



Trust as the dominant relational mechanism in digital platform-based enterprises: Evidence from China's tea poverty-alleviation context

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ABSTRACT

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This study examines whether customer trust is the dominant relational mechanism through which digital platform features shape customer loyalty in China's Tea Poverty-Alleviation Enterprises (CTPAEs). Drawing on the Stimulus-Organism-Response framework and Relationship Marketing Theory, the study compares the roles of customer trust and customer engagement within a single structural model. A quantitative, cross-sectional survey was conducted among consumers who had purchased CTPAE tea products through digital platforms, and 400 valid responses were analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). The findings show that digital platform features positively influence both customer trust and customer engagement. Customer trust has the strongest direct effect on customer loyalty and generally transmits the effects of platform features more strongly than customer engagement, although engagement remains a significant complementary mechanism. Platform interactivity affects loyalty only indirectly through trust and engagement, while information transparency, content personalization, and social value communication show both direct and indirect effects. These results indicate that loyalty in mission-driven digital platform environments is formed mainly through trust-based relational confidence rather than interaction intensity alone. Practically, CTPAEs should prioritize transparent information, credible poverty-alleviation communication, reliable service delivery, and meaningful engagement design so that digital platforms communicate both product value and social value. This approach can help mission-driven enterprises convert online platform experiences into sustainable customer loyalty.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature by showing that, in China's tea poverty-alleviation digital platforms, customer trust is the dominant relational mechanism linking platform features to customer loyalty, exceeding customer engagement in direct and indirect explanatory strength.

1. INTRODUCTION

Digital platforms have become central to how firms attract, communicate with, and retain customers. In these settings, loyalty is shaped not only by product value but also by platform interfaces that structure interaction, reduce uncertainty, and convey credibility to users (Li, Larimo, & Leonidou, 2021). As firms increasingly depend on digital interfaces to manage customer relationships, understanding how platform features influence customer loyalty has become an important issue in marketing research. This issue is especially relevant for mission-driven firms, which must communicate not only functional value but also authenticity, integrity, and social purpose. When commercial exchange is intertwined with social missions, consumers may question whether a digital platform genuinely reflects

the responsibility claimed by the firm or merely provides convenience (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004). China's Tea Poverty-Alleviation Enterprises (CTPAEs) provide an appropriate context because these initiatives connect digital commerce with rural development and social value creation (Kotiranta, Puumalainen, Sjögren, & Dana, 2024).

Whereas previous research demonstrates that digital capabilities like interactivity, transparency and personalization can enhance online customer responses, much of this research focuses more on the results of engagement. Customer engagement is frequently considered a prominent measure of platform success, and the unspoken rule that the greater the engagement, the more positive the consequences in terms of behavior (Islam et al., 2020). Nevertheless, stability in loyalty is not necessarily associated with frequent interaction. Clients can actively interact with a platform and still be reluctant to stick to it in case they doubt the credibility, intentions or trustworthiness of the platform. Trust can play a more important role in loyalty in digitally mediated transactions with information asymmetry than the strength of engagement alone (Gefen, Karahanna, & Straub, 2003). Despite the recognition of the significance of trust used in earlier studies, numerous researchers refer to trust and engagement as similar constructs instead of the relative strength of the two in the determination of loyalty (Thaichon, Liyanarachchi, Quach, Weaven, & Bu, 2020). Moreover, the majority of empirical data on the formation of digital loyalty is based on the mainstream e-commerce, retail, or social media context, where the relational sense of trust might not be similar to that in socially embedded enterprises. Customers in mission-driven digital businesses like CTPAEs react to the functionality of the platform as well as assertions about poverty alleviation, community welfare, and social responsibility. Such contexts of value platforms are under-researched, and it is hard to understand whether the results of traditional commercial environments can be applied to those (Alzaidi & Agag, 2022).

There is a gap in theory as well. SOR has been applied extensively to describe the effects of digital cues on internal states and behavioral consequences, yet most studies present only that organismic variables are important; they do not specify what internal process is more structurally decisive in certain conditions of platforms (Lian, 2021). In order to fill this gap, the current paper discusses the impact of features of digital platforms on customer loyalty in Tea Poverty-Alleviation Enterprises of China and compares customer trust and customer engagement in a single relationship framework. Based on the analysis of survey data with the help of PLS-SEM, the article assesses the idea that trust is the main relational mechanism by which the features of digital platforms can create loyalty in mission-driven digital ecosystems.

Based on this background, the current research addresses two research questions: RQ1: How do digital platform features affect customer trust and customer loyalty in China's Tea Poverty-Alleviation Enterprises? RQ2: Which relational mechanism, customer trust or customer engagement, is more structurally central in transmitting the effects of digital platform features to customer loyalty? This research makes three contributions. First, it moves beyond the question of whether trust and engagement are important by examining their relative explanatory value in loyalty formation. Second, it extends SOR-based research by incorporating Relationship Marketing Theory to highlight the stabilizing role of trust in exchange relationships (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Third, it provides practical guidance for mission-driven businesses by demonstrating that sustainable digital loyalty depends more on establishing credible trust-based relationships than on stimulating engagement alone.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Digital Platform Features and Customer Trust

The capabilities of digital platforms are usually perceived as positive stimuli that improve the user experience and enhance the relational outcomes. Interactivity, transparency, personalization, and communicating social value are often mentioned among the positive platform cues that can prompt positive consumer reactions in the digital environment (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Despite the fact that this literature has defined the significance of platform design, it tends to be confined to a feature-performance logic, and less emphasis is put on why certain platform cues lead to long-term trust, and others lead to transient positive responses. To illustrate, information transparency is usually

related to less ambiguity and increased credibility due to the ability of users to comprehend processes in the platform and company intentions better (Kim, Ferrin, & Rao, 2008).

