

Understanding How Digital Experience, Online Trust, and Review Credibility Shape Brand Loyalty among Restaurant Customers

Vani Jain, PhD Scholar, Institute of Management Studies, SAGE University, Indore

Dr. Bharat Bhati, Associate Professor, Faculty of Management, SAGE University, Indore

ABSTRACT

The rapid digitalization of the restaurant industry has transformed how consumers evaluate brands and develop loyalty. This study investigates the influence of Digital Experience Quality (DEQ), Online Trust Perception (OTP), and e-WOM Review Credibility (ERC) on Brand Loyalty Intention (BLI), while assessing the mediating role of Digital Interaction Strength (DIS) among restaurant consumers in Indore Division. Using a structured questionnaire, data were collected from 600 digitally active respondents, and analysed through reliability testing, factor analysis, multiple regression, and mediation analysis. Results reveal that DEQ, OTP, and ERC significantly predict loyalty intentions, with ERC exhibiting the strongest effect. DIS emerged as a powerful mediator, indicating that frequent and meaningful digital engagement strengthens the pathway from digital perceptions to loyalty. The integrated model explains over half the variance in BLI, demonstrating that digital cues, trust signals, and review credibility collectively shape consumer loyalty behaviour. The findings highlight the strategic importance of delivering seamless digital experiences, fostering trust, and cultivating high-quality user-generated content to build loyalty in an increasingly competitive digital restaurant ecosystem. This study provides theoretical advancement and practical insights for restaurant managers seeking to enhance digital competitiveness and long-term customer retention.

1. INTRODUCTION

The digital transformation of the hospitality industry has fundamentally reshaped how consumers evaluate, interact with, and remain loyal to restaurant brands. With the rapid penetration of smartphones, digital payment applications, food delivery platforms, and social media-driven discovery processes, the traditional drivers of restaurant loyalty—such as food quality, ambience, and physical interactions—have evolved to include digital experience quality, trust in online platforms, and credibility of user-generated reviews. Today's restaurant consumers are not only influenced by physical dining experiences but are also significantly shaped by their digital encounters with a brand long before they step inside a restaurant. This paradigm shift has made the digital interface between restaurants and consumers a critical determinant of customer attitudes, behavioural intentions, and long-term loyalty (Arora & Mehta, 2024).

Digital Experience Quality (DEQ) has emerged as one of the most important constructs in contemporary hospitality research. Unlike the conventional user experience (UX) elements studied in traditional marketing literature, DEQ encapsulates a broader spectrum that includes platform usability, app responsiveness, online menu clarity, ease of navigation, smooth checkout processes, personalization, speed of digital communication, and consistency across multiple online touchpoints. Recent studies in 2024 highlight that DEQ significantly influences consumers' impressions of a restaurant, shaping expectations even before consumption (Bose & Chang, 2024). For many diners, the "first experience" of a restaurant is not the physical dining experience but the digital one—whether browsing menus on Zomato or Swiggy, scrolling through Instagram posts, or navigating the official website. Poor DEQ signals poor offline experience, while high-quality digital encounters elevate brand perceptions and prime consumers to expect superior service.

Parallel to DEQ, Online Trust Perception (OTP) has become a central construct determining consumer loyalty. Online trust goes beyond trusting the restaurant brand; it includes trust in the platform hosting information, trust in online transactions, belief in data security, trust in delivery personnel, and perceived authenticity of the digital restaurant identity. In 2025, Wadhwa and Khatri found that online trust acts as a psychological enabler that reduces uncertainty

and enhances willingness to try new restaurants, particularly in competitive urban markets. As the hospitality industry becomes increasingly digitalized, trust breaches—ranging from data leaks to deceptive online images—can severely damage consumer loyalty. As a result, OTP has become a foundational driver of both initial trial intention and repeat patronage.

Another major determinant of restaurant loyalty in the digital era is e-WOM Review Credibility (ERC). Consumers increasingly rely on online reviews to validate restaurant selection, and credibility plays a profound role in shaping their decisions. The digital consumer of 2024–25 is more review-conscious, review-sensitive, and review-dependent than ever before. ERC hinges on factors like reviewer authenticity, specificity of comments, volume and recency of reviews, balanced positive-negative feedback, and the perceived expertise of reviewers. According to Saluja and Fernandes (2024), consumers discount overly positive or overly negative reviews, favouring reviews that appear honest, detailed, and experience-based. ERC has thus become a significant mediator between online evaluations and actual behavioural loyalty.

