



AI-driven customer engagement in entrepreneurial platforms: a conceptual model for driving brand loyalty in the digital start-up era

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Abstract: As the development rate of AI began to gain momentum in this digital era, it has initiated a revolution in the field of marketing, which none could ever think of. The moment it was deemed possible to alleviate such tiresome operations and create real-time, personalized experiences, technologies related to AI began changing the existing trend by which brands interact with their consumers. In this regard, start-ups are expected to reap the benefits of such developments at a larger scale, unlike other more established and resource-intensive companies or groups of enterprises. They can leverage technologies related to AI, which, by being cost-effective, will help them formulate strategies that do not only reach the targeted consumers but also engage them on a deeper, more significant level. The capability to operate at larger scales without charging such costs provides start-ups with a stepping stone towards developing a competitive advantage compared to others. The marketing solutions offered by technologies related to AI, such as the automation of customer service through chatbots, recommendation engines, and predictive analytics, have already proved its worth with respect to enhancing customer experiences. Nevertheless, in spite of the speedy increase in their uptake, there remains a conceptual void about their long-run contribution to customer engagement and brand loyalty in the entrepreneurial and start-up environment. The majority of what has been written to date centers on either the technical competence of AI or the marketing performance results of AI in the short run; in other words, there has been no noticeable attention to the lion's share of AI-applications--namely, their contribution to long-run consumer brand relationships. This current study undertakes the development of a conceptual model that integrates AI marketing applications with customer engagement and brand loyalty constructs in the digital start-up environment. The conceptual model is grounded in service-dominant logic and relationship marketing theories with value being seen as something that should be produced between firms and customers over time that should be appropriate for all individuals. It implies an improvement in different aspects of engaging activities such as interactive communication, offers, and services by marketing machinery fueled by AI. This, in turn, has given rise to the concept of a mediating influence on brand loyalty and AI adoption. There has also been consideration of the start-up context as a moderating factor in this model to incorporate the aspects of entrepreneurial flexibility and innovation culture.

It also allows for various situations through the direct and indirect routes of association. The direct route is used to address situations in which the application of AI tools will be subject to brand loyalty through enhanced perceptions of innovativeness and distinction of brand. The indirect route allows for situations in which, apart from a handful of cases, the application of AI tools in association with brand loyalty is subject to enhanced quality of engagement, which is further measured through strands of emotional attachment, behavior-based engagement, and advocacy. The moderating impact of the start-up environment might help in recognizing the possibilities that might explain how some exceptions, wherein the supply and accessibility of resources and the role

of firm founder might be treated as moderating factors. From a theoretical perspective, this paper intends to draw upon the knowledge acquired from studies related to AI marketing, customer engagement, and brand loyalty and shape them into an integrated framework to enhance application in relation to the field of entrepreneurial sciences. Further, this paper, following its earlier contribution to the recognition and understanding of AI in terms of the dynamics of start-ups' operations. This research provides insightful contributions, in operational terms, for start-ups seeking insight into how to effectively use AI applications so that marketing processes can benefit while employing ethical strategies that reduce the digital gap for the different segments of customers, both technology-inclusive and technology-exclusive, so they can benefit from the adaptiveness of AI applications in creating exclusive customer experiences. Such conceptual analysis has significantly contributed to knowledge as it allows the reader to be enriched with further insight as they come to grasp, through an in-depth manner, how the process of marketing with AI helps in creating customer loyalty in an environment where resources and innovations are scarce. This is through the identification of key mechanisms and contingencies involved so that such knowledge may be promoted for its application in later stages as it enables the operation of start-ups with the promise and complexity of AI.

Keywords: AI, Brand Loyalty, Customer Engagement, Entrepreneurial Marketing, Tools for Digital Marketing

Introduction

Digital start-ups are highly motivated by the new era of marketing potential that results from the application of artificial intelligence technology. The artificial intelligence technology has presented a platform that enables reaching as many customers as possible. There are many different studies that show that the ability for a digital start-up to retain customers is essential for the start-up's success. Therefore, the start-up must be focused on creating a platform that enables them to interact with the customers as much as possible. Similarly, customer engagement has always required human interaction based on instincts. However, with technologies integrated into customer relations, it is possible to engage consumers on a deeper level using hyper-personalized content. Though customer needs are never constant, it is therefore imperative to know how start-ups can plan to create customer emotional connection with the company. Although Artificial Intelligence technologies in the sphere of marketing have developed, the conceptual value of this technology to customer engagement and loyalty is demonstrated in a few studies, in particular, in the context of the start-up companies. The majority of the studies do not look directly at entrepreneurial and relational sides of branding, and many of them concentrate on large businesses or technical realization of AI. This is a conceptual paper that seeks to close this gap of knowledge by:

- It is a blend of certain theories of AI marketing, customer interaction and brand loyalty.
- In consideration of digital startups, the relationship between these constructs towards each other.
- To develop a conceptual model whereby theoretical propositions can be developed and then empirically tested at a later time.

The findings of this paper seek to contribute both to theory and practice, providing a first point from which to observe how AI can be utilized to establish inclusive, sustainable, and loyal customer relationships in entrepreneurial settings.