Interactive responsiveness is also considered a signal of trust since it is a signal of accessibility and support when interacting online (Sun & Zhang, 2021). The explanations, however, tend to presuppose that the existence of such attributes will automatically result in trust, although users might perceive the same platform cues in different ways based on the more general relational context. This shortcoming must be particularly pertinent in mission-oriented organizations like the Tea Poverty-Alleviation Enterprises in China. Under such conditions, the consumers will tend to assess the digital platforms not just on the functional basis but also on the perceived honesty, responsibility, and societal responsibility of the enterprise (Ibáñez, Guerrero, Yáñez-Valdés, & Barros-Celume, 2022). Even though research on digital social enterprises has already started to demonstrate how digitalization can convey the value of the mission, the number of studies demonstrating how particular platform characteristics are transformed into customer trust in digital socially embedded markets remains limited (Kotiranta et al., 2024). To this end, this paper will argue that the characteristics of digital platforms can be interpreted not only as technical affordances but as relational cues, the credibility of which should be evaluated within a particular context.

H₁: Digital platform features positively influence Customer Trust.

2.2. Customer Trust and Customer Loyalty

Trust has been viewed as one of the fundamental processes in a relational exchange since it decreases the degree of uncertainty and commitment in the long run (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In the digital world, this role acquires increased importance when the customers are often left to make choices based on incomplete information and low verification of assertions made to them directly (Gefen et al., 2003). The literature, however, mostly indicates the positive relationship between trust and loyalty. Nonetheless, a lot of this research is within the arena of commercial platforms, in which trust is often used as one of many predictors rather than one of the key stabilizing factors in the development of loyalty.

The ongoing research studies are aiming to uncover that trust is a facilitating factor in propelling the change from a positive digital experience to sustained usage, re-purchase intentions, and longer-term commitment (Lu, Wang, & Zhang, 2021). Nevertheless, trust has been identified as not well developed theoretically in reference to other constructions adjacent to it, like engagement, satisfaction, or quality of experiences. Thus, existing literature is inclined to believe in the presence of a trust effect, albeit less specific in regard to whether trust is a more decisive structural factor than alternative relational processes. This study fills this gap by believing in as a potentially overpowering route in which features of digital platforms impact the degree of loyalty.

H₂: Customer Trust positively influences Customer Loyalty.

2.3. The Mediating Role of Customer Trust

Organismic states are the explanation of the translation of environmental cues to behavioral outcomes within the framework of Stimulus-Organism-Response (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Relationship Marketing Theory also proposes that trust is not an attitude peripheralism but a central relational state that stabilizes exchange and facilitates continuity (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Combined, the above views give a solid ground to make mediation proposals. Nevertheless, a large number of SOR-oriented studies in online settings discuss mediation as a statistical problem instead of stating how any internal mechanism can be more determinant than another. This is particularly vital in this case. Even though features of digital platforms can have a direct impact on loyalty, they are unlikely to have significant effects unless customers perceive these features as credible and trustworthy.

This problem is even more acute in mission-driven businesses, since the allegiance can be less related to the current attractiveness of a platform and more to the question of whether the customer considers the business and its online interface to be reliable and authentic. This paper, therefore, hypothesizes that customer trust is the key relay

between the features of digital platforms and customer loyalty. Instead of the assumption that the organismic responses are equally strong, the study reconsiders mediation using a hierarchical relational viewpoint, where trust is supposed to have a stronger explanatory force.

H₃: Customer Trust mediates the relationship between digital platform features and Customer Loyalty.

2.4. Customer Engagement and Customer Loyalty

Customer engagement is usually defined as the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural involvement that customers exhibit towards brands, platforms, or interactive environments (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014). It has been established by previous research that interactive design, personalised content, and participatory communication can create engagement and enhance the feeling of connection of the customer to the digital platforms (Molinillo, Anaya-Sánchez, & Morrison, 2022). This literature has made significant contributions to the knowledge about active customer-platform relations. However, it sometimes goes too fast between the initiation of engagement and the results of loyalty, and therefore projects that participation suffices to guarantee commitment in the long run. This supposition should be given a second glance. Engagement can signify attention, participation, or enthusiasm, but it does not imply that the issue of concern about credibility, risk, or sincerity has been tackled. The customers can be highly engaged with a platform despite the fact that they might harbor some serious concerns about whether it is worth being loyal to it (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). This is why the current paper has regarded customer engagement as a valuable relational mechanism, yet doubts its power of explanation as compared to that of trust in the loyalty formation process.

H₄: Customer Engagement positively influences Customer Loyalty.

Based on the above theoretical arguments and hypotheses, the proposed conceptual framework is presented in Figure 1.

