Designing a Customer Engagement Model in the Digital Customer Journey Using the Grounded Theory Approach

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Abstract

The present study was conducted with the aim of designing a customer engagement model in the digital customer journey using the grounded theory approach (Case Study: Khanoumi Online Store). The research is applied in terms of purpose, qualitative in terms of method, and exploratory in nature. The statistical population consisted of theoretical (academic) experts and practical experts; a total of 14 participants from both groups—selected purposefully based on their knowledge and experience in the field of digital marketing—took part in the study. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data-collection instrument. After consolidating the interviews, coding and concept analysis were performed. Based on the results, 145 concepts were coded into 266 open codes; after merging similar categories and removing irrelevant ones, the analysis resulted in 82 axial codes and 17 selective codes, accounting for 20.12% of all extracted concepts. The findings indicate that education and skills, local and community support, and policymaking and planning constitute the most influential causal factors affecting customer engagement in the digital customer journey. Customer satisfaction, commitment and responsibility, service delivery ease, and employee-related factors form the contextual factors influencing the strategies, which include customer knowledge, customer enthusiasm, and infrastructure development. The intervening conditions include customer experience enhancement and customization. The identified strategies comprise customer penetration, social interaction, accurate audience identification, the stages of customer journey mapping, and the improvement of marketing strategies. Finally, the identified outcomes consist of increased customer loyalty, word-of-mouth promotion, and purchase intention.

Keywords: Customer engagement, digital customer journey, grounded theory.

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has transformed the structure, patterns, and mechanisms of customer interaction across industries, reshaping the traditional customer journey into a dynamic digital pathway characterized by multidimensional touchpoints, real-time engagement, and personalized experiences (Realita et al., 2024). As organizations shift toward digital platforms, understanding customer engagement throughout this journey has become a critical determinant of competitive advantage, value creation, and sustainable customer relationships (Barbosa et al., 2024). In digital ecosystems, engagement is no longer a unidirectional process; rather, it emerges as a co-creative and experiential phenomenon mediated by technologies, content, data, and user interactions (Hardcastle et al., 2025). Consequently, mapping and analyzing the digital customer journey has become an essential strategic requirement for firms aiming to optimize customer experiences, enhance loyalty, and improve marketing performance.

Digital transformation has intensified the complexity of customer decision-making by expanding the number of online touchpoints, intensifying competition, and accelerating information dissemination (Andersson et al., 2024). Within this context, firms must integrate data-driven insights, service automation, and personalized communication to maintain meaningful engagement throughout the customer journey. Artificial intelligence (AI), for example, is increasingly being embedded into customer-facing interfaces, enhancing convenience, responsiveness, and personalization (Liu, 2024). Platforms adopting AI-enabled concierges or service bots are able to streamline customer tasks, anticipate needs, and reduce friction, thereby strengthening engagement and satisfaction. This technological evolution aligns with shifts in consumer behavior, where customers expect seamless experiences that connect functional, emotional, and relational dimensions of service encounters.

In emerging economies, digital adoption has accelerated as firms attempt to modernize service delivery and integrate advanced technologies into the customer experience (Abdulsalam & Tajudeen, 2024). The digitalization of the customer journey in these markets, however, is often accompanied by infrastructural limitations, technological disparities, and variations in consumer digital literacy. Research indicates that customers in such contexts rely heavily on social media and mobile-based interactions,

making the mapping and management of digital touchpoints particularly important for service providers (Salonen et al., 2024). Strategic content delivery along these touchpoints plays a major role in enhancing customer engagement, particularly when content is timely, relevant, and aligned with customer motivations and expectations.

