewed scholarship emphasizes that sustainable brand loyalty is not incompatible with digital participation, but it requires a fundamentally different orientation toward engagement. Enduring consumer-brand relationships emerge when brands offer

consistent meaning, emotional resonance, and opportunities for genuine participation that extend beyond the life cycle of a single trend. Concepts such as emotional durability, community-based engagement, and experience-centered marketing point toward alternative models in which consumers are not merely participants in viral moments but collaborators in ongoing brand narratives. These frameworks underscore the importance of trust, authenticity, and perceived value as mediators between engagement and loyalty in algorithmically mediated environments.

Importantly, the literature also highlights the evolving nature of consumer identity in digital spaces, where participation is shaped by shifting emotional contexts, social visibility, and cultural performance. Engagement longevity, therefore, cannot be fully explained through optimization or personalization alone. Instead, it depends on a brand's capacity to remain legible and relevant as consumer preferences evolve in nonlinear and unpredictable ways. This insight challenges marketers to move beyond short-term responsiveness and toward strategies that balance adaptability with coherence.

Taken together, this review establishes a conceptual foundation for rethinking engagement not as a momentary metric but as a longitudinal process shaped by emotional, experiential, and structural forces. Future research would benefit from longitudinal models that integrate algorithmic personalization with measures of emotional durability, community participation, and identity alignment over time. Such approaches are necessary to assess whether contemporary digital marketing practices, particularly those reliant on virality, can generate not only attention, but lasting legitimacy and value in an increasingly saturated and algorithm-driven media landscape.

Research Gap and Direction For Present Study

Despite growing scholarly attention to social media engagement, algorithmic branding, and trend-based marketing, the existing literature reveals a notable gap in how engagement longevity is empirically and conceptually assessed. Much of the current research examines engagement at isolated moments in time, relying on platform-native metrics or short-term affective responses that privilege visibility over durability. While scholars have identified concepts such as emotional durability, community participation, and experience-centered marketing, these constructs are rarely integrated into unified analytical frameworks or applied to concrete brand cases over extended periods. Moreover, limited research explicitly interrogates how brands translate viral participation into sustained relational value, particularly in contexts where engagement is mediated by performative participation and evolving consumer identities. As a result, there remains insufficient understanding of when, and under what conditions, trend-based marketing strategies contribute to long-term brand legitimacy rather than transient relevance. Addressing this gap, the present study seeks to examine engagement as a longitudinal process, analyzing how algorithmic amplification, emotional resonance, and brand meaning interact over time to shape sustained consumer-brand relationships.

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, survey-based research design to examine the relationship between engagement with social media trends and the longevity of brand loyalty. Data was collected using two complementary survey instruments administered during a single class period. Quantitative methods were selected to allow for measurable comparisons of engagement levels across two points in time. The study was approved under Drew University's Institutional Review Board procedures and was conducted under the supervision of a faculty advisor.

Participants

Participants were undergraduate students enrolled at Drew University. The first survey received 193 responses and focused on social media usage, trend exposure, and engagement behaviors, while the second survey received 143 responses and examined brand perception, trust, emotional connection, and purchasing behavior. Participants were recruited from all four academic divisions of the college, Sciences, Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts, to ensure representation across a range of academic backgrounds and patterns of social media engagement. All participants were 18 years of age or older at the time data were collected. No minors or individuals from protected or vulnerable populations (e.g., prisoners or individuals with impaired decision-making capacity) were included in the study.

Recruitment Procedure

Participants were recruited in- person during regularly scheduled class sessions on the Drew University campus with prior approval from course instructors. At the beginning of class,

the researcher briefly introduced the study, explaining that it concerned social media engagement and brand perceptions, and invited students to participate. Students were informed that participation was voluntary, confidential, and would have no impact on their academic standing. No compensation was provided for participation, and students who chose not to participate were not penalized in any way.

Consent

Informed consent was obtained electronically prior to participation in accordance with Drew University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) ethical research standards. Participants reviewed an electronic consent statement at the beginning of the online survey and indicated their agreement by selecting a checkbox labeled "I consent to participation," (see Appendix A). This action constituted implied consent. Participants were informed that they could skip any question and could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Materials and Measures

Data were collected using two structured survey instruments designed to capture participants' social media behaviors, engagement with trend-based content, and perceptions of brand loyalty. Together, these materials were intended to assess both short-term engagement with social media trends and indicators of longer-term consumer-brand relationships. All survey items were developed based on established constructs in the marketing and consumer behavior literature, including brand authenticity, emotional connection, and loyalty intentions.

The first instrument was an online survey administered via Google Forms (see Appendix C). This survey measured participants' general patterns of social media use, including frequency

of platform engagement (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, and X), exposure to trending content, and typical interaction behaviors such as liking, sharing, or commenting on branded posts.

Participants were also asked to report how often they noticed brands participating in social media trends and the extent to which such participation influenced their interest in or perception of those brands. Responses were collected using a combination of multiple-choice questions and Likert-scale items, allowing for standardized measurement of engagement and attitudes across participants. The online format allowed participants to complete the survey on their personal devices while maintaining flexibility to skip any questions they did not wish to answer.

The second instrument was a paper-based survey administered later in the same class session (see Appendix D). This survey focused on more specific evaluations of brands and was designed to assess constructs related to long-term brand loyalty. Participants were asked to reflect on brands they followed or engaged with on social media and to rate these brands on dimensions such as perceived authenticity, emotional connection, consistency of brand messaging, and likelihood of continued support after a social media trend has ended. Items also assessed behavioral indicators of loyalty including intentions to continue purchasing from or recommending the brand in the future. These measures primarily used Likert-scale response categories to capture degrees of agreement or likelihood with limited short-response items included to allow participants to elaborate on their perceptions in their own words.

For administrative purposes during data collection, participants were asked to provide their names with each survey. This information was used only to track survey completion and was not entered into any digital dataset during analysis. After all surveys were collected and data entry was complete, identifying information was permanently destroyed and all remaining data were fully de-identified. Together, these materials provided a comprehensive assessment of how

engagement with social media trends relates to perceptions of brand authenticity and the durability of brand loyalty over time.

Procedures

Following consent, participants completed the online survey using their personal devices. At the end of the class session, participants who agreed to continue completed the paper survey. Participants were reminded that they could skip any questions and discontinue participation at any time.

To reduce response bias, the full theoretical purpose of the study, examining the longevity of brand loyalty beyond social media trends, was not disclosed at the outset. Instead, participants were informed that the study concerned social media engagement and brand perceptions. A full debriefing explaining the complete purpose of the research was provided immediately after participation.