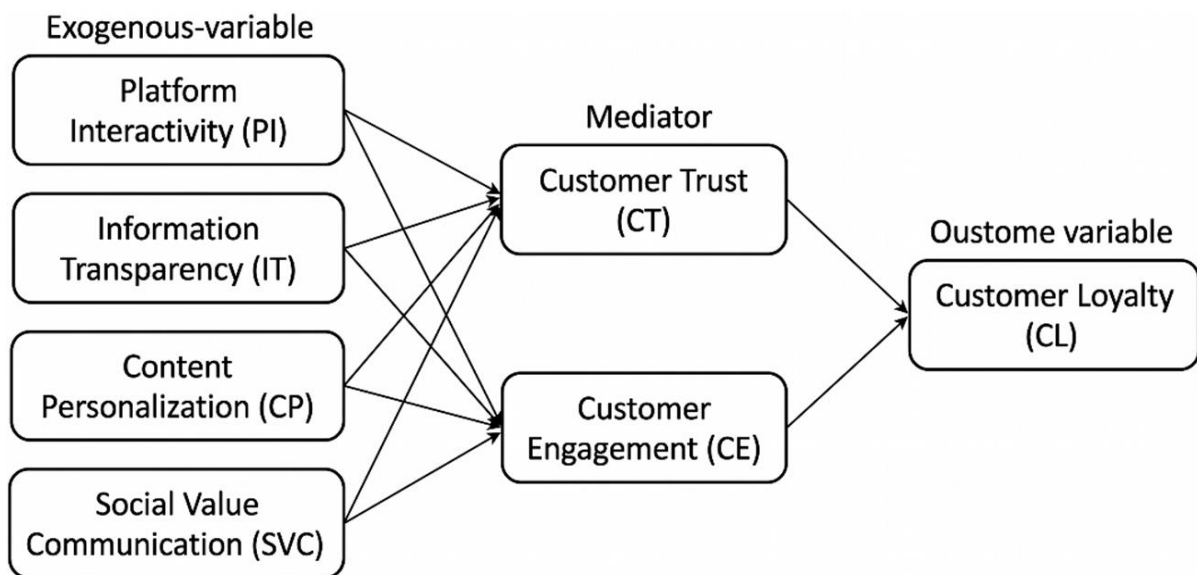


Figure 1. Conceptual framework showing four digital platform feature dimensions: customer trust, customer engagement, and customer loyalty.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research design used in this study was a quantitative research design to study the structural relationship between digital platform features, customer trust, customer engagement, and customer loyalty in the Tea Poverty-Alleviation Enterprises (CTPAEs) in China. The data were gathered by conducting a survey of consumers who interacted with the digital platforms of CTPAEs. Since the proposed model incorporates several latent constructs and mediating paths, partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was chosen as the primary

analysis method. PLS-SEM is suitable for models that focus on prediction, mediation, and extending the theory in digital marketing research. The data were collected via an online survey in the form of a questionnaire sent via enterprise-linked WeChat mini-programs and related online platforms related to CTPAEs. The sampling strategy was a non-probability convenience sampling due to the fact that the respondents were contacted via the channels of the available platforms. There were 412 responses that were gathered. Following filtering of incomplete questionnaires and patterned responses, 12 responses were eliminated, and 400 valid responses were obtained to be analyzed. Since convenience was employed in sampling, the results are to be viewed with reservations with regard to statistical generalizability outside the population of active users of these platform channels.

Multi-item scales based on the previous literature were used to measure all constructs and were contextualized to the digital platform of CTPAEs. The interactivity of the platform elicited senses of responsiveness and participatory communication attributes. The level of information transparency was used to determine the transparency, accessibility, and credibility of the information disclosed. The content personalization evaluated the degree of compatibility between user preferences and online content. The communication of the social mission and poverty-alleviation stories was captured by social value communication. The customer trust was gauged as perceived reliability and integrity of the platform, customer engagement was gauged as cognitive and behavioral involvement, and customer loyalty was gauged as repurchase and advocacy intentions. All items had a five-point Likert scale, where 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) were the possible answers. The questionnaire was pretested to ensure that it was clear, contextually appropriate, and valid in terms of content.

The analysis of data was performed with the help of SmartPLS in two steps. To measure the measurement model, first, the reliability of the indicators, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, discriminant validity, and collinearity diagnostics were used. Second, path coefficients, coefficient of determination (R^2), effect size (f^2), predictive relevance (Q^2), mediation analysis, and model fit were used to evaluate the structural model. The statistical significance of both the direct and indirect effects was tested with 5,000 resamples. This operation offered a stringent evaluation of the measurement properties and structural relationships in the proposed model.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Sample Profile and Data Screening

The number of questionnaires collected was 412 with the help of enterprise-based WeChat mini-programs and related digital platforms of Tea Poverty-Alleviation Enterprises in China. Following the screening of the incomplete responses and patterned answering behaviors, 12 questionnaires were eliminated. The resulting data set contained 400 valid answers, which were sufficient to perform PLS-SEM analysis. To enhance the strength of the statistical analysis, screening of data was done before model estimation.

The percentage of missing data was less than 1 percent of the total observations, and they were randomly assigned among variables. Since this proportion is low, mean substitution was employed to maintain the statistical power, with a small expected impact on the estimation of the parameters. Though PLS-SEM is not sensitive to multivariate normality, univariate diagnostics were examined to evaluate overall distributional characteristics. The results of the screening did not show any drastic deviation from normal thresholds, which indicated that the data set was appropriate to conduct the intended analysis. Since the survey was self-reported and a single source, common method bias (CMB) was evaluated by the single-factor test of Harman. The initial unrotated factor accounted for less than 40% of the total variance, which is less than the 50% mark, which means that the common method variance would not be a grave threat to the results.

In general, the dataset was deemed satisfactorily complete, with satisfactory distributional stability, and sufficient quality to be further assessed by measurement-model and structural-model.

4.2. Demographic Profile for Respondents

Table 1 gives demographic characteristics of the respondents (N = 400). The sample shows a relatively balanced and heterogeneous consumer structure in terms of age, gender, income, and education levels, and therefore improves the representativeness of empirical results on the basis of tea poverty alleviation enterprises (CTPAEs) in China.

Table 1. Demographic profile of respondents (N = 400).

Variables	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	141	35.3%
	Female	142	35.5%
	Prefer not to say	117	29.3%
Age	18 years old	66	16.5%
	19–24 years old	45	11.3%
	25–34	56	14.0%
	35–44	72	18.0%
	45–54	45	11.3%
	55–64	59	14.8%
	65 and above	57	14.2%
Income	Below 2,000 RMB	56	14.0%
	2,001–4,000 RMB	54	13.5%
	4,001–6,000 RMB	57	14.2%
	6,001–8,000 RMB	49	12.3%
	8,001–10,000 RMB	50	12.5%
	Above 10,000 RMB	73	18.3%
	Prefer not to disclose	61	15.3%
Education	Primary school	71	17.8%
	Junior high school	54	13.5%
	High school / Vocational school	47	11.8%
	Diploma	53	13.3%
	Bachelor's degree	80	20.0%
	Master's degree	46	11.5%
	Doctorate	49	12.3%

4.3. Gender Distribution

The distribution of gender among respondents was rather balanced, with 35.5 percent of the population identifying as female and 35.3 percent of the population by gender as male. Of particular note is that 29.3 percent selected the "prefer not to say" option, which may be due to increased privacy concerns in the online survey context. This near equality between females and males makes there less of a possibility for structures of bias when interpreting these relationships according to gender.