Customer engagement itself has become a central construct in marketing theory and practice. Engagement reflects the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral activities through which customers interact with brands across various digital interfaces (Taylor et al., 2023). Prior studies emphasize that engagement is both a psychological state and a dynamic behavioral process, influenced by perceived value, trust, and service quality (Williams & McKay, 2022). As such, engaged customers typically demonstrate stronger loyalty, higher purchase intentions, and greater participation in co-creation activities. In digital environments, engagement is shaped by multiple antecedents including user interface design, content quality, gamification mechanisms, and online community dynamics (Mousavi et al., 2021). For example, gamification elements embedded within digital platforms can enhance customer involvement, motivation, and the overall user experience (Mousavi & Shami Zanjani, 2021).

Digital customer journeys are also influenced significantly by content quality and brand interaction. High-quality digital content can stimulate emotional and cognitive engagement, improve brand perception, and strengthen customer–brand relationships (Haghighi Nasab & Ghasemi, 2022). Similarly, active brand interaction on digital platforms—through personalized communication, timely responses, and interactive features—drives deeper engagement and positively affects purchasing intentions (Kim & Kim, 2022). Firms that strategically manage their content, social media presence, and digital storytelling are more likely to sustain customer engagement over time.

Customer journey mapping (CJM) has gained prominence as a methodological tool for visualizing and managing the end-to-end customer experience. CJM helps organizations identify gaps, constraints, and opportunities across the sequence of interactions customers encounter before, during, and after purchase (Rajan et al., 2023). By aligning marketing actions with customer expectations at each stage, firms can optimize engagement levels and reduce perceived friction in the journey. This approach has proven especially relevant for digital-based startups, where customer journeys evolve rapidly in response to platform changes and competitive pressures (Realita et al., 2024).

Moreover, CJM supports the development of integrated digital strategies by linking customer insights to operational and technological initiatives.

At the same time, digital transformation reshapes how firms conceptualize and operationalize customer experience management. Contemporary research highlights the importance of using thematic and data-driven models to understand customer perceptions across digital channels (Dehdashti Shahrokh et al., 2022). Experience quality is influenced by system usability, accessibility, transparency, trust, and emotional resonance, all of which interact to shape engagement outcomes. In service sectors such as retail, insurance, hospitality, and entertainment, customer experience directly predicts satisfaction, loyalty, and long-term retention (Ali Rahimi et al., 2022; Kim & Kim, 2022).

Furthermore, customers increasingly rely on social media platforms for pre-purchase information, peer reviews, and post-purchase feedback. Social media-driven engagement has demonstrated strong predictive power for purchase intention, brand equity, and customer retention (Castillo et al., 2021). Influencer marketing also plays a critical role in shaping mental involvement, travel intentions, and brand attitudes, illustrating the psychological mechanisms through which engagement operates in digital spaces (Zahabi et al., 2023). Likewise, digital marketplaces and real-time virtual environments—including metaverse platforms—provide novel opportunities for multi-sensory engagement and decentralized brand interactions (Valaskova et al., 2022).

The literature also highlights the importance of emotional and cognitive drivers in shaping customer engagement. Emotional responses such as enjoyment, perceived relevance, and psychological involvement have been found to significantly affect digital behavior, especially in interactive environments like live-streaming commerce and mobile applications (Japutra et al., 2022; Zheng et al., 2022). These findings align with broader theories of experiential marketing, which emphasize the strategic importance of designing emotionally compelling digital encounters (Huseynli, 2022). At the same time, the cognitive dimensions of engagement—such as information processing, problem solving, and decision-making—are shaped by content clarity, interface usability, and trust-building mechanisms (Lim & Rasul, 2022).

In addition, online brand communities and open innovation platforms serve as critical engagement ecosystems in the digital journey. By facilitating customer participation, knowledge sharing, and collaborative problem solving, these platforms contribute to higher satisfaction and engagement (Lee & Yew, 2022). Customer participation in innovation communities can strengthen relational bonds and increase brand attachment, reinforcing the influence of digital engagement on perceived value.