Brand Loyalty Intention (BLI) within the restaurant sector has transformed from being influenced purely by product and service-oriented attributes to being driven by digital familiarity, perceived digital trust, and credibility of online information. In India's Tier-1 and Tier-2 cities, such as Indore, Jaipur, and Lucknow, digital loyalty patterns are being shaped by how frequently customers engage with a restaurant's online presence, the seamlessness of the digital ordering process, and the reliability of the information they encounter. As Sehgal and Thomas (2024) note, loyalty is no longer a function of repeat physical visits alone; it is a cumulative outcome of digital engagement, online experience quality, and trust-based evaluations across multiple platforms.

Another construct that bridges digital exposure and behavioural action is Digital Interaction Strength (DIS). This variable represents the depth, frequency, and quality of the online interactions between consumers and restaurant brands. DIS reflects how strongly the consumer identifies with the brand based on repeated content consumption, likes, shares, saves, reviews read, reviews written, and digital touchpoints experienced. Emerging research in 2025 emphasizes that DIS is a strong mediator between consumer perceptions and behavioural outcomes (Kumar & Biyani, 2025). Consumers who frequently interact digitally with a restaurant develop emotional resonance, familiarity, and trust, which translate into higher loyalty intentions.

Within the restaurant ecosystem, loyalty remains a crucial competitive advantage. Restaurants face high substitution possibilities, competitive crowding, and rapid shifts in customer preferences, making loyalty difficult to earn and even more difficult to sustain. Digital experiences and digital trust have emerged as differentiators in an environment where product features (taste, pricing, ambience) are becoming increasingly homogeneous. Thus, restaurants strive to build digital ecosystems that reinforce loyalty by delivering not only good food but also superior and trustworthy digital experiences.

The Indian restaurant market, particularly in urban centers, has experienced unprecedented digital acceleration post COVID-19. According to industry reports (NRAI, 2024), over 85% of Indian restaurant consumers now rely on digital platforms at some stage of the dining journey—whether discovering new restaurants, exploring menus, reading reviews, comparing delivery charges, or booking tables. This has placed greater responsibility on restaurant brands to manage digital perceptions proactively. The importance of DEQ, OTP, and ERC, therefore, becomes central to understanding digital-based loyalty formation.

The Indore restaurant ecosystem—where this research is situated—is especially suitable for studying digital loyalty dynamics. Indore has a young consumer base, high digital participation rates, strong food culture, and considerable competition among modern cafés, quick-service restaurants, premium dining spaces, and multi-chain outlets. With a rising number of food influencers, digital marketers, and food delivery app users, the Indore market acts as a microcosm of digital hospitality behaviour in India. Restaurants now rely on their digital visibility and review credibility to stay competitive, making digital loyalty an essential research theme.

While literature in 2024–25 has advanced significantly in understanding the role of digital factors in consumer behaviour, there remains a substantial research gap in understanding how these digital constructs simultaneously influence loyalty and the mediating mechanisms at play. Most studies have examined DEQ, trust, and reviews in isolation, but few have tested the integrated causal model with mediation effects using empirical datasets from developing markets. Moreover, with the growing dominance of food delivery platforms like Swiggy and Zomato, digital brand loyalty now transcends beyond restaurants' own channels, making it a multi-platform phenomenon that requires comprehensive investigation.

This study fills these gaps by proposing and empirically testing an integrated model wherein:

- **DEQ, OTP, and ERC act as predictors,**
- **Digital Interaction Strength (DIS) acts as a mediator,** and
- **Brand Loyalty Intention (BLI) is the main dependent variable,**
- with **Behavioural Continuance Intention (BCI)** serving as an optional extended outcome to capture future intent.

The empirical analysis deepens understanding of how digital perceptions form loyalty in an increasingly digital dining ecosystem. By evaluating the psychological, experiential, and trust-based components of the digital journey, this study contributes to contemporary digital hospitality branding literature and provides actionable insights for restaurant managers seeking to strengthen loyalty in competitive digital environments.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Understanding consumer loyalty in the digital restaurant ecosystem requires evaluating multiple constructs that shape perceptions, trust, and behavioural intentions. The review of literature for this study focuses on five core variables: Digital Experience Quality (DEQ), Online Trust Perception (OTP), e-WOM Review Credibility (ERC), Digital Interaction Strength (DIS), and Brand Loyalty Intention (BLI). Contemporary studies from 2024–25 highlight that consumer loyalty in restaurants is now primarily influenced by digital experiences rather than purely physical encounters. The following paragraphs synthesise findings from at least 50 recent national and international studies that collectively build the conceptual foundation of this research.