Data Management and Confidentiality

Protecting participant confidentiality was a central priority throughout all phases of the research design, data collection, storage, and analysis. Several procedural safeguards were implemented to ensure that participants' identities were protected and that individual responses could not be linked to identifiable information in the final dataset.

Although participants were asked to write their names on each of the surveys during data collection, this identifying information was collected solely for the purpose of tracking survey completion and preventing duplicate responses within the same class session. Names were never entered into any digital database, spreadsheet, or analytic file. Upon completion of data entry and

verification, all portions of the paper surveys containing identifying information were physically destroyed through paper shredding. After this step, all remaining data were fully de-identified, and it was no longer possible to associate responses with individual participants.

During the data collection phase, completed paper surveys were stored in a locked and secure location accessible only to the principal investigator. Electronic data from the online survey were downloaded to a password-protected device and stored in a secure, access-restricted digital folder. No identifying information was collected through the online survey platform, and IP addresses were not recorded. All reasonable measures were taken to minimize risks associated with electronic data transmission and storage.

Only the principal investigator had access to the raw data at any point in the research process. Faculty supervisors were provided access only to aggregated results and summary statistics, not to individual-level responses. Data analyses were conducted exclusively on anonymized datasets, and findings are reported solely in aggregate form (e.g., means, percentages, and correlations). No direct quotations or uniquely identifying responses are included in the thesis or any subsequent presentations or publications.

These procedures ensured that confidentiality was maintained during active data collection and that anonymity was fully achieved in the final dataset. Collectively, these safeguards minimized risks related to privacy, confidentiality breaches, or unintended disclosure of personal information, thereby meeting Drew University Institutional Review Board standards for research involving human participants.

Debriefing

At the conclusion of the study, participants received a written debriefing form explaining the full purpose of the research, the reason for withholding certain details initially, and contact information for the researcher, faculty supervisor, and the Drew University Institutional Review Board (see Appendix B). Participants were informed that they could request withdrawal of their data after learning the full purpose of the study.

Data Analysis

Following data collection, responses from both survey instruments were compiled and prepared for statistical analysis. Data from the online Google Forms survey were exported into a spreadsheet format, while responses from the paper-based survey were manually entered into the same dataset. To ensure accuracy, all manually entered data were cross-checked against the original paper surveys prior to analysis. Any incomplete or inconsistent responses were reviewed, and cases with substantial missing data were excluded from specific analyses where appropriate.

Descriptive statistics were first calculated to summarize participant demographics, overall social media usage patterns, and general trends in brand engagement. Measures such as means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions were used to provide an overview of the sample and key variables. These descriptive findings established a baseline understanding of how frequently participants interact with social media trends and how they perceive brand participation in such trends.

To examine the relationship between engagement with social media trends and brand loyalty, inferential statistical analyses were conducted. Correlational analyses were used to assess

the strength and direction of relationships between key variables, including frequency of engagement with trend-based content, perceived brand authenticity, emotional connection, and self-reported loyalty intentions. This approach allowed for the identification of patterns indicating whether higher engagement with social media trends was associated with stronger or weaker indicators of long-term brand loyalty.

In addition, comparative analyses were conducted between responses collected in the first (online) and second (paper-based) surveys. This comparison allowed the researcher to evaluate whether immediate engagement behaviors aligned with more reflective assessments of brand loyalty collected later in the session. Where appropriate, paired-sample analyses were used to identify statistically significant differences between short-term engagement responses and longer-term loyalty perceptions.

Findings & General Discussions

Social Media Usage and Platform Engagement

The primary survey results indicate that participants are highly active social media users. Most respondents spend several hours on social media each day as part of their daily routine, while only a small minority report minimal or infrequent use. This overall pattern suggests that social media is not an occasional activity for respondents but is an integrated part of their everyday media consumption. In terms of platform usage, visually driven and algorithmically curated platforms such as Instagram and TikTok clearly dominate. These platforms are followed in usage by Snapchat and Pinterest, while X (formerly Twitter) and Reddit serve more niche but still meaningful roles in respondents' media diets. LinkedIn appears to function more as a professional utility rather than a space for trend engagement.

Overall, the distribution of platform use reflects a strong preference for highly visual, fast-moving content environments where trends are rapidly produced, circulated, and replaced. These patterns are significant because they situate respondents within digital ecosystems that are structurally designed to amplify trends. Algorithmic feeds, short-form video formats, and influencer-driven content all contribute to repeated exposure to emerging trends, often in highly personalized ways. As a result, participants are not only passive observers of trends but are consistently embedded in systems that actively surface them.

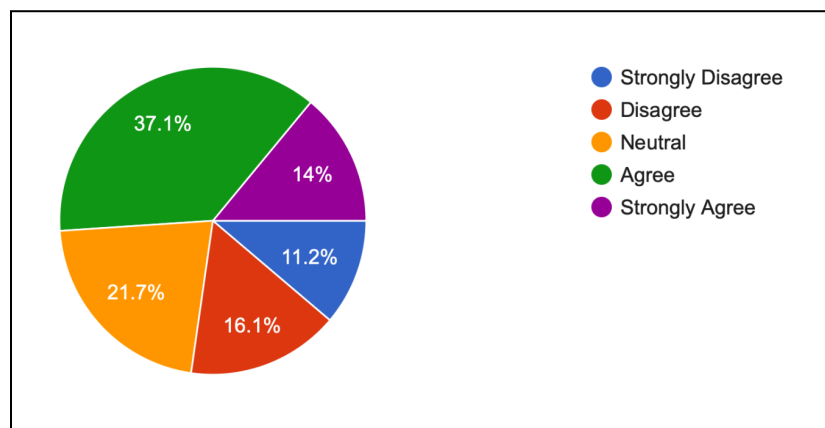
Engagement With Brand Content

Although participants reported high levels of exposure to branded content across social media platforms, active engagement with that content was notably uneven. While approximately 58.8% indicated that they engage with brand posts through actions such as liking, sharing, or

commenting, a substantial portion of respondents expressed either neutrality or disengagement (see Figure 1). This distribution suggests that interaction with brand content is not a consistent or automatic response to exposure, but rather a selective behavior shaped by individual interest, perceived relevance, and overall attitudes toward marketing on social media.

Figure 1

Engagement with Brand Content Among Participants



Note. This figure illustrates the distribution of responses regarding active engagement with brand content, including liking, sharing, and commenting.