4.4. Age Distribution

The sample of respondents was spread across seven adult age categories. The largest group included participants aged 35–44 years (18.0% of the sample), followed by participants aged 18 years (16.5% of the sample), those aged 55–64 years (14.8% of the sample), and participants aged 65 years and above (14.2%). This distribution indicates that the sample covered multiple adult age groups, which is especially relevant for digital marketing research because age may affect perceptions of platform interactivity, transparency, personalization, and social value communication.

4.5. Income Distribution

Income levels were widely spread. The greatest proportion reported an earning in the higher amounts of more than 10,000 RMB (18.3%), while other income brackets were between 12% and 15% each. Approximately 15.3% did not want to disclose the income information. The existence of both lower-income and higher-income consumers is

responsible for generalizing findings, as purchasing power may influence the formation of loyalty and trust evaluation processes.

4.6. Education Level

Educational attainment ranged from primary education to a doctorate. The most considerable part had a bachelor's degree (20.0 per cent), followed by those having primary school (17.8 per cent) and junior high school (13.5 per cent). Postgraduate qualifications made up over 23 per cent of the sample. Diversity in educational level is relevant for understanding the mechanisms of digital trust and engagement because digital processing differences and digital literacy may have an impact on the responsiveness toward marketing stimuli. Overall, the demographic profile shows a structurally diverse sample that can be used to examine the mechanisms of relationships between the digital marketing dimensions, customer trust, engagement, and loyalty.

4.7. Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model was tested before the estimation of the structural model to ensure the reliability and validity of all the reflective constructs. Consistent with the procedures of the PLS-SEM, the evaluation relied on studies of indicator reliability, internal-consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity.

4.8. Indicator Reliability

Indicator reliability was analyzed by analysis of the outer loadings of all of the measurement items. As shown in Table 2, all items showed loadings larger than the recommended threshold of 0.70, between 0.754 and 0.888.

Table 2. Outer loadings of measurement items.

Construct	Item Code	Loading
Platform Interactivity	PI1	0.813
	PI2	0.859
	PI3	0.842
Information Transparency	IT1	0.754
	IT2	0.865
	IT3	0.821
Content Personalization	CP1	0.822
	CP2	0.883
	CP3	0.851
Social Value Communication	SVC1	0.808
	SVC2	0.863
	SVC3	0.839
Customer Trust	CT1	0.828
	CT2	0.866
	CT3	0.851
Customer Engagement	CE1	0.851
	CE2	0.881
	CE3	0.867
Customer Loyalty	CL1	0.867
	CL2	0.888
	CL3	0.874

All the measurement items showed satisfactory outer loadings, ranging from 0.754 to 0.888, and hence showed good data reliability regarding the indicators across constructs. The relatively narrow range of loading indicates a similar quality of measurement without extreme variability for items.

Platform Interactivity showed stable loadings ranging from 0.813 to 0.859, representing a coherent measurement of interactive features of platforms. Information Transparency yielded a slightly wider dispersion (0.754–0.865);

however, all of the items were still well above the acceptable threshold for indicating a fairly good representation of perceptions related to transparency.

Content Personalization and Social Value Communication both showed good and fairly equal loadings, with no one item dominating the construct disproportionately. This well-balanced pattern suggests that personalization and value communication were perceived as multidimensional but, yet internally cohesive concepts.

For relational constructs, Customer Trust, Customer Engagement and Customer Loyalty all displayed reasonably high loadings above 0.82, with Customer Loyalty showing the highest loading values of all. The strength and stability of these loadings indicate that there is considerable common variance between the indicators of loyalty and that they form a highly coherent latent construct.

Importantly, no item came near the lower-bound threshold, and cross-loading concerns were not detected during the model-estimation process, such that there was no need to remove any indicator, resulting in a measurement structure that was intact both theoretically and empirically.

4.9. Internal Consistency and Convergent Validity

Internal consistency reliability was assessed using both Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR), and convergent validity was assessed using Average Variance Extracted (AVE). The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Reliability and convergent validity.

Construct	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Platform Interactivity	0.928	0.929	0.698
Information Transparency	0.954	0.956	0.667
Content Personalization	0.739	0.947	0.745
Social Value Communication	0.950	0.951	0.689
Customer Trust	0.961	0.961	0.721
Customer Engagement	0.818	0.952	0.746
Customer Loyalty	0.963	0.964	0.773

Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.739 to 0.963, indicating acceptable to excellent reliability across the constructs. Customer Trust (0.961) and Customer Loyalty (0.963) showed particularly high internal consistency, suggesting that their items were strongly interrelated and represented coherent latent dimensions. Content Personalization recorded the lowest Cronbach's alpha value (0.739); however, it remained above the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70. Because all Content Personalization items also showed satisfactory outer loadings (0.822-0.883), and because the construct achieved strong composite reliability and AVE values, no item was removed. Retaining all three items was considered appropriate to preserve the theoretical coverage of personalized content, preference fit, and user-oriented platform communication.

Composite reliability (CR) value ranged between 0.929 and 0.964, exceeding the minimum recommended value (0.70) for all the constructs. Importantly, values of CR were not greater than 0.97, suggesting that even though internal consistency is high, the likelihood of measurement redundancy is low. The comparatively low variation between Cronbach's alpha and CR across constructs is further indication of stable and well-balanced structures of measurement.

Convergent validity was evidenced by average variance extracted (AVE) values ranging from 0.667 to 0.773, all of which exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.50. This indicates that each construct explains a substantial proportion of the variance in its indicators.

Although Information Transparency had an AVE value of 0.667, it is well above acceptable standards. The relatively poorer AVE may indicate the multidimensionality of the concept of transparency perceptions, which may include the dimensions of informational clarity, completeness, accessibility, and credibility. Nevertheless, the value allows for adequate convergence and reliable measurement.