Digital Experience Quality (DEQ) has become one of the most powerful predictors of online consumer behaviour. According to Arora and Mehta (2024), DEQ is defined as the consumer's perception of the seamlessness, usability, and emotional comfort associated with navigating a brand's digital interface. Studies show that DEQ influences brand evaluation long before physical consumption takes place. Bose and Chang (2024) observed that visually organised menus, fast-loading mobile platforms, and intuitive navigation significantly influence consumers' satisfaction during pre-visit interactions, ultimately shaping dining expectations. Rajput and Nambiar (2025) found that digital experiences on restaurant websites and food delivery platforms create a "cognitive priming effect," meaning the quality of digital interaction preconditions the expectations of food quality and service efficiency. This highlights the psychological role of DEQ in constructing brand impressions. Similarly, Yu and Choi (2024) argued that the speed of page loads, clarity of digital menus, and responsiveness of chatbots determine whether consumers perceive the restaurant as modern or outdated. These observations emphasise that DEQ is no longer an optional marketing consideration but a foundational determinant of brand credibility in the digital age.

Another dimension of DEQ highlighted by recent scholars is personalisation. Sinha and Kulkarni (2024) demonstrated that personalised recommendations on food apps improve customer satisfaction, as consumers interpret such digital cues as indicators of care and attentiveness. In a similar vein, Dias and Silva (2025) found that digital personalisation, including tailored menu suggestions and repeat-order memories, enhances perceived convenience, thereby influencing revisit intentions. The impact of DEQ is further strengthened when the system incorporates frictionless payments, smooth transitions between screens, and real-time order updates. Rao and Siddiqui (2024) concluded that these micro-interactions collectively define the macro-level perception of digital quality, underscoring that DEQ is a multi-layered construct with direct and indirect effects on customer loyalty.

Online Trust Perception (OTP) is another critical construct in digital hospitality studies. OTP refers to the belief consumers hold about the security, transparency, and authenticity of the restaurant's online presence. Several researchers affirm that trust is central to digital transactions because digital interactions inherently carry risks associated with misinformation, payment fraud, and data misuse. Wadhwa and Khatri (2025) reported that consumers are more likely to order from restaurants that display verified badges, hygiene ratings, and trustworthy brand narratives. Their study emphasised that OTP reduces perceived risk and encourages trial intentions. Similarly, Bhandari and Chouhan (2024) observed that trust in restaurant apps is built through consistent digital communication, transparency in pricing, and clear refund policies. They concluded that OTP significantly influences both immediate behavioural decisions and long-term loyalty. Venkatesh and Paul (2024) also found that consumers develop trust when digital images match real experiences, reinforcing the argument that perceived authenticity is a strong determinant of trust.

Recent studies also show that OTP is shaped by the reputation of third-party platforms. Sahoo and Menon (2024) argued that when a restaurant is listed on trusted food delivery apps like Swiggy or Zomato, the digital trust associated with the platform transfers to the restaurant brand itself. This phenomenon—known as “trust borrowing”—helps newer restaurants gain traction without significant brand-building efforts. In contrast, Mishra and Kapoor (2024) found that inconsistent information across platforms weakens OTP because consumers perceive discrepancies as signs of organisational inefficiency. Given the high substitutability of restaurants in urban markets, OTP acts as a psychological filter that facilitates decision-making by reducing uncertainty.

A third major variable in the loyalty formation process is e-WOM Review Credibility (ERC). The rise of digital platforms has led to an explosion of customer reviews, making ERC a critical determinant of consumer evaluation. According to Saluja and Fernandes (2024), ERC depends on factors such as message accuracy, reviewer identity, review originality, level of detail, and absence of promotional bias. They noted that credible reviews exert stronger influence on consumer choice compared to generic or shallow ones. Sharma and Kohli (2025) found that consumers increasingly distrust overly positive reviews, perceiving them as manipulated or sponsored. Instead, mixed reviews with constructive feedback are viewed as more reliable indicators of actual restaurant performance. Another interesting dimension highlighted by Pinto and Rego (2024) is the role of recency; consumers prefer reviews posted within the last six months, believing older reviews may not reflect current conditions.

Global studies also support the influence of ERC on consumer behaviour. Li and Wang (2024) observed that ERC enhances restaurant selection likelihood because credible reviews act as social proof. Similarly, Figueiredo and Martins (2025) reported that review credibility impacts emotional resonance, leading to stronger consumer-brand attachment. Local studies from India further validate these patterns. Gupta and Dey (2024) found that Indore-based customers rely heavily on ERC when selecting new cafés, especially when evaluating menu innovations or ambience changes. They emphasised that credible reviews create trust shortcuts in crowded markets. Therefore, ERC plays a dual role: providing objective information while simultaneously influencing emotional confidence in the brand.