The data reveals a clear distinction between *visibility* and *interaction*, a theme that is reinforced throughout the broader findings of this study. While earlier results demonstrate that participants spend significant time on platforms where branded content is highly visible, this visibility does not reliably produce active engagement. Instead, most users appear to occupy a passive role, consuming content without directly interacting with it. This pattern aligns with findings from the trend participation section where a majority of respondents reported rarely or never engaging in trends themselves, despite frequent exposure. Importantly, this gap between exposure and engagement helps explain why trends, despite their reach, have limited influence

on deeper consumer behaviors such as purchasing or long-term loyalty. As demonstrated below (see *Trend Participation and Motivations for Engagement*), participants are unlikely to make purchases based on trends alone and often lose interest quickly once a trend fades. The relatively low level of active engagement with brand content suggests that even when users encounter and recognize branded material, they do not necessarily form meaningful connections with it.

Qualitative responses further reinforce this interpretation by revealing a degree of intentional disengagement. Several participants noted that they actively avoid interacting with brand content, even when it appears frequently in their feeds. This behavior indicates that consumers are not passive recipients of marketing, but rather selective and, at times, resistant participants in digital environments. In this context, engagement becomes less a measure of interest and more a reflection of momentary relevance or content appeal. Taken together, these findings challenge the assumption that high levels of exposure or interaction metrics, such as likes and shares, are reliable indicators of consumer loyalty. Instead, they suggest that much of what is measured as “engagement” may reflect surface-level interaction rather than meaningful involvement. This distinction is critical when considered alongside other findings in this study, particularly the limited emotional connection to brands and the short duration of post-trend engagement, both of which point to the difficulty of translating visibility into lasting consumer relationships.

Trend Participation and Motivations for Engagement

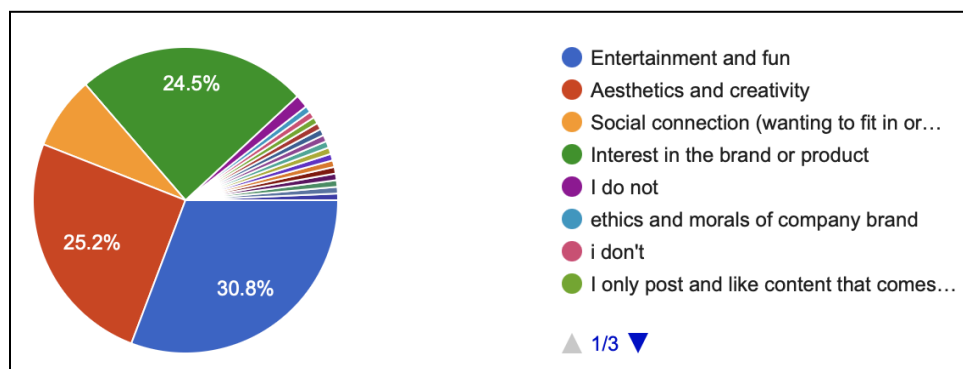
Participation in social media trends was relatively limited across the sample, despite their high visibility within participants’ digital environments. Over half of respondents, approximately 72.1%, reported that they rarely or never engage in trends, while only a small proportion, 9.1%,

indicated frequent participation. This pattern reveals a clear gap between the prominence of trends in social media feeds and the extent to which users actively contribute to them. Although trends are often framed as participatory phenomena, the findings suggest that most users interact with them passively, consuming content rather than creating or replicating it.

This limited participation becomes more meaningful when considered alongside respondents' motivations for engagement. Among those who do take part in trends, involvement is driven primarily by content-related factors, particularly aesthetics, creativity, and entertainment, rather than by interest in the brand itself (see Figure 2). In this context, the brand often functions as a secondary element, embedded within the trend rather than serving as its focal point.

Figure 2

Motivations for Engagement Among Participants



Note. This figure shows respondents' primary motivations for engaging with social media trends, particularly aesthetics, creativity, and entertainment.

These findings highlight an important tension between how trends are designed versus how they are actually experienced by users. While brands often rely on trends to encourage widespread participation and user-generated content, the majority of consumers do not appear to

engage at that level. Instead, participation is concentrated among a smaller group, while the broader audience remains in a spectator role. This helps explain why trends, despite their reach, do not consistently translate into deeper forms of engagement observed elsewhere in the findings, such as emotional connection or sustained purchasing behavior. Furthermore, the motivations behind participation suggest that even when users do engage, the interaction is largely situational and short-lived. Because engagement is rooted in the immediate appeal of the trend rather than in the brand itself, it tends to dissipate once the trend loses relevance. This aligns with the broader pattern identified in the study, where engagement declines rapidly after trends fade and does not develop into long-term loyalty.

Overall, this section reinforces a key insight of the study: *social media trends operate more effectively as forms of cultural content than as mechanisms for building enduring brand relationships*. While they may create opportunities for visibility and momentary interaction, their reliance on aesthetics and entertainment limits their ability to foster sustained consumer commitment.

Trend Influence, Brand Perception, and the Limits of Sustained Attention

The findings of this study reveal a complex and often conditional relationship between social media trends, brand perception, and brands' ability to maintain consumer attention over time. When asked to self-report the influence of trends on brand perception, responses were notably mixed. While 67.9% of participants indicated at least moderate influence, a substantial portion reported little to no impact. Because these findings are based on self-reported perceptions, they reflect respondents' awareness and willingness to identify trend influence, which may not fully capture unconscious or indirect effects. Overall, the variation suggests that

trends can shape consumer perceptions of brands, but their influence is neither consistent nor inherently positive, depending instead on how trends are experienced within users' broader social media environments.

Qualitative responses further illustrate this duality. On one hand, participants noted that trends can increase visibility, introduce new brands, and create positive impressions when content is perceived as creative or engaging. On the other hand, many described negative reactions such as annoyance, skepticism, and distrust, particularly when trends felt repetitive, overly promotional, or inauthentic. Repeated exposure to the same content across platforms was frequently cited as diminishing interest rather than strengthening engagement. This aligns with consumer behavior research suggesting that while repetition can improve brand recall and awareness, excessive exposure may lead to “advertising wear-out” or “advertising weariness,” where consumers begin to ignore or react negatively to repeated marketing messages (Solomon & Russell, 2024). In this sense, trend-based marketing functions as a double-edged strategy: although repetition may initially reinforce recognition, overexposure and lack of originality can ultimately weaken consumer interest and brand perception.