When comparing across digital marketing dimensions, the results showed that Platform Interactivity and Social Value Communication both had high reliability and acceptable AVE levels, indicating that interactive features and value-based communication are consistent constructs in the thoughts of respondents. The consistency observed in these constructs provides strong reinforcement of the measurement stability of the exogenous variable in the structural construct.

Overall, the evidence obtained from the alpha and composite reliability and AVE confirms that all the constructs show good levels of internal consistency and sufficient convergent validity. The measurement model thus forms a sound basis for the final estimation of a structural model.

4.10. Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity was examined by using the Fornell–Larcker criterion as well as the heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratio to ensure that each construct was empirically distinct from the other constructs in structural analysis.

As can be seen in Table 4, the square roots of AVE (diagonal elements) are higher than the corresponding inter-construct correlations in all cases. This shows that each construct has a higher variance with its own indicators than with other latent variables, thus meeting the Fornell-Larcker criterion.

Table 4. Fornell–Larcker criterion.

Construct	PI	IT	CP	SVC	CT	CE	CL
PI	0.836						
IT	0.512	0.817					
CP	0.484	0.501	0.863				
SVC	0.473	0.529	0.498	0.830			
CT	0.602	0.598	0.533	0.571	0.849		
CE	0.623	0.577	0.542	0.590	0.601	0.864	
CL	0.585	0.568	0.541	0.563	0.702	0.673	0.879

Note: Diagonal values represent square roots of AVE.

The square roots of AVE (bold diagonal values) exceed corresponding inter-construct correlations, satisfying the Fornell–Larcker criterion.

Table 5. HTMT ratios.

Construct Pair	HTMT
CT – CL	0.763
CE – CL	0.741
CT – CE	0.713
All other pairs	< 0.65

Amongst the correlations between the constructs, response, Customer Trust, and Customer Loyalty have the highest correlation rate ($r=0.702$), followed by Customer Engagement and Customer Loyalty ($r=0.673$). Despite these fairly substantial correlations, their shared correlation is thus substantially higher than the diagonal AVE values for both constructs (0.849 for Trust and 0.879 for Loyalty), giving further evidence of empirical distinctiveness between the constructs. Correlations between dimensions of digital marketing were moderate in nature and were generally found to be in the range of 0.47–0.60. This kind of pattern implies conceptual relatedness among marketing features while allowing enough separation to warrant consideration of them as separate constructs within the model. To further support the discriminant validity, the HTMT ratio was investigated (Table 5). All values of HTMT were below the conservative value of 0.85, the highest value showing between Customer Trust and Customer Loyalty (0.763).

Although this is a relatively strong relationship, it is below the critical level, which verifies that the two constructs are related but still empirically distinguishable. Similarly, the HTMT value between Customer Engagement and Customer Loyalty (0.741) implies meaningful relational proximity with the absence of redundancy. All of the remaining HTMT values were less than 0.65, indicating clear separation among digital marketing constructs and relational mediators. Given together, the outcomes generated in both the Fornell–Larcker criteria and the HTMT analysis give consistent evidence for the establishment of discriminant validity. The constructs in the proposed model are sufficiently differentiated that they merit separate estimation in the structural model.

4.11. Collinearity Assessment

To test for possible multicollinearity between the predictor constructs, the variance inflation factor (VIF) was calculated for each exogenous variable in relation to the respective endogenous constructs. All VIF scores were below the conservative value of 3.3, therefore showing that collinearity is not an issue in the current model. Specifically, VIF values ranged from 1.45 to 2.87 across structural paths in such a way that they suggested moderate but acceptable interrelationships between predictor constructs.

Although some dimensions of digital marketing were found to have moderate correlations, especially between Platform Interactivity and Customer Engagement, as well as Information Transparency and Customer Trust, those correlations were within acceptable limits and did not cause inappropriate increases in standard errors or distortion in estimating the paths. The lack of high collinearity suggests that the digital marketing dimensions each enter unique value of explanatory variance into the translational constructs. This finding supports the conceptual differences between interactive, transparent, personalised, and socially-oriented platform features in the model. Overall, the collinearity assessment is used to ensure further confidence in the statistical stability and appropriateness of the measurement and structural elements in the model for hypothesis testing.

4.12. Measurement Model Summary

The evaluation of the measurement model indicates satisfactory psychometric properties across all constructs. Indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, discriminant validity, and collinearity diagnostics collectively suggest that the measures are reliable, empirically distinct, and suitable for structural-model estimation.

4.13. Structural Model Assessment

After performing the reliability and validation analysis of the measurement model, the structural model was analysed in order to test the hypothesised relationships between digital marketing dimensions, customer trust, customer engagement, and customer loyalty. Bootstrapping using 5,000 subsamples was run to test the significance of paths.

4.14. Structural Determinants of Customer Engagement

To analyze the structural predictors of Customer Engagement, path coefficients and the respective significance levels were estimated by bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples. The results are found in Table 6.

Table 6. Structural paths predicting customer engagement.

Path	β	t-value	p-value	Decision
Platform Interactivity → CE	0.340	9.114	<0.001	Supported
Information Transparency → CE	0.232	6.226	<0.001	Supported
Content Personalization → CE	0.246	6.990	<0.001	Supported
Social Value Communication → CE	0.277	8.257	<0.001	Supported

Table 6 demonstrates that the four dimensions of digital marketing have statistically significant impacts on Customer Engagement ($p < 0.001$). The standardized path coefficients are between 0.232 and 0.340, which means moderate to rather strong predictive relationships. Platform Interactivity is the strongest predictor with its standardized coefficient ($= 0.340$), which implies that the interactive features of platforms contribute most towards the formation of engagement.

This result indicates that the responsiveness, two-way communication, and user participation opportunities are particularly effective in motivating active customers' participation. The second-strongest predictor is the Social Value Communication (0.277), which means that the value-focused communication and socially valuable stories are also significantly influential in determining the engagement. Engagement is also affected by Content Personalization (0.246) with a rather positive impact; however, its strength is slightly lower than Platform Interactivity and Social Value Communication.