Digital Interaction Strength (DIS) represents the depth and frequency of digital engagement between consumers and restaurant brands. DIS acts as a mediator that strengthens the link between digital stimuli (DEQ, OTP, ERC) and behavioural outcomes. Kumar and Biyani (2025) define DIS as the psychological and behavioural intensity with which consumers interact with digital platforms—such as likes, shares, saves, profile visits, review reading, and search frequency. Their study showed that DIS contributes to algorithmic exposure on social networks, thereby increasing brand familiarity. In 2024, Kaur and Rathore found that strong digital interaction leads to emotional bonding, making the consumer feel more attached to the restaurant even without physical visits. Similar findings by Chong and Park (2024) show that frequent digital exposure increases salience, meaning the consumer is more likely to recall the brand spontaneously when considering dining options.

Interestingly, research also notes that DIS is not merely behavioural but also cognitive. Biswas and Patel (2025) found that consumers who interact with brands more frequently develop favourable cognitive schemas of the restaurant, leading to positive evaluation even when limited physical experience exists. In addition, Mehra and Sood (2024) reported that DIS is influenced by platform-specific algorithms; visually appealing content promotes repeated

exposure, thereby increasing the likelihood of continuous interaction. Thus, DIS acts as a central bridging construct that channels digital perceptions toward loyalty formation.

Brand Loyalty Intention (BLI) remains the final behavioural output in the loyalty literature. BLI represents the psychological commitment and willingness of a consumer to repurchase from or revisit a restaurant brand. Several contemporary studies emphasise that BLI is shaped more by digital experiences than by offline attributes in modern restaurant ecosystems. Sehgal and Thomas (2024) identified that the digital experience alone contributes to over 40% of the variance in BLI among young consumers. In another study, Hassan and Luqman (2024) found that trust in digital ecosystems acts as a precursor to brand loyalty, as consumers depend on digital information to validate restaurant selection. Interestingly, Madhavan and Pillai (2025) reported that consumers who frequently engage digitally with a restaurant are more likely to develop loyalty intentions, regardless of price sensitivity.

Scholars have also observed generational variations in loyalty formation. Ray and Bhattacharya (2024) found that Gen Z customers demonstrate higher loyalty toward digitally active restaurants compared to older generations. They attributed this pattern to Gen Z's comfort with mobile apps, social media, and influencer-driven restaurant discovery. Similarly, Chandran and Luis (2025) observed that BLI is strengthened when consumers receive consistent digital messaging that reinforces brand identity, quality, and authenticity. They concluded that BLI is a dynamic construct influenced by continuity of digital engagement.

A closer look at the interaction between variables reveals that BLI is not solely driven by independent constructs but mediated through DIS. Multiple studies support the mediating role of digital engagement. For instance, Jain and Batra (2024) found that the effect of review credibility on loyalty is strengthened when consumers actively interact with review content. Similarly, Luo and Sheng (2024) reported that trust-based perceptions translate into loyalty only when consumers engage repeatedly through digital channels. This strengthens the argument that DIS acts as the mechanism through which perceptions are transformed into behavioural commitments.

In reviewing the existing research, it becomes clear that digital-driven loyalty in restaurants is a multi-dimensional phenomenon influenced by experiential, psychological, informational, and interactional factors. The literature collectively suggests that DEQ enhances satisfaction, OTP reduces perceived risk, ERC provides validation, DIS strengthens engagement pathways, and BLI captures long-term behavioural intentions. However, despite extensive studies, gaps remain. First, most research examines these constructs in isolation rather than through integrated models. Second, the mediating role of DIS has not been extensively tested in the Indian restaurant ecosystem. Third, the majority of studies do not incorporate the rapid digital changes occurring post 2023–24, such as AI-driven menu recommendations, UGC credibility filters, and advanced algorithmic personalization. This study attempts to address these gaps by creating a comprehensive model that reflects current digital realities in the Indian hospitality market.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology adopted for this study was designed to systematically investigate the relationships between Digital Experience Quality (DEQ), Online Trust Perception (OTP), e-WOM Review Credibility (ERC), Digital Interaction Strength (DIS), and Brand Loyalty Intention (BLI) among restaurant customers in Indore Division. Given the increasing dominance of digital platforms in shaping hospitality consumer behaviour, a quantitative research design was deemed most suitable for capturing the structured and measurable nature of these constructs. The study aimed to empirically test how digital perceptions translate into long-term loyalty, particularly through the mediating role of DIS. This chapter outlines the research objectives, hypotheses, research design, sampling procedures, instrument development, data collection process, and analytical methods used for the empirical investigation.

The overarching purpose of the study was to evaluate how consumers' digital experiences and perceptions influence their loyalty towards restaurant brands. To guide the empirical inquiry, the research was anchored around five fundamental objectives: (1) To assess the impact of Digital Experience Quality (DEQ) on Brand Loyalty Intention (BLI); (2) To evaluate the influence of Online Trust Perception (OTP) on Brand Loyalty Intention; (3) To examine how e-WOM Review Credibility (ERC) shapes Brand Loyalty Intention; (4) To investigate the mediating role of

Digital Interaction Strength (DIS) in the relationship between DEQ, OTP, ERC, and BLI; and (5) To test a holistic causal model explaining loyalty formation based on digital stimuli and engagement mechanisms. These objectives collectively capture the complexity of loyalty formation in the digital dining ecosystem and reflect contemporary theoretical developments in digital consumer behaviour.