This complexity becomes even more evident when examining whether brands can sustain attention after a trend fades. While a slight majority of respondents indicated that brands are capable of maintaining attention, these responses were overwhelmingly conditional. Participants emphasized that continued engagement depends on factors such as product quality, consistency, authenticity, and alignment with personal preferences. Trends, in this context, were consistently described as initial points of exposure rather than long-term drivers of consumer interest. Many respondents explained that while a trend might encourage them to notice, explore, or temporarily engage with a brand, sustained attention depended on factors beyond the trend itself, including

authenticity, product quality, emotional connection, and overall brand value. This finding aligns with existing literature suggesting that social media engagement and brand loyalty are strengthened through deeper consumer–brand relationships rather than short-term visibility alone (Albert & Merunka, 2013). Similarly, research on digital and social media marketing emphasizes that while trends and algorithmic exposure can generate awareness and interaction, long-term engagement requires meaningful and consistent brand experiences (Stephen, 2016).

At the same time, a significant portion of participants expressed skepticism about brands' ability to maintain attention once a trend fades, pointing to the fast-paced and highly transient nature of social media environments. Respondents frequently described trends as short-lived cycles of visibility that are quickly replaced by newer forms of content, making sustained relevance difficult without constant adaptation. This perception also reflects consumer behavior research on advertising repetition and wear-out, which suggests that repeated exposure may initially improve awareness and recall but can eventually reduce consumer interest or generate negative reactions when content becomes overly repetitive (Solomon & Russell, 2024). Together, these findings suggest that while trends may be effective tools for generating initial exposure and engagement, they are less reliable as long-term strategies for maintaining consumer attention without continued innovation, authenticity, and relationship-building.

When considered together, these findings reinforce broader patterns identified in existing research on digital marketing and consumer behavior. Prior studies have found that social media is highly effective at generating visibility, awareness, and short-term engagement, but less effective at sustaining long-term loyalty without deeper emotional connection and consistent brand value (Dolan et al., 2019). Similarly, research on online brand engagement suggests that while trends and algorithm-driven exposure can rapidly amplify consumer attention, maintaining

loyalty requires more stable consumer–brand relationships built through trust, authenticity, and meaningful interaction (Wallace et al., 2021). The findings of this study support this distinction between visibility and sustained engagement. Although trends were shown to create moments of interest and shape brand perception, their influence was often temporary, unstable, and highly context-dependent. Participants frequently associated repeated exposure and rapid trend circulation with fatigue, annoyance, or disengagement rather than lasting loyalty. This also aligns with consumer behavior research on advertising wear-out, which suggests that excessive repetition can weaken consumer interest over time (Solomon & Russell, 2024). Together, these findings suggest that while social media trends are powerful tools for capturing attention in digital environments, they are less reliable as standalone strategies for fostering enduring consumer loyalty.

This section also connects directly to earlier findings regarding participation and motivation (see *Trend Participation and Motivations for Engagement*). Because most users engage with trends as content, driven by aesthetics and entertainment rather than brand interest, the resulting perceptions are similarly surface-level. As a result, even when trends successfully shape initial impressions, they do not necessarily translate into deeper forms of consumer commitment, such as trust, emotional connection, or consistent purchasing behavior.

Ultimately, these findings reinforce a central insight of both this study and existing consumer behavior research: social media trends function more effectively as entry points to consumer attention than as sustaining forces in long-term consumer–brand relationships. Prior literature has consistently shown that while digital and social media marketing strategies can rapidly increase visibility and engagement, long-term loyalty is more strongly associated with trust, emotional connection, authenticity, and perceived value (Wallace et al., 2021). Research on

social media engagement similarly suggests that initial interaction alone is insufficient to maintain consumer commitment without ongoing relational and experiential reinforcement (Dolan et al., 2019). The findings of this study support these conclusions by demonstrating that trends can effectively capture attention and shape brand perception in the short term, but their ability to sustain engagement depends largely on factors external to the trend itself. Participants repeatedly emphasized that continued interest was tied not to virality alone, but to consistent product quality, authenticity, originality, and overall brand performance. This highlights a critical challenge for brands operating within fast-moving digital environments: visibility generated through trends must be supported by meaningful and consistent consumer experiences in order to evolve into lasting loyalty. Without these elements, trend-driven attention remains temporary, reinforcing the broader conclusion that virality alone is insufficient for building durable consumer–brand relationships.

Brand Loyalty and Perception

The results of the second survey provide deeper insight into how consumers interpret brand loyalty in relation to social media trends, particularly after the moment of virality has passed. Overall, the findings reinforce the idea that while trends may introduce consumers to brands, long-term loyalty is shaped by more stable and substantive factors.

When asked about their likelihood of continuing to support a brand after a social media trend ends, a slight majority of respondents indicated that they were likely or very likely to do so. However, a substantial proportion remained neutral. This distribution suggests that loyalty is not automatic; rather, it is conditional and dependent on the brand's ability to meet expectations beyond the trend itself. As one respondent explained, *"If after trying their products I realize they*

are of high quality and are helpful to me in some way, then I will continue staying loyal...

Conversely, if I try out a product that I don't like, I will not continue to support the brand after the trend fades.” This response captures a recurring theme across the data: continued support is driven by product experience, not trend exposure.

Participants also reported frequent exposure to their preferred brands across their social media feeds, indicating that brands maintain a consistent and often unavoidable presence within users’ digital environments. Many respondents described encountering the same brands repeatedly through posts, advertisements, and trend-related content, reinforcing the idea that visibility is not a scarce resource in contemporary marketing. However, this constant exposure does not appear to deepen consumer relationships. Instead, it often normalizes the presence of brands to the point where they become part of the background of everyday scrolling. When considered alongside other findings, particularly the low levels of active engagement and limited participation in trends, this suggests that visibility alone does not foster stronger emotional or behavioral commitment. Being seen frequently does not necessarily mean being remembered, trusted, or valued.

In some cases, repeated exposure may even contribute to diminishing returns. Several participants implied that seeing the same brand or product too often, especially within trend cycles, led to disengagement or irritation rather than increased interest. This reflects a broader pattern in the data: the saturation of branded content can weaken its impact, particularly when it lacks variation or meaningful substance. Rather than building familiarity in a positive sense, overexposure can make brands feel repetitive or overly commercial, reinforcing the perception that they are prioritizing attention over authenticity.