The emerging body of research has also emphasized that digital customer engagement is multidimensional and context-dependent. For instance, user experiences differ significantly between first-time and repeat customers, with repeat customers exhibiting deeper emotional involvement and greater co-creation potential (Hollebeek et al., 2022). Similarly, variations in customer expectations and technological proficiency influence how digital interfaces are perceived and engaged with (Mohammed et al., 2022). Customer engagement is further shaped by external factors such as security concerns, abusive supervision in organizational contexts, and digital literacy challenges (Xu et al., 2022).

Within this broader theoretical landscape, scholars have increasingly turned to grounded theory as a robust approach for developing context-specific models of customer engagement (Ali Rahimi et al., 2022). Grounded theory allows researchers to uncover latent patterns, conceptual categories, and interrelationships that emerge from customers' lived experiences. This method has proven especially effective in complex industries—such as insurance, automotive, and digital retail—where customer decision-making is nonlinear and strongly shaped by psychological, social, and technological conditions (Bakhshizadeh Borj et al., 2022; Dehdashti Shahrokh et al., 2022).

Despite extensive work in this area, several gaps remain, particularly in the context of digital retail platforms in emerging markets, where customer engagement patterns are influenced by cultural expectations, platform characteristics, and service dynamics. Although existing studies have explored digital experience, gamification, E-CRM, and digital content strategies, few have developed a comprehensive grounded model that integrates causal conditions, strategies, contextual factors, intervening factors, and outcomes within the digital customer journey (Mokha & Kumar, 2022; Mousavi et al., 2021; Saljooghi Nejad & Rusta, 2021). This gap underscores the need for a holistic model tailored to real-world digital retail environments.

Therefore, this study aims to design a grounded theory model of customer engagement in the digital customer journey of an online retail platform.

2.   Methods and Materials

This study is applied in terms of purpose, qualitative in terms of method, and exploratory in terms of the nature of the data. In the qualitative phase, the grounded theory method based on Strauss and Corbin's approach is employed. Accordingly, the population examined in the qualitative section consists of professors and experts in the field of electronic businesses, preferably with familiarity with the Khanoumi brand. Participants were selected through purposive sampling and theoretical judgment.

The population examined in the quantitative section consists of customers of the Khanoumi online store. To determine the sample size for an unlimited population in the quantitative phase, Morgan's table was used. Data collection tools included semi-structured interviews in the qualitative phase and a researcher-made questionnaire derived from qualitative findings in the quantitative phase.

For data analysis in the qualitative phase, the grounded theory method with a systematic approach was applied. Thus, the data were first identified through open, axial, and selective coding, and subsequently categorized into five groups: causal conditions, intervening conditions, contextual conditions, strategies, and consequences.

Table 1

Complete Profile of Interview Participants

Row	Gender	Education Level	Field of Study	Work Experience
1	Male	PhD	Business Management	10 years
2	Female	Bachelor's	Business Management	40 years
3	Male	PhD	Marketing Management	23 years
4	Female	Master's	Management	16 years
5	Male	PhD	Business Management	24 years
6	Male	Master's	Business Management	17 years
7	Male	Master's	Business Management	35 years
8	Female	PhD	Business Management	10 years
9	Male	Bachelor's	Management	19 years
10	Male	Master's	Management	14 years
11	Female	PhD	Business Management	15 years
12	Male	Bachelor's	Management	10 years
13	Female	Master's	Business Management	12 years
14	Male	Master's	Public Administration	17 years

3.   Findings and Results

The interview data in this section seek to identify the factors influencing customer engagement in the digital customer journey using the grounded theory approach. After examining and analyzing the interviews, a total of four selective codes—customer satisfaction, commitment and responsibility, service delivery ease, and employee-related factors—were extracted, corresponding to 26 axial codes. The results are presented in the table below.

