



WHEN AI ADVERTISING GETS SMARTER: THE ROLE OF AI-AGENCIES IN FORMING BRAND LOYALTY

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ABSTRACT: *This paper aims to theorize the fragmented connections found in the literature among AI, advertising, customer engagement (moderated by AI-agency), and brand outcomes as networking relationships rather than cause-and-effect relationships. This conceptual study seeks to predict these fragmented networking relationships and develop a new theoretical model based on Actor-Network Theory (ANT). Drawing from ANT, the study examines the effect of AI-advertising on AI-based customer engagement, moderated by AI-agency, to assess its impact on brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. It involves identifying situations, objects, behaviors, or people using human versus non-human factors and revealing antecedents and outcomes. This is achieved by formulating propositions regarding the impact of AI-advertising on AI-based customer engagement humanized by AI-agency. The proposed theoretical model aims to pave the way for future researchers to empirically test these relationships.*

KEYWORDS: AI-advertising, AI-agency, Customer engagement, Brand outcomes, ANT.



INTRODUCTION

The word “leap” refers to “a large jump or sudden movement, usually from one place to another” (Cambridge, 2025), which makes artificial intelligence (AI) the leap of this technological era (Donthu et al., 2022a; Donthu et al., 2022b). Building on this concept, many fields have leapt forward as a result of AI, with advertising being a notable example. The implementation of AI achieved a smooth shift from traditional to advanced advertising (Ford et al., 2023). Applications of AI-advertising have been extracted to illustrate the shift toward enhancing the reach of advertising messages (Ford et al., 2023). AI can be a helpful tool to manage issues, increase the speed of decision-making, and automate routine human tasks (Copeland, 2021; Qin & Jiang, 2019). With AI, advertising has become more effective, customized, creative, tailored, and segmented through customer relationship management, scenario advertisement writing, and post-ad key performance indicator metrics (Chen et al., 2019; Deng et al., 2019; Li, 2019).

The implementation of AI-driven advertising has the potential to effectively persuade consumers to engage more extensively with brands. However, the nature of this engagement may vary if AI agency moderates this relationship. The reliance on AI-agency is intricately linked to extensive involvement with customer, market, and competitor data, which is ultimately governed by human oversight (Sundar, 2020). This suggests that, while handling vast amounts of data can facilitate the suggestion of new products, the customization of content, or the recommendation of innovative product uses, such processes are only logical when human intervention delineates the boundaries of AI-agency to optimally align with customer needs and preferences (Sundar, 2020). Sundar posits that consumer engagement with a brand can be enhanced through exposure to brand elements or direct interaction with the brand via AI.

According to actor-network theory (ANT), relationships can be understood as network-driven engagements rather than merely input–output interactions (Latour, 2005). Consequently, AI-advertising can be conceptualized as an algorithmic actor endowed with AI-agency that optimizes the propensity of consumers to engage with brands. This networked relationship can be particularly beneficial in reinforcing brand awareness, enhancing perceived quality, and fostering brand loyalty. Accordingly, this study examines the impact of AI-advertising on AI-based customer engagement, moderated by AI-agency, as a networked relationship rather than a cause-and-effect to assess its positive effects on brand outcomes such as brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand loyalty.

Purpose of the study

The aim of this study is to construct a theoretical framework that illustrates the influence of both human and non-human factors on brand loyalty using ANT. This is achieved by examining the effect of AI-advertising on AI-based customer engagement, moderated by AI-agency, to assess the impact on brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. In the existing literature, ANT has not been explored within the context of brand loyalty formation generated by AI-advertising and humanized by AI-agency. Thus, this study aims to demonstrate the formation of brand loyalty as a brand equity factor in this context. Although previous research has explored parts of these relationships (Alghaswyneh, 2025; Gao et al., 2023; Hollebeek et al., 2024; Kang & Lou, 2022), the literature on this issue remains fragmented.



To address this gap, this conceptual study seeks to predict these fragmented relationships and develop a new theoretical model (Jaakkola, 2020) based on ANT. It involves identifying situations, objects, behaviors, or people using human versus non-human factors (Latour, 2005) and revealing antecedents and outcomes (Cornelissen, 2017; Fulmer, 2012; MacInnis, 2011; Meredith, 1993). This is achieved by formulating propositions regarding the impact of AI-advertising on AI-based customer engagement, humanized by AI-agency to determine the effect on brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. This proposed theoretical model aims to pave the way for future researchers to empirically test these relationships.