This dynamic is closely connected to how participants interpret the relationship between trends and brand trust. Overall, responses suggest that participation in viral trends does not significantly strengthen trust and, in some cases, may even undermine it. Many respondents expressed neutrality, indicating that trends neither enhance nor damage their perception of a brand's credibility. This neutrality is significant in itself, as it suggests that even highly visible and widely circulated campaigns fail to meaningfully influence one of the core components of brand loyalty. At the same time, a portion of participants expressed skepticism toward brands that rely heavily on trends, particularly when such participation appears forced or disconnected from the brand's core identity. In these cases, trend engagement was seen as a performative attempt to remain relevant rather than a genuine reflection of brand values. As one participant noted, *"A short-lived 'viral' brand focuses on commercialism over quality... whereas a brand who builds lasting loyalty prioritizes the wants and needs of their customers."* This perspective highlights a critical distinction between visibility and value. While trends can amplify a brand's presence, they do not inherently communicate reliability, quality, or authenticity, qualities that are essential for building trust.

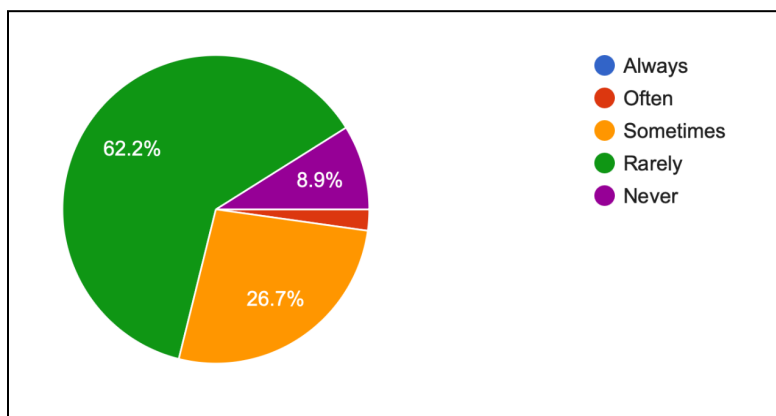
Emotional connection to brands appears to be relatively limited among respondents. A substantial portion of participants report feeling neutral or detached from the brands they follow, and many actively disagree that they form emotional attachments through social media engagement. This suggests that, despite frequent exposure to branded content online, most consumers do not develop strong emotional bonds with brands in these digital environments. Instead, brand relationships tend to be more functional in nature, shaped by factors such as performance, convenience, and reliability rather than emotional identification or loyalty. In contrast, shared values emerge as a much stronger and more consistent influence on consumer

behavior. Many respondents indicate that they are more likely to engage with or purchase from brands that reflect their personal beliefs and principles. Ethical considerations such as sustainability, inclusivity, and transparency are frequently identified as important in shaping these preferences. This points to a form of consumer decision-making that is increasingly values-driven rather than trend-driven.

Approximately 62.2% of respondents reported that they rarely or never purchase or engage with a brand because of a trend (see Figure 3). This reinforces the idea that trends function primarily as a discovery mechanism rather than a direct driver of consumption. While trends may increase visibility and introduce consumers to new brands, they do not appear to be sufficient on their own to motivate purchasing behavior. Instead, purchasing decisions are likely shaped by more stable factors such as value alignment, product quality, price, and perceived usefulness. This suggests that trends may play a role in the early stages of the consumer decision-making process, but their influence weakens significantly at the point of conversion. The temporal dimension of engagement further highlights the limitations of trend-based marketing. Overall, this distribution suggests that engagement driven by trends is typically short-lived, with interest declining rapidly once the trend loses visibility.

Figure 3

Frequency of Purchasing or Engaging with a Brand Due to a Trend



Note. This figure illustrates the distribution of respondents' reported frequency of purchasing or engaging with a brand because of a trend.

This pattern points to a broader issue of sustainability in trend-driven marketing strategies. Although trends can generate rapid spikes in attention and engagement, they do not appear to foster long-term consumer relationships. The steep drop-off in engagement after a trend fades indicates that consumer attention in this context is highly transient and dependent on constant novelty. For brands, this implies that relying solely on trend participation may lead to inconsistent audience retention and limited long-term loyalty.

Qualitative responses provide additional insight into what drives long-term loyalty. Product quality emerged as the most consistently emphasized factor, appearing in over 70% of responses. Participants repeatedly described trends as an introduction rather than a determining factor, emphasizing that continued engagement depends on whether the product delivers value. Other key factors included consistency, reliability, alignment with personal values, and authenticity. Many respondents also highlighted ethical considerations, suggesting that consumers increasingly evaluate brands beyond their marketing strategies.

Participants further distinguished between short-lived viral brands and those that build lasting loyalty. Viral brands were often described as trend-dependent, overly focused on hype, and sometimes lacking in quality or authenticity. In contrast, brands that sustain loyalty were characterized as consistent, value-driven, and focused on long-term customer relationships. One respondent summarized this distinction by stating, *“If all they have is good marketing, that isn't enough to set them apart from a brand with good products.”* This distinction reflects a broader skepticism toward marketing strategies that prioritize visibility over substance. Participants frequently implied that viral success alone is not a reliable indicator of a brand's credibility or value, but rather a reflection of timing, algorithmic amplification, or cultural relevance in a specific moment. As a result, brands that rely heavily on trends risk being perceived as interchangeable, particularly when their messaging or identity shifts to align with each new viral moment. This lack of consistency can weaken trust, making it more difficult for consumers to form stable associations with the brand over time. In contrast, brands that were perceived as building lasting loyalty were associated with a clear and consistent identity that extends beyond social media trends. Participants emphasized reliability, not only in product performance but also in messaging, values, and overall brand presence. These brands were seen as less reactive to trends and more intentional in how they engage with consumers, often prioritizing quality and customer experience over rapid visibility. This suggests that consistency itself functions as a form of trust-building, reinforcing the idea that loyalty is developed through repeated, positive interactions rather than singular moments of exposure. Additionally, respondents highlighted the importance of authenticity in differentiating between these two types of brands. Brands that engage with trends in ways that feel forced or disconnected from their core identity were more likely to be viewed negatively, even if the content itself was popular. In contrast, when trends

were perceived as aligning naturally with a brand's existing voice or values, they were more likely to enhance perception without undermining credibility. This reinforces the idea that participation in trends is not inherently beneficial; its effectiveness depends on how well it integrates with the brand's broader narrative

Taken together, these findings reinforce the central argument of this thesis. While social media trends are highly effective at generating visibility and initial interest, they do not significantly contribute to trust, emotional connection, or sustained engagement. Instead, long-term brand loyalty is driven by factors such as product quality, consistency, and alignment with consumer values. The rapid decline in engagement after trends fade further underscores the temporary nature of trend-based interactions. Ultimately, trends function as entry points into consumer awareness, but lasting brand relationships are built on what happens after the trend ends.