The smallest, yet statistically significant, effect (0.232) is found in Information Transparency, indicating that informational clarity is beneficial to engagement despite not being more activating than more interactive or value-driven features. On balance, the findings suggest that Customer Engagement is influenced by interactive and value-driven digital experiences the most, and personalization and transparency are complementary to each other.

In terms of relative magnitudes of the results, when compared, the impact of Platform Interactivity is about 22% more than that of Social Value Communication and almost 47% more than that of Information Transparency. This hierarchy of coefficients implies the various levels of influence of the digital marketing dimension in the context of determining the influence of engagement results.

In general, the structural results demonstrate that Customer Engagement is driven by interactive and value-oriented digital experiences with personalization and transparency contributing to the engagement-building process.

4.15. Structural Determinants of Customer Trust

In order to evaluate the structural predictors of Customer Trust, bootstrapping was done with 5,000 resamples to obtain the path coefficients, t-values, and levels of significance. Table 7 shows the results.

Table 7. Structural paths predicting customer trust.

Path	β	t-value	p-value	Decision
Platform Interactivity $\rightarrow$ CT	0.346	8.857	<0.001	Supported
Information Transparency $\rightarrow$ CT	0.322	7.796	<0.001	Supported
Content Personalization $\rightarrow$ CT	0.182	4.561	<0.001	Supported
Social Value Communication $\rightarrow$ CT	0.197	5.240	<0.001	Supported

Table 7 indicates that the four dimensions of digital marketing have significant effects on customer trust at $p < 0.001$. The standardized coefficients are between 0.182 and 0.346, which shows moderate to strong predictive influences. Platform interactivity has the highest standardized coefficient (0.346), indicating that the interactive characteristics are the most influential in the formation of trust perceptions.

The t-value (8.857) is relatively high, which also means that this relationship is strongly supported statistically. In second place ($\beta = 0.322$) is Information Transparency, but the magnitude is somewhat smaller than that of Platform Interactivity. The fact that these two coefficients are close to each other shows that interactive reassurance and transparent disclosure of information work simultaneously in the development of consumer trust. The impact of Platform Interactivity is relatively 7% greater than Information Transparency, meaning similar but slightly differentiated levels of impact.

Conversely, Content Personalization ($= 0.182$) and Social Value Communication ($= 0.197$) have smaller but statistically significant impacts. These variables, though, play a positive role in forming trust; their values are about 43–47 percent lower than Platform Interactivity. This trend indicates that even though personalization and value

communication contribute to the process of trust building, functional interactivity and informational clarity have a greater impact on the process of building trust.

On the whole, the hierarchy of the coefficients shows that platform-level functional mechanisms are the key factors that lead to trust formation, then come communicative and personalization-based features. These findings reveal the discriminatory roles of digital marketing dimensions in the relational confidence outcome.

4.16. Structural Determinants of Customer Loyalty

The bootstrapping procedure was used to estimate the direct paths of the exogenous and relational constructs to assess the structural predictors of Customer Loyalty. Table 8 reports the results.

Table 8. Structural paths predicting customer loyalty.

Path	β	t-value	p-value	Decision
Customer Trust $\rightarrow$ CL	0.355	6.712	<0.001	Supported
Customer Engagement $\rightarrow$ CL	0.257	5.116	<0.001	Supported
Social Value Communication $\rightarrow$ CL	0.145	3.478	<0.001	Supported
Information Transparency $\rightarrow$ CL	0.110	2.823	0.005	Supported
Content Personalization $\rightarrow$ CL	0.107	2.965	0.003	Supported
Platform Interactivity $\rightarrow$ CL	0.072	1.731	0.084	Not Supported

Both relational constructs, Customer Trust and Customer Engagement, have statistically significant positive relationships with Customer Loyalty ($p < 0.001$), as indicated in Table 8. The standardized coefficients vary between 0.072 and 0.355, which means that the explanatory power of the predictors is not similar.

Customer Trust had the strongest direct effect on Customer Loyalty ($\beta = 0.355$, $t = 6.712$, $p < 0.001$). Compared with Customer Engagement ($\beta = 0.257$), the effect of Customer Trust was approximately 1.38-fold stronger ($0.355 / 0.257 = 1.38$), indicating that relational confidence was more influential than engagement in explaining loyalty formation.

Customer Loyalty is also positively and statistically significantly impacted by Customer Engagement ($= 0.257$, $p < 0.001$), meaning that behavioral and emotional engagement does make a significant contribution to loyalty, but its impact is less than that of trust.

Among the dimensions in the area of digital marketing, Social Value Communication has the most direct impact on loyalty (beta 0.145), followed by Information Transparency (beta 0.110) and Content Personalization (beta 0.107). These effects are statistically significant, but the magnitude of these effects is considerably less than the relational constructs. In particular, the Customer Trust effect is greater than the biggest digital marketing predictor (0.355 compared to 0.145).

Customer Loyalty does not have any statistically significant direct predictor of Platform Interactivity ($= 0.072$, $p = 0.084$). This non-significant interaction indicates that interactive platform characteristics have a direct impact on loyalty via relational processes as opposed to a direct behavioral channel.

Taken together, the structural results indicate a strong hierarchy of influence where relational constructs, in particular Customer Trust, are the most important to explain loyalty formation, with the direct impacts of the digital platform dimensions being relatively minor.

4.17. Explanatory Power of Endogenous Constructs (R^2)

The explanatory power of the endogenous constructs was examined through the coefficient of determination (R^2), as presented in Table 9.

Table 9. Explanatory power of endogenous constructs.

Endogenous Construct	R ²	Interpretation
Customer Engagement	0.548	Moderate–Strong
Customer Trust	0.527	Moderate
Customer Loyalty	0.657	Substantial

The structural model explains 54.8% of the variance in Customer Engagement and 52.7% of the variance in Customer Trust, as shown in Table 9. These values suggest moderate-to-high explanatory power in behavioural and marketing research.