Preliminary literature review

a. Theoretical background

i. Actor-network theory (ANT)

ANT suggests that behavior can be shaped and reshaped through both human and non-human factors to influence a situation (Latour, 2005). Human factors may include the behavior or ideas of other individuals, while non-human factors can encompass objects, regulations, instructions, or technologies, such as AI, in today's context. To consider a situation from this viewpoint, a combination of human and non-human factors is necessary. Therefore, AI-advertising (technology/AI) can influence customer engagement behavior (behavior) if humanized via AI-agency (people), which affects how individuals perceive certain brands and their quality (ideas and perception), ultimately leading to brand loyalty (a brand equity factor). This forms the framework for this study. In essence, brand loyalty cannot be enhanced without first establishing a solid foundation of accurate brand awareness and a positive perception of quality, which are preceded by specific customer behaviors significantly influenced by AI-driven advertising humanized by AI-agency.

The existing literature has not explored ANT in the context of forming brand loyalty through AI-advertising humanized by AI-agency. While AI-advertising can be regarded as an algorithmic actor, AI-agency can be seen as a sociotechnological moderator affecting AI-based customer engagement. Together, they are shaping a theoretical model of human and non-human actors, influencing brand equity elements (brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand loyalty) as outcomes generated of ANT. Thus, this paper aims to demonstrate the formation of brand loyalty as a brand equity factor in this context.

b. AI-advertising and AI-agency

AI-advertising is often described as an automated system within the advertising realm, designed to generate content, automate personalization, and gather data, among other functions (Gao, 2023; Gao & Huang, 2021). While some researchers view AI-advertising as a third-party entity that automates the creation of advertising content with a touch of personalization (Neumann et al., 2019), others consider it a sophisticated tool capable of crafting advertisements from scratch (Wu et al., 2021). Additionally, previous scholars have explored how customer behavior is influenced when exposed to AI-generated advertisements (Campbell et al., 2021). It has been suggested in earlier studies that AI-generated fake advertisements can impact the functionality of advertising (Kietzmann et al., 2021). Some researchers have also pointed out that even AI-generated advertisements may exhibit bias in terms of which ads are shown to which segments, exploring the reasons behind this bias and potential solutions (Watts



& Adriano, 2021). Thus, AI-advertising not only encompasses the integration of AI and advertising but also delves into areas such as targeting, content generation, deepfakes, and bias.

AI-agency, in contrast, represents a technological approach to detect, refine, automate, customize, edit, or recommend (Sundar, 2020). It can handle vast amounts of data to suggest what an audience should be exposed to. Sundar argues that AI is not merely a device or software; rather, it is an entity that performs tasks automatically. Other researchers have noted that AI can generate new insights because of its extensive dealings with data related to customers, competitors, or the market (Kang & Lou, 2022). AI is regarded as a broad concept (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2019) and can be considered as the foundational stone to boost narrower concepts, such as AI-agency. A critical aspect of AI-agency is its ability to determine which content should be visible to the audience and what should be excluded (Gillespie, 2014). However, it has been suggested that if AI-agency is given a human touch, it can be directed toward enhancing the customer experience, making consumers more likely to engage and interact with a brand (Kang & Kim, 2020; Kang & Lou, 2022; Sundar, 2020). Nevertheless, while heavy reliance on AI might affect customer engagement, it could damage the brand image if not properly tailored. The optimal approach is to support AI with human input, rather than replacing humans entirely with AI (Sundar, 2020).

c. AI-based customer engagement

Customer engagement is considered a psychological behavior that evaluates marketing performance (Lim et al., 2022). The literature suggests that customer engagement is an engagement-driven concept, primarily focusing on customers' responsiveness to any brand element or AI-agency factors (Hollebeek et al., 2023). Interestingly, it has been noted that when customers encounter AI-agency, their level of awareness regarding it remains ambiguous (Hollebeek et al., 2024). To clarify this concept, previous studies have broken AI-agency down into dimensions encompassing cognition, sentiments, and attitude (Hollebeek et al., 2023; Vivek et al., 2014). First, customer engagement *cognition* refers to the mental effort a customer exerts to complete a task or make a decision (Schaarschmidt & Dose, 2023). Second, customer engagement *sentiments* pertain to customers' emotional responses to brand elements, such as power, excitement, happiness, anger, sadness, or fear (Herrando et al., 2017). Third, customer engagement *attitude* relates to the extent of a customer's actual behavior toward any brand element (Hollebeek et al., 2014).