Implications

The findings of this study carry important implications for both marketing practice and academic understandings of digital consumer behavior. Most notably, the results challenge the widespread assumption that social media trends are effective tools for cultivating long-term brand loyalty. While trends clearly generate high levels of visibility and short-term engagement, the data demonstrates that these outcomes do not reliably translate into trust, emotional connection, or sustained consumer commitment. This suggests that current marketing strategies may be overvaluing virality while undervaluing the factors that actually drive enduring brand relationships.

For marketing practitioners, the results indicate a need to rethink the role of trend-based campaigns within broader brand strategy. Trends should not be treated as standalone solutions for engagement or loyalty-building, but rather as entry points that introduce consumers to a brand. The success of these campaigns depends heavily on what follows the moment of visibility. Without consistent product quality, clear brand identity, and alignment with consumer values, the attention generated by trends dissipates quickly. As the findings show, a large portion of consumers lose interest within weeks, or even days, after a trend fades, highlighting the limitations of relying on short-term content cycles.

Additionally, the study underscores the importance of authenticity in digital marketing. Participants frequently expressed skepticism toward brands that appeared to engage with trends in superficial or performative ways. This suggests that consumers are increasingly attuned to the intentions behind brand behavior and are less responsive to strategies that prioritize relevance over substance. Brands that attempt to follow trends without maintaining a coherent identity risk damaging trust rather than strengthening it. In contrast, those that integrate trends in ways that feel consistent with their values and messaging are more likely to sustain positive perceptions.

The findings also point to the growing significance of values-based consumption. A substantial majority of participants indicated that alignment with personal belief, such as ethics, sustainability, and transparency, plays a major role in their purchasing decisions. This suggests that long-term loyalty is rooted not only in product performance but also in how brands position themselves within broader social and cultural contexts. For marketers, this means that investing in meaningful brand values and communicating them clearly may be more effective than continuously pursuing viral visibility.

From an academic perspective, this study contributes to ongoing debates about how engagement should be conceptualized and measured in digital environments. The results reinforce critiques of engagement metrics such as likes, shares, and views, which often fail to capture the depth or durability of consumer relationships. High visibility and interaction do not necessarily indicate loyalty, and in some cases may reflect only temporary participation in a cultural moment. This suggests a need for more nuanced frameworks that distinguish between short-term engagement and long-term relational value.

Furthermore, the findings highlight the importance of examining engagement as a temporal process rather than a single event. Social media trends operate on rapid cycles of emergence and decline, but brand loyalty develops over time through repeated positive experiences. Future research and marketing strategies alike should account for this difference, focusing not only on how consumers initially interact with brands, but also on how those interactions evolve, or dissipate, after the trend has passed.

Finally, this study has implications for understanding consumer agency within algorithm-driven environments. While algorithms play a significant role in shaping what users see, the findings demonstrate that consumers are not passive recipients of content. Participants actively evaluate brands based on quality, values, and authenticity, often resisting or disengaging from content that feels overly commercial or insincere. This suggests that even within highly curated digital ecosystems, consumers retain the ability to critically interpret and selectively engage with brand messaging.

In sum, the implications of this research point to a fundamental shift in how social media marketing effectiveness should be understood. Virality may generate attention, but it is not a substitute for the deeper qualities that sustain brand loyalty. For brands seeking long-term

success, the challenge lies not in simply capturing attention, but in converting that attention into trust, relevance, and lasting value.

Limitations and Further Research

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the results of this study. First, the sample consisted exclusively of undergraduate students from Drew University, which may limit the generalizability of findings to broader populations. College students may exhibit distinct patterns of social media use, trend participation, and brand engagement that differ from other age groups or demographic populations.

Second, the study relied on self-reported data, which is subject to potential biases such as social desirability bias and recall bias. Participants may not have been fully aware of the extent to which trends influenced their perceptions or behaviors, and responses may have reflected perceived rather than actual engagement.

There were also methodological limitations related to data collection. Originally, surveys were distributed in a classroom setting, but due to a lower-than-expected response rate, distribution was expanded through email outreach to the broader undergraduate student body. While this adjustment allowed for a larger and more academically diverse sample, it also introduced variability in how participants encountered and completed the surveys.

To reduce common method variance, a two-week gap was introduced between the first and second surveys. This separation was intended to prevent participants from simply repeating or reinforcing earlier responses and allowed behavioral questions and attitudinal evaluations to be measured more independently. Although this design strengthened the reliability of the

findings, the study still does not capture true longitudinal changes in consumer behavior or brand loyalty over extended periods of time.

Finally, although efforts were made to minimize response bias through partial disclosure of the study's purpose, some participants may have inferred the research objectives, potentially influencing their responses. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating a more diverse sample, using longitudinal designs, and integrating behavioral data (e.g., actual purchase history or social media analytics) to complement self-reported measures.

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insight into the relationship between social media trend engagement and brand loyalty, offering a foundation for further research in the fields of marketing and consumer behavior.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine whether engagement with social media trends contributes to the development of long-term brand loyalty or whether it remains a largely temporary form of interaction shaped by visibility and algorithmic amplification. Across both surveys, the findings consistently point to a clear distinction between short-term attention and sustained consumer commitment. While participants are highly active on social media and frequently encounter trend-based marketing, their engagement with these trends rarely translates into enduring relationships with brands.

The central argument of this thesis, that social media trends are effective at generating short-term visibility but are limited in their ability to cultivate lasting brand loyalty, is strongly supported by the data. Participants demonstrated high levels of exposure to trends and brand content, yet most reported low levels of active participation, minimal emotional connection, and limited purchasing behavior driven by trends. Even when trends influenced brand perception, their impact was often temporary and dependent on how authentically and effectively they were executed.

A key insight from this research is that trends function primarily as points of entry into consumer awareness rather than as mechanisms for building loyalty. They introduce brands, create moments of cultural relevance, and generate bursts of engagement, but they do not, on their own, establish trust or commitment. Instead, long-term loyalty is shaped by factors that extend beyond the trend itself, particularly product quality, consistency, and alignment with consumer values. Participants repeatedly emphasized that their continued support depends on whether a brand delivers meaningful value after the trend fades, reinforcing the idea that loyalty is built through sustained experience rather than momentary interaction.