Table 2

Coding of Causal Conditions

Selective Code	Axial Code
Customer Satisfaction	Pleasant feeling
	Meeting customer expectations
	Addressing customer problems
	Creating a positive feeling for the customer
	Building trust
	Providing ideal services to the customer
	Service delivery ease
	Identifying customer needs
	After-sales services
	Customer experience
	Service quality

Commitment and Responsibility	Post-purchase support
	Creating value for the company and customer
	Traceability of services
	Responsibility
Service Delivery Ease	Timeliness in service delivery
	No errors in service delivery
	Expected behavior
	Online sales procedures
	Providing sufficient awareness to customers about service usage
	Rapid service delivery
	Service integration
Employee-Related Factors	Human resource skills and expertise
	Experienced workforce
	Responsiveness in case of delays
	Staff behavior

This section seeks to identify the factors influencing the selection of appropriate strategies under current conditions. Qualitative analyses extracted two selective codes—customer knowledge and customer enthusiasm, and infrastructure development—from 12 axial codes. Results are shown in the table below.

Table 3

Coding of Contextual Factors

Selective Code	Axial Code
Customer Knowledge	Feedback on services
	Customer knowledge of services
	Adequate information regarding service delivery
	Flexibility in service provision
Customer Enthusiasm	Positive staff behavior
	Loyalty and marketing programs
	Advertising and incentives to attract customers
	Tangible features of the Khanoumi business
	Offering discounts
	Preserving consumer privacy
	Pleasant experience
Infrastructure Development	Search engine
	SEO
	Attractive content creation
	Website design

Intervening factors refer to general influences that affect the strategies. The analyses extracted two selective codes—customer experience enhancement and customization—from 8 axial codes. The results are summarized below.

Table 4

Coding of Intervening Factors

Selective Code	Axial Code
Customer Experience Enhancement	Service delivery transparency
	Information security
	Post-purchase support
	Responding to customer questions and needs
Customization	Personalized communications
	Additional discounts based on purchase volume
	Providing exceptional services to potential customers

The interview text analysis in this section seeks to identify the actions and interactions derived from the core idea. The analyses extracted five selective codes—customer penetration, social interaction, accurate audience

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identification, stages of customer journey mapping, and improvement of marketing strategies—from 25 axial codes. The results are presented in the table below.

Table 5

Coding of Strategic Factors

Selective Code	Axial Code
Customer Penetration	Competitive advantage
	Empathy with the customer
	Arousing customer emotions
	Customer psychology
	Interest or attractiveness
Social Interaction	Online responsiveness
	Email marketing
	Customer club
	Receiving criticisms and suggestions
Accurate Audience Identification	Customer personality
	Predicting customer behavior
	Persuading customers
Stages of Customer Journey Mapping	Action and purchase
	Desirability and decision-making
	Awareness and recognition in the customer journey
Improvement of Marketing Strategies	Targeted promotional campaigns
	Search engine marketing
	Continuous brand awareness creation

The application of the selected strategies results in several outcomes. Analysis of the interview data identified three selective outcomes of customer engagement in the digital customer journey using the grounded theory approach, drawn from 11 axial codes. Each of these factors was repeated numerous times across interviews, making it impossible to differentiate their degree of importance, as their significance varies depending on existing conditions and the organizational environment. The results are presented in the table below.

Table 6

Coding of Outcomes

Selective Code	Axial Code
Increased Customer Loyalty	Customer commitment
	Customer repurchase
	Customer preferences
Word-of-Mouth Advertising	Positive customer feedback
	Product service quality
	Receiving positive and desirable feelings
Purchase Intention	Product prices
	Brand commitment
	Cognitive brand loyalty
	Emotional brand loyalty

Given the main objective of the study—designing a customer engagement model in the digital customer journey using the grounded theory approach—a qualitative method and grounded theory (systematic approach) were employed. Through analyzing the interviews using this method, causal conditions, intervening conditions, contextual conditions, strategies, and outcomes were identified. Finally, the identified categories were presented within a paradigm model (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Paradigm Model of Customer Engagement in the Digital Customer Journey of the Khanoumi Online Store

Contextual Factors:

Customer Knowledge: Feedback on services, customer knowledge of services, adequate information regarding service provision, flexibility in service delivery.