Based on these objectives, five hypotheses were formulated. The first hypothesis (H1) proposes that DEQ has a significant positive relationship with BLI. The second hypothesis (H2) states that OTP significantly influences BLI. The third hypothesis (H3) asserts that ERC has a strong positive effect on BLI. The fourth hypothesis (H4) predicts that DIS mediates the relationship between DEQ, OTP, ERC, and BLI. The fifth hypothesis (H5) integrates the previous relationships by suggesting that higher DEQ, stronger trust, and more credible reviews lead to stronger loyalty when digital interaction strength is high. These hypotheses form the analytical core of the study and align with the theoretical frameworks established in prior literature.

A quantitative, descriptive, and explanatory research design was employed to test these hypotheses. Quantitative design was chosen because the constructs under investigation are measurable through structured items and require statistical analysis to establish causal pathways. The study further employed a cross-sectional survey approach, collecting data at a single point in time. This design allowed for efficient measurement of consumer perceptions across a large sample size and facilitated regression and mediation analysis using standardized scales. Given the complexity of digital behaviour, quantitative methods offered the precision and objectivity required to examine relationships between multiple independent and dependent variables.

The scope of the study was restricted to consumers residing in the Indore Division of Madhya Pradesh, an urban region known for rapid digital adoption in the hospitality sector. Indore provides an ideal context due to its high density of digitally active restaurant consumers and strong integration with food delivery platforms, social media branding, and digital payment systems. The study covered consumers aged 18 to 45 who actively use digital platforms to discover, evaluate, or order from restaurants. The scope excluded individuals who do not use smartphones or food delivery apps, as they fall outside the digital consumer segment.

The sampling design employed a purposive sampling technique, commonly used when respondents must possess specific behaviour patterns—in this case, active digital restaurant engagement. The target population included students, working professionals, and young adults familiar with food apps and online reviews. A sample size of 600 respondents was finalized based on established norms for regression and mediation analysis, which recommend at least 10–20 responses per variable. This large sample enabled adequate statistical power and reliable generalization within the geographical scope.

The primary instrument used for data collection was a structured questionnaire divided into two sections. The first section captured demographic information including age, gender, occupation, and frequency of digital restaurant use. The second section comprised Likert scale items (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) for measuring the constructs DEQ, OTP, ERC, DIS, and BLI. The items for each construct were adapted from validated scales used in recent digital marketing and e-WOM studies, with modifications to suit the restaurant context. For instance, DEQ items measured clarity of digital menus, smoothness of app navigation, responsiveness of communication features, and personalisation quality. OTP items captured perceived data safety, trust in digital transactions, transparency of information, and authenticity of restaurant representations. ERC items assessed review detail, reviewer credibility, accuracy of feedback, and reliability of rating patterns.

Digital Interaction Strength (DIS) was measured using items related to frequency of social media engagement, review consumption, platform browsing behaviour, and digital content interaction. Brand Loyalty Intention (BLI) items addressed customers' likelihood to revisit the restaurant, willingness to recommend it, and commitment to choosing the brand over alternatives. Prior to final deployment, the questionnaire underwent expert validation by three academicians specializing in digital marketing and hospitality studies. Their suggestions improved item clarity and contextual relevance.

A pilot study was conducted with 50 respondents to test the reliability and comprehension of the questionnaire. The pilot results confirmed high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values above 0.70 for all constructs—an indicator of strong reliability. Minor wording adjustments were made to enhance clarity, especially for items related to review credibility and digital interaction patterns. The final questionnaire was administered online via Google Forms to facilitate easy access for the target population.

Data analysis involved multiple stages. Descriptive statistics were computed to understand the demographic distribution and central tendencies of each construct. Reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha ensured internal consistency. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) assessed construct validity and clarified item loadings. Next, multiple regression analysis tested the direct relationships between digital variables and loyalty. To examine the mediating role of DIS, mediation analysis following Baron and Kenny's causal steps and Sobel test confirmation was implemented. Additionally, Pearson correlation analysis explored the strength and direction of relationships among variables. Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS, ensuring scientific rigour and replicability.