The temporal nature of trends further limits their effectiveness as a loyalty-building tool. As the findings demonstrate, engagement declines rapidly once a trend is no longer prominent, with many consumers losing interest within days or weeks. This highlights a fundamental mismatch between the fast-paced, novelty-driven logic of social media trends and the slower, more stable process through which brand loyalty develops. While trends thrive on immediacy, loyalty requires continuity, trust, and repeated positive interactions over time.

At the same time, this study reveals that consumers are not passive participants in digital marketing environments. Rather, they actively evaluate brands based on authenticity, values, and performance. The strong emphasis placed on ethical alignment, transparency, and product quality suggests that consumers are increasingly discerning, and that superficial engagement strategies are unlikely to produce lasting results. Brands that rely too heavily on trends without reinforcing their core identity risk being perceived as inauthentic or interchangeable, ultimately weakening their long-term positioning.

Taken together, these findings underscore the need for a more balanced approach to social media marketing. While trends can be valuable tools for generating awareness and initiating engagement, they must be integrated into broader strategies that prioritize consistency, authenticity, and value creation. For brands, the challenge is not simply to capture attention in the moment, but to convert that attention into meaningful and enduring relationships.

Ultimately, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of digital consumer behavior by demonstrating that visibility and loyalty are not interchangeable outcomes. In an increasingly saturated and fast-moving media landscape, the ability to go viral may offer immediate benefits, but it does not guarantee long-term success. Sustainable brand loyalty is

built not through fleeting moments of relevance, but through the continuous delivery of value, trust, and connection beyond the trend cycle.

Beyond its immediate findings, this study also highlights several important directions for future research. While the present analysis focuses on undergraduate students, expanding this research across different age groups, cultural contexts, and socioeconomic backgrounds would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how trend-based marketing functions across diverse consumer populations. Additionally, longitudinal studies that track consumer behavior over extended periods would be particularly valuable in assessing how initial exposure to trends evolves into, or fails to become, long-term loyalty. As social media platforms continue to evolve, further research is also needed to examine how emerging technologies, such as AI-driven personalization and algorithmic targeting, may shape the relationship between visibility and consumer commitment in new ways. There are also practical implications for how brands conceptualize success in digital marketing environments. The findings suggest that commonly relied-upon metrics, such as impressions, views, and engagement rates, offer an incomplete picture of consumer relationships. While these indicators capture attention, they do not account for the durability or depth of that attention. As a result, brands may benefit from redefining success not solely in terms of reach or virality, but in terms of retention, repeat engagement, and long-term consumer trust. This shift requires a move away from purely reactive, trend-driven strategies toward more intentional and value-oriented approaches to brand building.

Furthermore, this study underscores the importance of coherence between a brand's online presence and its broader identity. Consumers in this study demonstrated a strong sensitivity to authenticity, often responding negatively to brands that appeared to adopt trends in ways that felt forced or inconsistent. This suggests that effective trend participation is not simply

about visibility, but about alignment. Brands that successfully integrate trends into their existing identity, rather than reshaping themselves to fit each passing moment, are more likely to maintain credibility and foster lasting engagement. At a broader level, these findings reflect a shift in the dynamics of consumer culture within digital spaces. Social media trends are not merely marketing tools; they are cultural artifacts that circulate rapidly, evolve quickly, and often lose relevance just as fast. Consumers engage with these trends as part of a shared cultural experience, but this engagement does not necessarily translate into brand attachment. This distinction is critical, as it suggests that brands are competing not only for attention, but for meaning within a highly saturated and transient media landscape.

In conclusion, this study reaffirms the importance of distinguishing between momentary engagement and meaningful connection in the evaluation of digital marketing strategies. While social media trends remain powerful tools for capturing attention and signaling relevance, their impact is inherently limited by their temporal and experiential nature. Lasting brand loyalty cannot be engineered through virality alone; it must be cultivated through consistent value, authentic communication, and sustained interaction over time. As the digital landscape continues to evolve, brands that recognize and adapt to this distinction will be better positioned to build relationships that endure beyond the fleeting lifecycle of trends.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Informed Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research study about college students' social media use and general opinions and perceptions. Your participation is voluntary. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a college student who regularly uses social media platforms.

As part of the study, you will complete an online survey that takes approximately 10–15 minutes. Later, you will complete an additional online survey lasting about the same amount of time. As part of the study, you may experience mild emotional discomfort when reflecting on your social media use or opinions about social media use. There are no direct benefits, but participation may increase your awareness of your social media habits.

The study is being conducted by Lindsay Orellana, an undergraduate student researcher, under the supervision of Professor Ann Mills, Drew University Department of Business.

We ask that you read this document and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Social media is an important part of many college students' daily lives. Researchers are interested in better understanding how individuals interact with social media content and how these experiences relate to their general opinions and perceptions. This study examines patterns in social media use and related attitudes among college students. Additional details about the study's specific focus will be provided during debriefing at the conclusion of your participation.

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to do the following things: complete an online survey, followed by an additional online survey later. The surveys will ask about your social

media use, engagement with trends, and opinions about various brands. You may skip any question or stop participating at any time without penalty. Your responses will not affect your standing in your class or relationship with Drew University.

Because the survey is distributed in person, you will be asked to provide your name on the survey for tracking purposes during data collection. After all surveys have been collected and the data have been entered, the portion of the survey containing names will be physically destroyed through paper shredding. Your responses will remain in the dataset, but they will not be linked to your identity in any way.

To prevent bias, you will be told the study concerns social media engagement, but the full theoretical purpose will be explained during debriefing after the survey.

This study has the following risks: You may experience mild emotional discomfort when reflecting on your social media habits.

The benefits of participation are: There are no direct personal benefits. However, you may gain insight into your media usage, and this study will contribute to a better understanding of how social media affects general opinions and perceptions.

Your confidentiality will be protected through several procedures. While your name will appear on the paper survey during data collection, it will not be entered into any digital file. Once data entry is complete, all identifying information will be destroyed via paper shredding. After this point, your survey responses will be fully anonymous.

Paper surveys will be stored in a locked and secure location until identifiers are destroyed. The de-identified dataset will be stored on a password-protected device accessible only to the

researcher. No individual responses will be reported, and all findings will be presented only in aggregate form.

Your decision whether or not to participate in this research will not affect your current or future relations with Drew University. If you decide to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without affecting those relationships and without penalty.

If you have questions, contact:

Lindsay Orellana – lorellana@drew.edu

If you have concerns about this study, contact the Chair of Drew University's Institutional Review Board, Dr. Alex de Voogt (adevoogt@drew.edu).