On the other hand, while AI has significantly transformed customer engagement from its traditional form (Kang & Lou, 2022), it also plays a crucial role in enhancing the effectiveness of brand advertising through automation, personalization, targeting, and meeting customer needs (Hollebeek et al., 2024). However, customers may respond to AI-advertising by recognizing AI cues, such as customized messages, or by interacting with AI features, such as product recommendations (Sundar, 2020). Furthermore, AI's influence on advertising is evident, as it strengthens customer engagement with a brand by personalizing the customer experience (Alghaswyneh, 2025). It has also been argued that AI-agency has simplified and enhanced marketers' ability to identify customer needs and boost satisfaction, providing a competitive edge in the industry. For instance, the use of AI-powered sales representatives, virtual influencers, voice assistants, or any other AI tools that directly communicate with customers can significantly enhance customer engagement. In a previous research project, 89 studies were systematically reviewed to demonstrate that implementing AI-driven technologies



can improve brand equity outcomes, such as brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand loyalty (Hollebeek et al., 2023). Thus, we introduce the following propositions:

P1: AI-advertising has a positive influence on AI-based customer engagement.

P1a: AI-agency moderates the positive relationship between AI-advertising and AI-based customer engagement.

d. Brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand loyalty

First, to break down these concepts, the word “brand” should be defined. According to the American Marketing Association, brand can be defined as “a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller’s goods or service as distinct from those of other sellers” (American Marketing Association, n.d).

i. Brand awareness

Scholars have identified various concepts intrinsic to a brand, including brand awareness, brand image, brand recall, brand recognition, and brand loyalty. Brand awareness, for example, can be understood from two perspectives: outcomes and antecedents. From the perspective of outcomes, brand awareness is defined as an audience’s ability to recognize any brand element that triggers an increased willingness to purchase (Rossiter et al., 2018). From the perspective of antecedents, brand awareness is conceptualized as the memory a customer holds regarding a particular brand (Keller, 1993). Building on these definitions, a new definition has been proposed: “Brand awareness is the likelihood that a person retrieves a brand identifier and a product category or category needs from memory across brand-relevant situations” (Bergkvist & Taylor, 2022, p. 297). The authors of this definition argue that, despite contextual and situational variations, it retains explanatory power and continues to offer value over time (Bergkvist & Taylor, 2022). Furthermore, brand awareness can influence the selection of certain brands (Valavi, 2014) and is considered a significant component of brand measurement (Aaker, 1996). Previous studies have identified a strong relationship between brand awareness and brand loyalty (Bilgin, 2018; Buyukdag, 2021; Wasik et al., 2025). The greater the familiarity of a brand in customers’ minds, the more likely customers are to exhibit behaviors such as increased purchase intentions and enhanced brand loyalty.

ii. Perceived quality

Perceived quality is a frequently examined concept in the existing literature, often associated with various brand equity factors. It is defined as the impression a consumer forms regarding the functionality and benefits of a product (Zeithaml, 1988). The complexity of perceived quality arises from its variability among different consumers (Yoo & Donthu, 2001). While Zeithaml (1988) characterized perceived quality in this manner, other scholars have described it as the expectations a consumer holds for a brand or product (Woodruff & Gardial, 1996). Consequently, perceived value can lead to certain positive or negative outcomes, such as increased brand loyalty; a positive outcome (Nasution & Mavondo, 2008). It has been suggested that perceived quality is integral to brand loyalty, provided that customer satisfaction is achieved (Oliver, 1997). Furthermore, some scholars have linked perceived quality to outcomes related to brand attachment or the willingness to engage in actions through purchase intentions (Liao et al., 2022) or trust (Hudders et al., 2022). Thus, perceived quality influences consumers’ overall evaluation of a brand, shaping their emotional connection and long-term



commitment through factors like brand loyalty (Hudders et al., 2022). In this study, perceived quality is a crucial factor mediating the relationship between AI-advertising and brand loyalty.