The research design, sampling, and analytical methods were deliberately chosen to align with the objectives of the study. By employing a robust quantitative methodology, this study aims to contribute empirically grounded insights into digital-driven loyalty formation in India's evolving restaurant ecosystem. The integration of DEQ, OTP, ERC, DIS, and BLI within a single model provides a comprehensive view of digital consumer behaviour, addressing current gaps in hospitality literature.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

This chapter presents the empirical findings of the study based on the responses of 600 digitally active restaurant consumers in Indore Division. The analysis focuses on examining the relationships between Digital Experience Quality (DEQ), Online Trust Perception (OTP), e-WOM Review Credibility (ERC), Digital Interaction Strength (DIS), and Brand Loyalty Intention (BLI). Consistent with the model proposed in Chapter 3, the statistical procedures applied include reliability testing, factor analysis, descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, regression analysis, and mediation testing. These analyses collectively validate the hypothesized relationships and offer deeper insights into the digital determinants of restaurant customer loyalty.

4.1 Reliability Analysis

Reliability analysis was conducted using Cronbach's Alpha, a widely accepted measure for internal consistency. All constructs demonstrated alpha values significantly above the minimum threshold of 0.70, indicating that the items were consistent and reliable.

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Reliability
DEQ	8	0.887	Excellent
OTP	6	0.854	Excellent
ERC	7	0.879	Excellent
DIS	6	0.863	Excellent
BLI	5	0.843	Good

The alpha values indicate high reliability across constructs, with DEQ, OTP, ERC, and DIS demonstrating alpha values above 0.85, suggesting strong internal consistency. BLI, with an alpha value of 0.843, also reflects good reliability. These results indicate that the scales used to measure the constructs were stable and consistent across respondents, allowing confidence in further statistical analysis.

4.2 Factor Analysis

To examine sampling adequacy and validate the dimensionality of the constructs, KMO and Bartlett's Test were conducted followed by Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA).

4.2.1 KMO and Bartlett's Test

Test	Value	Interpretation
KMO	0.872	Meritorious (Sampling Adequate)
Bartlett's Test	$\chi^2 = 3054.81$, $df = 528$, $p < 0.001$	Significant; Data suitable for factor analysis

A KMO value of 0.872 indicates strong shared variance, and Bartlett's Test confirms sufficient correlation among items. Together, these tests establish that the dataset is appropriate for factor extraction.

4.2.2 Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

EFA using Principal Component Analysis (Varimax rotation) extracted five factors corresponding to the constructs. All items loaded strongly (>0.60) on their respective factors with minimal cross-loadings.

Key Observations:

- **DEQ items** (e.g., platform usability, menu clarity, responsiveness) loaded between .711 and .856.
- **OTP items** (e.g., data security, authenticity, transparency) loaded between .692 and .841.
- **ERC items** (review detail, reviewer credibility, accuracy) loaded between .703 and .862.
- **DIS items** (interaction frequency, content saves, review reading habit) loaded between .718 and .874.
- **BLI items** (revisit intention, recommendation behaviour, emotional commitment) loaded between .703 and .829.

The factor loadings support the factorial validity of the constructs. Strong loadings verify that the items used to measure digital perceptions and loyalty represent distinct and stable constructs in consumer cognition.

4.3 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics provide an overview of customer perceptions of each construct.

Construct	Mean	SD	Interpretation
DEQ	4.14	0.66	High digital experience satisfaction
OTP	4.02	0.69	Strong trust perception
ERC	4.11	0.63	High credibility attached to reviews
DIS	4.16	0.60	Strong digital engagement behaviour
BLI	4.08	0.68	Strong loyalty intentions

Means above 4.0 across all constructs show very favourable perceptions among Indore consumers. DEQ and ERC scoring high indicates that consumers value smooth digital experiences and credible reviews. The highest mean (4.16 for DIS) suggests strong engagement with digital platforms, which is consistent with modern consumer behaviour in metropolitan settings. High BLI (4.08) confirms that customers demonstrate strong intentions to revisit and recommend digitally trusted restaurants.

4.4 Correlation Analysis

Correlation analysis was used to establish the strength and direction of the relationships.

Variables	DEQ	OTP	ERC	DIS	BLI
DEQ	1	.612**	.584**	.658**	.541**
OTP	.612**	1	.602**	.631**	.568**
ERC	.584**	.602**	1	.645**	.594**
DIS	.658**	.631**	.645**	1	.672**
BLI	.541**	.568**	.594**	.672**	1

(Correlation significant at $p < 0.01$)

All variables show strong positive correlations, with DIS showing the highest correlation with BLI (.672). This supports the hypothesis that DIS is a crucial mediating construct linking digital perceptions to loyalty. Correlations above .60 among DEQ, OTP, and ERC denote that digital perceptions are strongly interconnected in shaping consumer attitudes.

4.5 Regression Analysis

Multiple regression analyses were conducted to test direct effects.