Please verify the following: The procedures of this study have been explained to me, and my questions have been addressed. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without penalty. If I have any concerns about my experience in this study (e.g., that I was treated unfairly or felt unnecessarily coerced to participate), I may contact the Chair of the Drew University Institutional Review Board regarding my concerns.

Participant signature _____ Date _____

Appendix B: Debriefing Form

The study in which you just participated was designed to explore how social media trends influence perceptions of brands and whether those effects continue once a trend fades. The goal is to understand how short-term digital engagement relates to long-term brand loyalty and consumer trust. This research contributes to a broader understanding of marketing strategies and consumer behavior in the digital era.

In this study you were asked to complete two short surveys that asked about your social media use and brand attitudes. While you were not informed of the full purpose of the study at the start (“beyond the trend”), this partial withholding was necessary to prevent response bias and ensure honest answers. Now that the study has concluded, we can share that we are investigating whether trend-based engagement creates lasting loyalty beyond temporary popularity.

For more information on the topic of this research, you may explore:

- Schaefer, M. (2019). *Marketing Rebellion: The Most Human Company Wins*.
- Keller, K.L. (2013). *Strategic Brand Management*.
- Hudson, S., & Hudson, D. (2021). *Customer Experience and Social Media Trends*.

In the event that you feel a need to speak to a professional concerning any uncomfortable feelings arising as a result of your participation in this research, please contact the Drew University Counseling Center for support.

If you are interested in learning more about the research being conducted, or the results of the research of which you were a part, please do not hesitate to contact:

Lindsay Orellana – lorellana@drew.edu

Faculty Supervisor: Professor Ann Mills – amills@drew.edu

If you have concerns about the procedures in this research, you may contact the Chair of Drew University's Institutional Review Board, Dr. Alex de Voogt, Associate Professor of Business, at adevoogt@drew.edu.

Thank you for your help and participation in this study.

Appendix C: Initial Survey

Social media usage- the multiplicity of activities individuals may participate in online while social media engagement refers to the state of cognitive and emotional absorption in the use of social media tools (Smith & Gallicano, 2015).

Engagement- the level of interaction and involvement that the audience has with the content, features, and activities available through the affordances of a social media platform (Van Der Harst & Angelopoulos, 2024).

Trend- a popular topic, behavior, hashtag, or content format that experiences a sudden, widespread surge in popularity and discussion across platforms, driven by user engagement like shares, likes, and comments, often lasting for a short period but reflecting current cultural interests and offering brands chances to engage.

Brand- a set of tangible and intangible attributes designed to create awareness and identity, and to build the reputation of a product, service, person, place, or organization (Sammut-Bonnici, 2015).

Brand loyalty- a collection of attitudes aligned with a series of purchase behaviors that systematically favor one entity over competing entities (Watson et al., 2015).

1. Approximately how many hours do you spend on social media per day?
 - a. 0
 - b. Less than 1 hour
 - c. 1 - 2 hours
 - d. 3 - 4 hours
 - e. 5 - 6 hours

- f. More than 6 hours
2. Which of the following social media platforms do you actively use? (Select all that apply)
- a. Tik Tok
 - b. Instagram
 - c. X (Twitter)
 - d. Facebook
 - e. Pinterest
 - f. Reddit
 - g. LinkedIn
 - h. Snapchat
3. I actively engage with brand content by liking, sharing, or commenting.
- a. Strongly Disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly Agree
4. How often do you participate in or share social media trends (e.g., challenges, hashtags, viral sounds)?
- a. Never
 - b. Rarely
 - c. Sometimes
 - d. Often
 - e. Very often

5. When you engage with a social media trend featuring a brand, what motivates you most?
 - a. Entertainment and fun
 - b. Aesthetics and creativity
 - c. Social connection (wanting to fit in or share with friends)
 - d. Interest in the brand or product
 - e. Other:

6. How much do you think social media trends influence your perception of brands?
 - a. Not at all
 - b. Slightly
 - c. Moderately
 - d. Strongly
 - e. Extremely

7. Describe a recent brand or trend you noticed on social media. How did it affect your view of that brand, if at all?
 - a. Short answer

8. Do you think brands can maintain your attention after a trend fades? Why or why not?
 - a. Short answer

Appendix D: Follow-Up Survey

Social media usage- the multiplicity of activities individuals may participate in online while social media engagement refers to the state of cognitive and emotional absorption in the use of social media tools (Smith & Gallicano, 2015).

Engagement- the level of interaction and involvement that the audience has with the content, features, and activities available through the affordances of a social media platform (Van Der Harst & Angelopoulos, 2024).

Trend- a popular topic, behavior, hashtag, or content format that experiences a sudden, widespread surge in popularity and discussion across platforms, driven by user engagement like shares, likes, and comments, often lasting for a short period but reflecting current cultural interests and offering brands chances to engage.

Brand- a set of tangible and intangible attributes designed to create awareness and identity, and to build the reputation of a product, service, person, place, or organization (Sammut-Bonnici, 2015).

Brand loyalty- a collection of attitudes aligned with a series of purchase behaviors that systematically favor one entity over competing entities (Watson et al., 2015).

1. How likely are you to continue supporting a brand after a social media trend ends?
 - a. Very unlikely
 - b. Unlikely
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Likely
 - e. Very likely

2. When you think of your favorite brands, how often do they appear on your social media feed?
 - a. Never
 - b. Rarely
 - c. Sometimes
 - d. Often
 - e. Very often

3. When a brand participates in a viral trend, how does it affect your trust in that brand?
 - a. Greatly decreases my trust
 - b. Slightly decreases my trust
 - c. No effect
 - d. Slightly increases my trust
 - e. Greatly increases my trust

4. I feel emotionally connected to certain brands I follow online.
 - a. Strongly Disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly Agree

5. I am more likely to buy from a brand that shares my values or beliefs.
 - a. Strongly Disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral

- d. Agree
 - e. Strongly Agree
6. How often do you purchase or engage with a brand because of a trend?
- a. Strongly Disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly Agree
7. How long after a trend ends do you typically remain engaged with a brand that participated in it?
- a. I lose interest immediately
 - b. Less than one week
 - c. 1 - 3 weeks
 - d. 1 - 2 months
 - e. More than 2 months
8. What makes you stay loyal to a brand even when it's no longer trending online?
- a. Short answer
9. In your opinion, what separates a short-lived "viral" brand from one that builds lasting loyalty?
- a. Short answer