Customer Enthusiasm: Positive employee behavior, loyalty and marketing programs, advertising and incentives to attract customers, tangible elements of the Khanoumi business, offering discounts, preserving consumer privacy, pleasant experience.

Infrastructure Development: Search engine, SEO, attractive content creation, website design.

Causal Conditions:

Customer Satisfaction: Pleasant feeling, meeting customer expectations, addressing customer issues, creating a positive feeling for the customer, building trust, providing ideal services, service delivery ease, identifying customer needs, after-sales services, customer experience, service quality.

Commitment and Responsibility: Post-purchase support, creating value for the company and the customer, service traceability, responsibility.

Service Delivery Ease: Timely service delivery, error-free service delivery, expected behavior, online sales process, providing sufficient guidance to customers on service use, rapid service delivery, service integration.

Employee-Related Factors: Human resource skills and expertise, experienced workforce, degree of responsiveness in case of delay, staff behavior.

Strategies:
Customer Penetration: Competitive advantage, empathy with the customer, arousing customer emotions, customer psychology, interest or attractiveness, human resource training, differentiation.
Social Interaction: Conversation, email marketing, customer club, content marketing, receiving criticisms and suggestions, online responsiveness.
Accurate Audience Identification: Customer mindset, predicting customer behavior, customer personality, persuading customers.
Stages of Customer Journey Mapping: Action and purchase, desirability and decision-making, goal setting, awareness and recognition in the customer journey, removing barriers.
Improvement of Marketing Strategies: Targeted advertising campaigns, search engine marketing, continuous brand awareness creation.
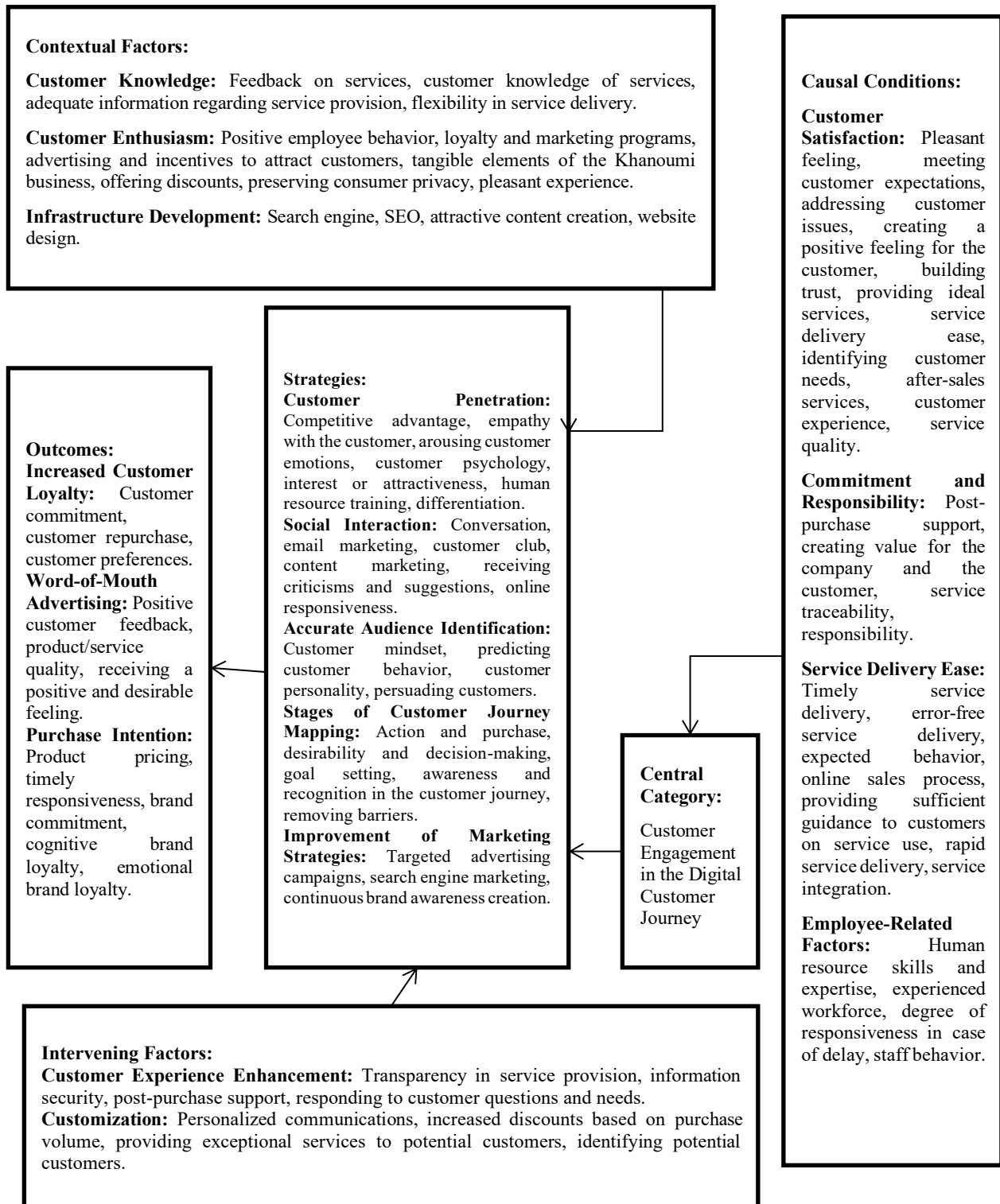
Outcomes:
Increased Customer Loyalty: Customer commitment, customer repurchase, customer preferences.
Word-of-Mouth Advertising: Positive customer feedback, product/service quality, receiving a positive and desirable feeling.
Purchase Intention: Product pricing, timely responsiveness, brand commitment, cognitive brand loyalty, emotional brand loyalty.