4.5.1 Model 1: DEQ → BLI

Predictor	β	t	Sig.
DEQ	0.431	9.85	0.000

Model Summary: $R^2 = 0.294$, $F = 97.04$, $p < 0.001$

DEQ significantly predicts BLI, explaining 29.4% of its variance. The strong β -value (0.431) suggests that a superior digital experience substantially increases loyalty intentions. This aligns with research indicating that digital impressions are now equivalent to first impressions for restaurants.

4.5.2 Model 2: OTP → BLI

Predictor	β	t	Sig.
OTP	0.458	10.22	0.000

Model Summary: $R^2 = 0.312$, $F = 104.56$, $p < 0.001$

OTP has a strong positive effect on BLI. Trust is critical in digital food consumption, and customers tend to be loyal to restaurants they perceive as digitally reliable.

4.5.3 Model 3: ERC → BLI

Predictor	β	t	Sig.
ERC	0.482	11.03	0.000

Model Summary: $R^2 = 0.324$, $F = 109.87$, $p < 0.001$

ERC shows the strongest direct influence ($\beta = 0.482$) among the three predictors, explaining 32.4% of the variance in BLI. This highlights the importance of authentic, detailed, and credible online reviews in shaping loyalty decisions.

4.6 Combined Regression Model for DEQ, OTP, ERC → BLI

Predictor	β	t	Sig.
DEQ	0.218	4.82	0.000
OTP	0.241	5.35	0.000
ERC	0.312	7.02	0.000

Model Summary:

$R^2 = 0.511$, $F = 197.14$, $p < 0.001$

Together, DEQ, OTP, and ERC explain **51.1%** of the variance in BLI—an exceptionally strong combined effect. ERC remains the strongest predictor, followed by OTP and DEQ. This demonstrates that loyalty in digital restaurant ecosystems is multi-dimensional and significantly shaped by digital cues.

4.7 Regression Model: Digital Predictors → DIS

Predictor	β	t	Sig.
DEQ	0.312	7.95	0.000
OTP	0.284	7.41	0.000
ERC	0.356	9.02	0.000

Model Summary:

$R^2 = 0.554$, $F = 219.62$, $p < 0.001$

DEQ, OTP, and ERC collectively explain **55.4%** of the variance in DIS. This shows that better digital experiences, higher trust, and credible reviews directly enhance the intensity of digital interaction. ERC again exhibits the strongest predictive power.

4.8 Regression Model: DIS → BLI

Predictor	β	t	Sig.
DIS	0.618	15.87	0.000

Model Summary:

$R^2 = 0.416$, $F = 251.78$, $p < 0.001$

DIS strongly predicts BLI, explaining 41.6% of its variance. With a β -value of 0.618—the highest among all models—DIS emerges as the most influential factor in building loyalty. Consumers who interact frequently and deeply with brands online develop stronger emotional and behavioural loyalty.

4.9 Mediation Analysis (Testing H4 and H5)

DIS was tested as a mediator using **Baron & Kenny's four-step approach** and supported by **Sobel Test**.

Step 1: Digital Predictors → BLI

(Significant)

Step 2: Digital Predictors → DIS

(Significant)

Step 3: DIS → BLI

(Significant)

Step 4: Digital Predictors → BLI (With DIS added)

Predictor	β (Before)	β (After Mediation)	Mediation Type
DEQ	.431	.187	Partial
OTP	.458	.209	Partial
ERC	.482	.221	Partial

Sobel Test Results:

- DEQ → DIS → BLI = 8.12 ($p < 0.001$)
- OTP → DIS → BLI = 7.54 ($p < 0.001$)
- ERC → DIS → BLI = 9.02 ($p < 0.001$)

DIS partially mediates all three relationships, confirming that digital engagement acts as a psychological bridge converting digital perceptions into loyalty behaviour. Even when direct effects exist, the inclusion of DIS significantly strengthens loyalty formation. This supports **H4 and H5**.

4.10 Hypothesis Testing Summary

Hypothesis	Statement	Result
H1	DEQ significantly influences BLI	Supported
H2	OTP significantly influences BLI	Supported
H3	ERC significantly influences BLI	Supported
H4	DIS significantly influences BLI	Supported
H5	DIS mediates DEQ/OTP/ERC → BLI	Supported

4.11 Overall Interpretation

The findings clearly demonstrate that digital experiences and perceptions exert a strong influence on brand loyalty formation among restaurant customers. DEQ, OTP, and ERC each play distinct yet interconnected roles in shaping loyalty. However, the results show that e-WOM Review Credibility (ERC) exerts the strongest influence, reflecting the growing reliance on user-generated online feedback in the digital age.

Digital Interaction Strength (DIS) plays a crucial mediating role, transforming digital perceptions into emotional attachment and behavioural commitment. The significance of DIS suggests that repeated and meaningful digital interactions—such as browsing menus, engaging with social media content, and reading credible reviews—are essential in building loyalty.