The fact that the R² of Customer Engagement and Customer Trust are relatively similar indicates equal predictive power of the digital marketing dimensions by both of the relational mediators. This shows that interactive, informational, personalization, and social value processes have similar contributions to the formation of engagements and the development of trust. It is important to note that the R² of Customer Loyalty is 0.657, which implies that 65.7% of the variation in loyalty intentions can be attributed to the joint effect of digital marketing dimensions and relational constructs.

It is the greatest strength of the explanations of all the endogenous variables in the model. The comparison across constructs indicates that the mediator level (0.53–0.55) to the loyalty level (0.66) suggests that the predictive consolidation is improved at the outcome stage. Customer Loyalty has a higher R², which means that relational processes enhance the flow of digital marketing effects into behavioural intentions.

On the whole, the R² values indicate that the structural model has high predictive validity, especially in the context of the formation of loyalty in the digital platform environment of CTEPs.

4.18. Effect Size Assessment (f^2)

To further evaluate the relative contribution of each exogenous construct to the endogenous variables, effect size (f^2) values were calculated. The results are presented in Table 10.

Table 10. Effect size assessment of key structural paths.

Path	f^2	Effect Size
PI → CE	0.210	Medium
IT → CT	0.170	Medium
CT → CL	0.155	Medium
CE → CL	0.078	Small–Medium

Table 10 reports the effect sizes for the key structural paths that were most relevant to the model interpretation. Platform Interactivity showed a medium effect on Customer Engagement ($f^2 = 0.210$), while Information Transparency showed a medium effect on Customer Trust ($f^2 = 0.170$).

For the loyalty paths, Customer Trust had a medium effect on Customer Loyalty ($f^2 = 0.155$), whereas Customer Engagement had a small-to-medium effect on Customer Loyalty ($f^2 = 0.078$). This pattern is consistent with the direct-path results and further supports the interpretation that trust contributes more strongly to loyalty formation than engagement.

Overall, the f^2 results indicate that the model's explanatory contribution is concentrated in the relational pathways, particularly the trust-based pathway leading to Customer Loyalty.

Table 11 presents the bootstrapped indirect effects for the trust- and engagement-based mediation paths, showing that trust generally transmits the effects of digital platform features to customer loyalty more strongly than engagement.

Table 11. Indirect Effects with emphasis on trust-based mediation.

Indirect Path	Indirect β	t-value	p-value	Mediation Type
PI $\rightarrow$ CT $\rightarrow$ CL	0.123	4.982	<0.001	Full
PI $\rightarrow$ CE $\rightarrow$ CL	0.088	3.741	<0.001	Full
IT $\rightarrow$ CT $\rightarrow$ CL	0.114	4.506	<0.001	Partial
IT $\rightarrow$ CE $\rightarrow$ CL	0.060	3.102	0.002	Partial
CP $\rightarrow$ CT $\rightarrow$ CL	0.065	3.198	0.001	Partial
CP $\rightarrow$ CE $\rightarrow$ CL	0.063	3.046	0.002	Partial
SVC $\rightarrow$ CT $\rightarrow$ CL	0.070	3.401	0.001	Partial
SVC $\rightarrow$ CE $\rightarrow$ CL	0.071	3.355	0.001	Partial

The results show that all indirect paths are statistically significant. Trust-based mediation is generally stronger than, or comparable to, engagement-based mediation, supporting the argument that customer trust is the dominant relational mechanism linking digital platform features to customer loyalty.

4.19. Indirect Effect and Mediation Analysis

In the case of Platform Interactivity, the Customer Trust (0.123) indirect impact is greater than the engagement-based channel (0.088), and the Customer Loyalty direct impact is not significant. This trend means complete mediation, where trust is the more dominant transmission medium that mediates the effects of interactivity on loyalty.

In the case of Information Transparency and Content Personalization, both direct and indirect changes in loyalty are important, which is evidence of a partial mediation. In both instances, the trust-based indirect effect is a little bigger than the engagement-based indirect effect. In the case of Social Value Communication, trust-based and engagement-based indirect effects are also important and quite close in value (0.070 and 0.071, respectively).

All in all, the outcomes of mediation usually demonstrate better or similar transmission based on trust, which proves the structural centrality of trust in the model. The combination of the indirect effects implies that the attributes of digital platforms enhance loyalty through the improvement of relational confidence, and engagement serves as a complementary route.

4.20. Predictive Relevance Assessment (Q^2)

To assess the predictive relevance of the structural model, the Stone–Geisser Q^2 values were calculated using the blindfolding procedure. The results are presented in Table 12.

Table 12. Predictive relevance assessment (Q^2).

Construct	Q^2	Interpretation
Customer Engagement	0.392	Strong
Customer Trust	0.374	Strong
Customer Loyalty	0.458	Strong

As shown in Table 12, all Q^2 values are greater than zero, providing evidence of predictive relevance for all endogenous constructs. Among them, Customer Loyalty records the highest Q^2 value (0.458), indicating the strongest predictive relevance at the outcome stage.

Overall, the Q^2 results support the predictive capability of the proposed structural model.

4.21. Model Fit Evaluation

Although Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) emphasizes predictive power rather than classical goodness-of-fit statistics, model fit was also evaluated using the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) and the normed fit index (NFI). These metrics are summarized in Table 13.

Table 13. Model fit indices.

Index	Value
SRMR	0.061
NFI	0.902

As shown in Table 13, the SRMR value is 0.061, indicating acceptable residual discrepancies between observed and model-implied correlations. The NFI value of 0.902 suggests satisfactory overall model adequacy.