Central Category:

Customer Engagement in the Digital Customer Journey

Intervening Factors:
Customer Experience Enhancement: Transparency in service provision, information security, post-purchase support, responding to customer questions and needs.
Customization: Personalized communications, increased discounts based on purchase volume, providing exceptional services to potential customers, identifying potential customers.

4.　Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore and conceptualize the structure of customer engagement in the digital customer journey by applying a grounded theory approach. The results revealed a multilayered model consisting of causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening factors, strategic actions, and outcomes, which together provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how customers interact with digital retail platforms. The discussion below interprets these findings through alignment with the existing body of literature and demonstrates how the results confirm, extend, or challenge prior empirical and theoretical insights.

The first major finding concerns the causal conditions shaping customer engagement, specifically *customer satisfaction, commitment and responsibility, service delivery ease,* and *employee-related factors*. The importance of customer satisfaction as a driver of engagement is consistent with research highlighting that perceived value, trust, and emotional gratification are foundational antecedents of active digital engagement (Williams & McKay, 2022). The study's results—indicating that meeting expectations, providing ideal services, and creating pleasurable experiences enhance engagement—align strongly with research demonstrating that high-quality digital touchpoints significantly increase customer satisfaction and subsequent brand interactions (Kim & Kim, 2022). Furthermore, the emphasis on trust-building parallels findings showing that trust mediates the relationship between customer experience and engagement, particularly in hotel and service sectors (Kim & Kim, 2022).

The role of commitment and responsibility as a causal condition resonates with the literature on customer value co-creation, where customers perceive commitment and accountability from firms as signals of reliability and relational quality (Hardcastle et al., 2025). Post-purchase responsiveness, which emerged as a critical factor in this study, confirms prior findings showing that follow-up services and traceability mechanisms foster deeper engagement and reduce uncertainty in digital service environments (Xu et al., 2022). Similarly, the emphasis on service delivery ease corresponds closely to the work of Realita (2024), who stresses the importance of frictionless digital pathways and the clarity of information to support customer journey mapping (Realita et al., 2024). The

identification of error-free delivery and rapid responsiveness strengthens existing models proposing that operational efficiency is a primary antecedent of satisfaction and engagement in digital ecosystems (Barbosa et al., 2024).