iii. Brand loyalty

Loyalty is a widely discussed concept in the existing literature (El-Manstrly & Harrison, 2013), reflecting its complexity and significance across multiple disciplines. It is an adaptive and evolving term that extends beyond simple consumer preference, encompassing an influence on long-term commitment to a brand (Parris & Guzman, 2023). Specifically, brand loyalty is characterized by a continuous and consistent preference for a particular brand over time, despite the availability of numerous alternatives and substitutes on the market (Tanveer et al., 2021; Wong, 2023). This persistence in preference indicates not only repeated purchase behavior but also a deep psychological attachment to and trust toward the brand. Furthermore, firms place considerable emphasis on nurturing brand loyalty because of its profound and measurable impacts on business performance. Brand loyalty contributes significantly to sustained profitability (Sudirjo et al., 2024). Additionally, loyal customers often act as brand advocates, enhancing customer attitude toward the brand. Beyond financial benefits, brand loyalty strengthens a brand's equity by reinforcing positive associations, increasing perceived quality, and solidifying the brand's market position (Ahmed et al., 2023). This enhanced equity, in turn, creates a competitive advantage that is difficult for rivals to replicate, contributing to long-term strategic success (Uzir, et al., 2025). Given these substantial benefits, brand loyalty is rightly considered the focal point of a firm's branding activities (Kandampully et al., 2015). Companies invest in strategies that foster emotional connections, personalized experiences, and consistent value delivery to cultivate loyalty. Ultimately, brand loyalty not only secures repeat business but also forms the foundation for sustainable growth and resilience in competitive markets. Thus, we introduce the following propositions:

P2: AI-based customer engagement has a positive influence on brand awareness.

P3: AI-based customer engagement has a positive influence on brand loyalty.

P4: AI-based customer engagement has a positive influence on perceived quality.

P5: Brand awareness has a positive influence on brand loyalty.

P6: Perceived quality has a positive influence on brand loyalty.

Research questions and conceptual model

This study has three research questions: (1) How can brand loyalty consistently deliver outcomes when its precursors are shaped by AI-advertising or AI-agency interventions? (2) What potential effects might AI-advertising have on the advertising process itself? (3) In what ways is brand loyalty altered when AI-advertising is made more humanlike?

Using ANT, this paper conceptualizes AI in advertising as an engaging non-human actor within advertising networks, rather than merely a technological tool. Consequently, brand loyalty can be perceived as an outcome generated by such networks, shaped by specific networking factors within AI-advertising and moderated by AI-agency. The AI-based customer engagement variable represents the transformative mechanism that translates AI-advertising algorithm actions into theoretically profound and significant customer attitudes. Furthermore, brand



awareness and perceived quality function as network-stabilizing factors that enhance brand loyalty through recurring mediators, such as AI-advertising and AI-agency. This conceptual framework further illustrates that AI-agency is a constraint determining the level of strength generated by AI-driven networks, which is then converted into brand outcomes such as brand loyalty. Ultimately, this framework demonstrates that brand loyalty is a continuous outcome derived from a network of human and non-human actors.