Taken together, these indices indicate that the structural framework demonstrates acceptable global fit in addition to its predictive strength.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Summary of Key Findings

This study examined the structural relationships among digital platform features, Customer Trust, Customer Engagement, and Customer Loyalty in the digital platform environment of CTPAEs in China. The results show that the four digital platform dimensions significantly influenced both Customer Trust and Customer Engagement. Among these dimensions, Platform Interactivity emerged as the strongest predictor of both relational constructs, highlighting the importance of responsive interaction, two-way communication, and participatory platform processes in shaping user engagement and trust (Dhaoui & Webster, 2021; Shawky, Kubacki, Dietrich, & Weaven, 2020; Zhao, Xu, & Xu, 2023).

Customer Trust had the strongest direct effect on Customer Loyalty, exceeding Customer Engagement and the direct effects of the digital platform dimensions. The mediation analysis further shows that both Customer Trust and Customer Engagement function as transmission channels between digital platform features and loyalty, with trust-based indirect effects generally stronger than, or comparable to, engagement-based effects. This pattern supports a trust-dominant relational mechanism: although digital platform features can enhance both trust and engagement, loyalty formation in this mission-driven context relies more heavily on relational confidence.

5.2. Theoretical Implications

The trust-dominant pattern has theoretical implications for SOR-based digital platform research and Relationship Marketing Theory. Although digital platform features can enhance both engagement and trust, the findings indicate that loyalty formation in this mission-driven context relies more heavily on trust as the central relational anchor.

In the context of the SOR model, trust and engagement can be perceived as organismic conditions that connect digital stimuli and behavioral consequences (Islam et al., 2020; Lian, 2021; Zhou, Li, Yang, & Chen, 2022). This paper demonstrates that these organismic states are not all decisive by incorporating the Relationship Marketing Theory. Trust is the more structurally central process by which digital platform characteristics are transformed into loyalty to expand the trust-based reasoning of relationship marketing to mission-driven digital platform environments (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Thaichon et al., 2020).

The results are also contrary to the belief that high engagement will inevitably lead to long-lasting loyalty. Whereas the role of engagement is still important, it is not as strong in its explanatory power as trust. This implies that participation, attention, and interaction cannot be adequate without relational confidence. The study moves a hierarchy in the formation of loyalty in digital relationships through a comparative analysis of the strength of other possible relational pathways, where trust is the key relational anchor.

5.3. Practical Implications

The results suggest a number of managerial implications to CTPAEs and other mission-driven digital platform operators that aim to enhance the level of customer loyalty. First, since Customer Trust is the best predictor of

loyalty, managers ought to consider trust-building mechanisms instead of paying close attention to the engagement metrics. Clear communication, regularity in service delivery, and honest information disclosure ought to be considered as essential strategic practices, but not auxiliary features (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Kong, Wang, Hajli, & Featherman, 2020; Lu et al., 2021).

Second, whereas Platform Interactivity is a strong predictor of both engagement and trust, it does not have a strong direct impact on loyalty. This implies that the interactive features, like live chat, feedback features, and participatory campaigns, must be created not only to provoke activity but to underpin credibility and relational confidence (Li et al., 2021). Third, the level of engagement and loyalty is greatly affected by Social Value Communication. In the case of poverty-alleviation enterprises, communicating social mission, community impact, and sustainability can enhance relational attachment and loyalty by enhancing the social purpose of the enterprise by making it more credible and salient (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Ibáñez et al., 2022; Kotiranta et al., 2024).

Fourth, individualization and openness must be incorporated into a wider relational approach. Personalized recommendations can enhance user experience, yet they will have a better impact on loyalty when they are presented in a regular trust-building context (Dwivedi et al., 2021). On the whole, managers ought to pursue a top-down approach whereby emphasis is placed on trust building, encouraging engagement experiences, and social value communication to build long-term loyalty.

5.4. Limitations and Future Research

There are a few limitations to this study.

To begin with, the cross-sectional design cannot be used to make strong causal inferences across time. A longitudinal study would give a more solid foundation to the analysis of the temporal stability of trust, engagement, and loyalty formation. Second, the sample was selected among the users of the Tea Poverty-Alleviation Enterprises of China via enterprise-based WeChat mini-programs and other digital platforms via convenience sampling. Consequently, the sample can be biased towards active users of the platforms as well as those who are already predisposed to the social mission of the enterprises, and thus not be statistically representative of larger consumer groups. Third, even though the research is primarily based on the SOR framework and the Relationship Marketing Theory, possible future research might include some other perspectives, including the Social Exchange Theory or Customer Experience Theory, to determine boundary conditions and other possible explanatory mechanisms. Fourth, trust and engagement are the primary relational mediators considered in this model. Perceived risk, emotional attachment, or brand identification are other psychological constructs that can also play a role in shaping loyalty in the digital platform environment. Fifth, the research is based on self-reported measures, which can be affected by perceptual bias. Despite the fact that common method bias was minimized with the help of procedural and statistical solutions, future research might involve the use of behavioral indicators or platform analytics in order to enhance empirical robustness. Future studies can also study how the relative value of trust and engagement in loyalty formation changes with the emergence of new technologies, like AI-enabled personalization, live commerce, or social commerce ecosystems (Hameed et al., 2025; Zhang, Shao, Zhao, Li, & Zhang, 2024; Zhao et al., 2023).

In general, additional studies in various industries, timeframes, and study designs would assist in refining and broadening the suggested trust-dominant relational framework.

6. CONCLUSION

This research paper adds to the literature on digital platforms by demonstrating that customer trust is the prevalent form of relationship between digital platform characteristics and customer loyalty in mission-based businesses. Even though customer engagement is an important factor, it is secondary to the structurally central position of trust. The results indicate that credibility, authenticity, and relational confidence are more important in influencing loyalty in socially embedded digital platforms than interaction intensity. Platform integrity and reliable

communication can thus provide greater loyalty results than engagement-oriented strategies alone to managers of China Tea Poverty-Alleviation Enterprises. The study builds on the research on digital platform management by demonstrating that trust is not merely a mediating factor among many others in mission-driven platform settings but is the main relational anchor around which loyalty is bundled.

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