Employee-related variables such as *expertise, behavioral quality, and responsiveness* also proved vital in the causal conditions. Although engagement is typically conceptualized as digitally mediated, recent evidence indicates that human factors still hold a substantial role in hybrid digital service environments (Lee & Yew, 2022). The findings of this study confirm that knowledgeable and empathetic staff can enhance the customer's digital experience even in platforms where customer–employee interactions are limited or indirect (Huseynli, 2022). Moreover, the behavioral competence of customer service teams is shown to positively influence both trust and perceived fairness, thereby improving engagement outcomes (Mohammed et al., 2022).

In terms of contextual factors, the study identified *customer knowledge, customer enthusiasm,* and *infrastructure development* as essential conditions shaping the effectiveness of engagement strategies. Customer knowledge emerged through themes such as feedback, information adequacy, and service familiarity, mirroring prior studies stressing that informed customers are better able to engage meaningfully with digital platforms (Ali Rahimi et al., 2022). Customer enthusiasm, reflected in loyalty programs and positive interactions, aligns with research showing that emotionally positive atmospheres and perceived incentives enhance customer mental involvement and positively influence behavioral engagement (Zahabi et al., 2023). The identification of tangible business attributes, such as discount strategies and privacy preservation, also supports earlier work linking emotional comfort and perceived fairness to customer attitude formation in digital shopping contexts (Mokha & Kumar, 2022).

Infrastructure development—including SEO, attractive content creation, and effective website design—is another significant contextual factor. This finding is highly consistent with industry-wide evidence showing that optimized search engines, enhanced content quality, and user-friendly digital architectures directly influence engagement behavior (Haghighi Nasab & Ghasemi, 2022). Moreover, the necessity of strong technological foundations mirrors the insights of Salonen (2024), who demonstrated that timely and relevant content delivery across the B2B

digital journey depends heavily on robust digital infrastructures (Salonen et al., 2024).

The study also highlighted intervening conditions, notably *customer experience enhancement* and *customization*. Customer experience enhancement, encompassing transparency, information security, and responsive communication, aligns with the global literature on digital transformation, which emphasizes that improved user experiences reduce customer uncertainty and facilitate emotional engagement (Huseynli, 2022). The significance of security and transparency corroborates studies showing that perceived technological risk can undermine engagement, whereas clear information and strong privacy mechanisms boost digital confidence (Zheng et al., 2022). Customization, including personalized communication and discount strategies, reinforces the conclusions of Japutra (2022), who demonstrated that relative advantage and personalized digital interactions strongly predict customer engagement in m-commerce contexts (Japutra et al., 2022). These findings also extend earlier models of digital marketing, which argue that personalization is a primary driver of both cognitive and emotional involvement (Mousavi et al., 2021).

The analysis of strategic actions revealed five major strategies: customer penetration, social interaction, accurate audience identification, customer journey roadmap development, and improved marketing strategies. These strategies correspond directly to contemporary models of digital engagement. Customer penetration—supported through empathy, emotional stimulation, differentiation, and competitive advantage—supports the conclusions of Hollebeek (2022), who argues that customer engagement is strengthened when brands activate both cognitive and affective dimensions (Hollebeek et al., 2022). The study's findings that empathy and emotional activation drive engagement are consistent with Zahabi (2023), who emphasized psychological involvement in influencer-driven contexts (Zahabi et al., 2023).

Social interaction strategies such as email marketing, content marketing, customer clubs, and online responsiveness align with the extensive literature on digital community engagement. Castillo (2021) provides strong evidence that social media-driven interaction improves customer loyalty and behavioral engagement (Castillo et al., 2021). The importance of responsiveness identified in this study also parallels research suggesting that timely digital communication is one of the strongest predictors of long-term engagement (Salonen et al., 2024). Additionally, email marketing and community-based strategies reinforce the

insights of Lim (2022), who argued that social media and digital interaction remain central to modern engagement frameworks (Lim & Rasul, 2022).