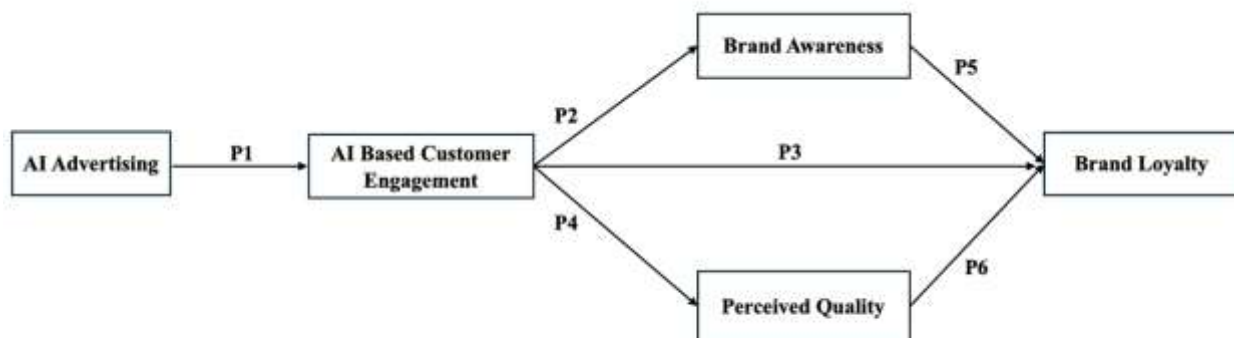


Figure (1). Conceptual Framework

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This study employs a conceptual research approach with the objective of making theoretical contributions to the field of AI-advertising. Such conceptual contributions are crucial in the present fragmented empirical context in which existing theories and frameworks have not adequately addressed AI-agency in advertising. In alignment with Jaakkola (2020), the primary aim of this research is to integrate fragmented networking-driven relationships by linking AI contexts with brand outcomes, mediated by AI-based customer engagement, rather than merely testing these relationships empirically. This theoretical development seeks to extend the existing literature by exploring the intersection of AI-advertising, AI-based customer engagement, and brand outcomes. Relevant studies were identified through a search of many journals, focusing on the AI-advertising contexts that lead to AI-based customer engagement, moderated by AI-agency and affecting brand outcomes through actors and networks rather than cause-and-effect relationships. Instead of providing a broad overview of the existing literature on these fragmented network relationships, the literature was selected based on its significance in addressing AI-advertising and brand interactions that contribute to brand equity outcomes.

Consequently, this study's original conceptual framework is constructed based on ANT, linking the variables as emerging networks comprising both human and non-human actors. This theory provides an appropriate lens for theorizing AI-advertising as an active actor with AI-agency rather than as a passive innovative tool. In this study, theorizing the network relationships involves an iterative process of conceptualization and integration. Initially, the major variables were introduced as part of an ongoing process, with a primary focus on AI-agency as a constraint shaping AI-based customer engagement, leading to positive brand outcomes. As a result, the proposed conceptual framework is theorized to demonstrate the



networking influence of AI-advertising on brand loyalty through AI-based customer engagement, brand awareness, and perceived quality as mediators. Through comprehensive articulation of the constructs, logical relational sequence, and contextual constraints, the methodology provides conceptual foundations that offer clear recommendations for future empirical validation of these conceptualizations. Overall, our methodology theorizes our model through predicting prospect connection (Jaakkola, 2020) among AI, advertising, and brand outcomes as networking relationships instead of cause-and-effect or antecedent-and-precedent relationships.

DISCUSSION

Theoretical implications

This paper contributes novel theoretical insights by advancing three key propositions. First, it reconceptualizes brand outcomes not as isolated outcomes derived from cause-and-effect relationships but as emergent phenomena arising from complex network-level interactions. This shift moves beyond traditional relationships, emphasizing the interconnectedness and systemic nature of brand-related constructs within broader relational networks. Second, the model introduces the concept of AI-agency as a critical constraint that influences core brand dimensions: brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand loyalty through AI-driven customer engagement. This occurs particularly in contexts where customers interact with AI-advertising systems, conceptualized here as non-human networks. By integrating AI-agency into the framework, it captures the dynamic role of AI as a network-engaging participant shaping consumer perceptions and behaviors, thereby expanding the theoretical understanding of brand engagement in technologically mediated environments. Third, the framework bridges a notable gap in the existing literature by employing an integrative network-driven modeling approach. Drawing on Jaakkola's (2020) model-building methodology, this approach predicts the networking effects among constructs, thereby formalizing the theorization process. The approach aligns with Delbridge and Fiss's (2013) integrative theorizing, which aims to construct a formal network around the central construct; in this case, brand outcomes influenced by AI-agency. The resulting theoretical structure not only synthesizes disparate elements of brand research and AI engagement but also provides a robust foundation for future empirical testing and refinement.

Practical implications

This paper contributes to the existing literature by offering managerial implications through the following points. First, our proposed conceptual framework positions AI-advertising as a relational system rather than a mere technological tool for advertising campaigns. Marketers should emphasize the significance of AI-advertising as a continuous process, rather than employing it sporadically under specific conditions. Using AI-advertising as a one-time tool may overlook its substantial benefits for brand outcomes and customer engagement. Second, it is essential to calibrate AI-agency to enhance its positive effects on brand outcomes, such as brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand loyalty as well as to improve AI-based customer engagement. In other words, the application of AI-agency should be balanced to achieve optimal results, as excessive reliance on AI-agency may appear illogical to customers, while neglecting it could impede a brand's competitiveness. Third, marketers should govern AI to



assess brand performance over time, thereby eliminating marketing myopia in certain contexts. The performance of human marketers can be augmented by engaging brand actors' algorithms, which link brand values with their activities. Thus, situating AI-agency within marketing contexts could significantly impact the forecasting of additional measures or even suggest new strategies.

In conclusion, a balanced use of AI-agency is fundamental to generate the best brand outcomes, such as strengthening brand awareness, meeting perceived quality, enhancing brand loyalty, and increasing customer engagement through exposure to AI-advertising.

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