Together, the results validate the integrated model and highlight the centrality of digital ecosystems in modern hospitality branding.

5. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to examine how Digital Experience Quality (DEQ), Online Trust Perception (OTP), and e-WOM Review Credibility (ERC) shape Brand Loyalty Intention (BLI) among restaurant consumers, and to investigate the mediating role of Digital Interaction Strength (DIS) in the digital loyalty formation process. Using empirical data from 600 digitally active consumers in the Indore Division, the study provides actionable insights into how restaurants can build stronger customer loyalty through optimized digital ecosystems.

The findings demonstrate that the restaurant consumer's loyalty behaviour is no longer determined solely by physical service quality or food taste; rather, loyalty is strongly rooted in the quality of digital experiences that precede and surround consumption. DEQ has a significant influence on BLI, confirming that a seamless digital interface—smooth navigation, responsive platforms, well-designed menus, frictionless payments, and personalized suggestions—encourages consumers to commit to a restaurant brand. Consumers interpret digital quality as symbolic of overall service excellence, which enhances confidence in the brand and encourages repeated patronage.

OTP also emerged as a strong predictor of BLI. In the digital age, trust has become the central psychological filter through which consumers evaluate restaurants. The study establishes that trust in digital transactions, confidence in online representations of the restaurant, verified profiles, and transparent digital communication collectively shape consumer loyalty. When trust is compromised, even superior digital experiences fail to sustain loyalty, highlighting the importance of digital integrity in hospitality branding.

ERC exerted the strongest direct effect on loyalty. The digital consumer in 2024–25 values authentic, detailed, and balanced online reviews. Review credibility serves as a powerful social proof mechanism, reducing uncertainty and providing reassurance in competitive restaurant markets. Detailed narratives, reviewer identity, recency, and accuracy

significantly strengthen the consumer's decision to return to or recommend a restaurant. In a market where consumers are saturated with choices, ERC becomes the primary differentiator.

One of the most significant contributions of the study is the validation of Digital Interaction Strength (DIS) as a robust mediator between digital perceptions and loyalty outcomes. DIS captures how deeply and frequently consumers interact with the restaurant's digital content—through likes, shares, browsing behaviour, review reading, and social media engagement. Mediation results confirm that positive digital perceptions translate into loyalty only when they generate strong digital interactions. This means consumers develop loyalty not simply because they trust a brand or read credible reviews, but because they repeatedly engage with the digital presence of the restaurant. This finding aligns with global digital behaviour patterns, where habitual digital interaction leads to brand familiarity, emotional bonding, and long-term behavioural commitment.

The empirical model validated in this study reinforces the idea that loyalty formation in restaurants is a multi-dimensional, digitally mediated process. It highlights that restaurants must adopt an integrated approach to digital strategy—ensuring high digital experience quality, building trust through transparency, promoting authentic reviews, and fostering continuous digital engagement. These findings hold significant practical implications for restaurant managers, digital marketers, and hospitality strategists. Restaurants must prioritize investment in digital platforms, SEO, trustworthy online information, interactive content creation, and review management systems. Strengthening these aspects can create a sustainable digital loyalty pipeline, ensuring continued competitiveness in an increasingly digital marketplace.

The study does have certain limitations. Being cross-sectional, it captures consumer perceptions at one point in time and may not reflect shifts in digital behaviour over longer periods. Additionally, the study focuses exclusively on digitally active consumers from urban Indore, limiting generalizability to rural or non-digital populations. Future research can expand to longitudinal designs, multi-city comparisons, or qualitative studies exploring deeper emotional and psychological aspects of digital interaction. There is also scope to incorporate emerging digital trends such as AI-driven personalization, augmented reality menus, and influencer-mediated engagement in future studies.

Despite these limitations, the study makes significant theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it expands digital consumer behaviour literature by validating a comprehensive loyalty model integrating experience quality, trust, review credibility, and digital interaction strength. Practically, the results provide restaurants with an evidence-based roadmap for improving digital branding and loyalty outcomes. In a world where digital impressions dominate consumer decision-making, restaurants must move beyond transactional digital presence and invest in holistic digital ecosystems that foster trust, interaction, and long-term loyalty.

In conclusion, digital loyalty in the restaurant sector is shaped by a synergy of experiential, informational, trust-based, and interactional dimensions. Restaurants that excel in creating high-quality digital experiences, fostering trust, ensuring credible reviews, and encouraging frequent digital interactions are more likely to build strong brand loyalty among consumers. The validated model from this study provides a robust framework for restaurants seeking to strengthen their digital competitiveness and customer retention in the evolving digital landscape.

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