Accurate audience identification—via behavioral prediction, customer personality, and customer persuasion—supports existing consumer segmentation models emphasizing psychological, demographic, and behavioral segmentation for engagement optimization (Rajan et al., 2023). The study's insights about the importance of predicting behavior and identifying customer mindsets resonate closely with Lee (2022), who emphasized knowledge integration and open innovation for improving satisfaction and engagement (Lee & Yew, 2022).

Developing a customer journey roadmap, involving stages such as goal setting, awareness, decision-making, and barrier removal, corresponds with Realita's (2024) framework on customer journey mapping for digital startups (Realita et al., 2024). This alignment reinforces the importance of structured planning in shaping customer perceptions throughout the journey. The study's emphasis on reducing barriers is also consistent with Mohammed (2022), who identified friction reduction as a critical determinant of digital engagement (Mohammed et al., 2022).

The final category of strategies—improving marketing strategies—was closely aligned with earlier studies emphasizing targeted ads, search engine marketing, and continuous brand awareness as key digital engagement mechanisms (Barbosa et al., 2024). The results confirm that integrated and consistent digital marketing strategies enhance brand visibility, strengthen customer touchpoints, and increase engagement. Similarly, prior research demonstrates that targeted marketing and content-based strategies create higher customer involvement and more effective customer journey experiences (Haghighi Nasab & Ghasemi, 2022).

The study also identified three key outcomes: increased customer loyalty, strengthened word-of-mouth advertising, and heightened purchase intention. These outcomes mirror prior empirical findings showing that engagement positively influences behavioral loyalty, repurchase intentions, and brand advocacy (Zheng et al., 2022). Customer loyalty, driven by commitment and emotional involvement, reflects broader findings that engagement enhances both cognitive and emotional loyalty components (Valaskova et al., 2022). Word-of-mouth outcomes support previous studies establishing the link between digital engagement and positive customer referral behaviors (Castillo et al., 2021). Similarly, purchase intention outcomes align closely with

literature showing that digital engagement increases perceived value and reduces psychological risk, leading to stronger buying intentions (Zahabi et al., 2023).

Overall, this study extends prior research by producing a contextually grounded, multidimensional model that captures the complexity of digital customer engagement in a retail platform within an emerging economy. Its emphasis on both emotional and operational drivers enriches existing frameworks and offers a comprehensive perspective on the interplay between digital infrastructures, customer behaviors, and strategic engagement practices.

This study was conducted with a qualitative focus and relied on interviews with experts and customers, which may limit generalizability. The sample size, although appropriate for grounded theory, was relatively small and context-specific. Additionally, the study examined a single digital retail platform, which may not fully represent other industries with different technological, cultural, or operational characteristics. The cross-sectional nature of the data also limits temporal insights into evolving engagement patterns, especially in fast-changing digital environments.

Future studies may benefit from employing mixed-method designs to integrate quantitative validation of the proposed model. Researchers could also examine customer engagement across different digital retail categories to identify industry-specific and cross-industry patterns. Longitudinal approaches could further enhance understanding of how engagement changes over time. Comparative studies between emerging and developed digital markets may provide valuable insights into cultural or environmental effects on digital engagement. Additionally, future research may explore the moderating role of demographics, technological literacy, and platform design in shaping engagement behaviors.

Digital retail managers should enhance customer engagement by prioritizing transparency, personalization, and responsive service mechanisms. Investment in strong digital infrastructure, including SEO, content optimization, and user-friendly interfaces, is essential. Organizations should design loyalty and incentive programs that stimulate emotional involvement and behavioral participation. Training programs aimed at improving staff responsiveness, empathy, and problem-solving abilities can significantly strengthen the customer experience. Finally, firms should employ targeted, data-driven marketing strategies and continuous customer journey mapping to identify and resolve engagement barriers.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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