Literature Review

The link between artificial intelligence, customer engagement, brand loyalty within the context of a digital start-up is an excellent case for academic exploratory research. For it is true that all three topics have been exhaustively studied. Yet it is also true that where the three overlap namely in entrepreneurship there is a glaring need for further academic research. Moreover, the review is enriched with four thematic topics.

Artificial Intelligence in Marketing

Artificial intelligence marketing can be defined as the use of algorithms, machine learning algorithms, and automation methods to carry out marketing activities that classically involved the use of human intelligence, including decision-making, personalization, and natural language processing (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2019). AI technologies, which include chatbots (Shumanov & Johnson, 2021), predictive analytics tools (Wedel & Kannan, 2016), and recommender systems (Jannach et al., 2016), enable marketers to analyze large data sets for patterns and personalize messages in real-time.

Theoretically, the potential for value creation with AI is based in Technology Acceptance Theory (Davis, 1989) and Service-Dominant Logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), with both emphasizing co-creation of value enabled by technology. For the marketing aspects of AI, the three key value points for its implementation are (Huang & Rust, 2021):

1. Cognitive – processing large volumes of data to derive insights,
2. Affective – mimicking empathy through sentiment analysis and tone adaptation,
3. Conative – prompting customer reactions via tailored suggestions.

Although research does indicate its potential in personalization (Chatterjee et al., 2021) and determining effective decisions (Marinchak et al., 2018), little research exists on larger organizations. No research offers a start-up point of view; however, these businesses could utilize AI to address resource constraints, reduce customer cost of acquisition, and build scalable marketing infrastructures from scratch.

Customer Engagement Theory

According to Customer Engagement Theory, customer engagement is a multidimensional concept that possesses cognition, emotion, and behavior (Brodie et al., 2011; Vivek et al., 2012). In this way, the customers are engaged once they are actively involved in the offers by the brand, community, and values to produce co-created value.

AI affects engagement in the following ways:

- Personalized delivery of content (Bleier et al.2019)
- Conversational marketing through voice assistants and chatbots (Chaves & Gerosa 2021)
- Predictive analytics-based proactive service interventions (Nguyen et al., 2020)

Research has also established that the levels of engagement increase with perceived usefulness (Hollebeek et al., 2019) and facility for interaction (Bowden et al., 2021), with all these benefits boosted by AI technology. However, there has been no exploration of the entrepreneurial circumstance in which engagement forms the foundation for brand creation from scratch.

Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty has generally been conceptualized as a consumer's commitment to repay or prescribe a brand, theorized as attitudinal loyalty-which is an essentially positive attitude toward and trust in the brand-and behavioral loyalty-repetitive buying (Oliver, 1999; Dick & Basu, 1994). Loyalty is a by-product of strategy because repeat customers lead to reduced acquisition costs and consequently result in more stable revenue flows (Reichheld & Sasser, 1990).

AI-driven personalization and responsiveness have been proven to result in trust, as stated by Kaplan et al. (2020); satisfaction, according to Choudhury et al. (2022); and emotional bonding, as proved by Lemon & Verhoef (2016). While this may be the case, researchers also warn that when excessive, automation can make interactions feel robotic, reducing authenticity and, in turn, hurting loyalty. This is as suggested by Grewal et al. (2020). With start-ups, as a brand is yet to build its identity and credibility, a balance has to be maintained between automation and human influence.

The Entrepreneurial Context and Entrepreneurial Marketing

Entrepreneurial marketing is an interconnection between marketing planning and entrepreneurial posture under the provisions of innovativeness, risk-taking, proactiveness, and leverage of resources Morris et al., 2002; Hills et al., 2008. Unlike traditional marketing, EM thrives in conditions of uncertainty, where creative and experimental means of reaching niche markets would be applied to good use.

Digital start-ups are most of the time born digital or even born global, as Buhalis & Sinarta (2019) refer. They have been built up based on technology for scalability and reach. The AI allows for:

- Automate lead generation and conversion tracking (Guenzi & Nijssen, 2020),
- Run hyper-targeted campaigns at a minimal cost.
- Create real-time feedback loops for fast adaptation of products.

Yet, with case evidence supporting AI implementation in entrepreneurial marketing and although it has become more common, the theoretical aspect has not been properly articulated to link AI, engagement, and loyalty in start-up firms. The current paper tries to address this conceptual gap and proposes an integrated framework.

The Start-up Context and Entrepreneurial Marketing

Start-ups function within uncertainty, scarce resource, and rapid market penetration contexts. In turn, entrepreneurial marketing focuses on innovation, the identification of opportunity, risk-taking, and leveraging resources to create customer value in conditions of uncertainty. AI adoption suits entrepreneurial marketing paradigms in their provision of tools that support rapid experimentation with focused campaigns and real-time market feedback. This level of agility enables start-ups to adapt rapidly to customer preferences for optimization in engaging and loyalty-building processes.

Integrating AI, Engagement, Loyalty, and Start-up Strategy

While AI roles in entrepreneurial marketing, customer interaction, brand loyalty, and marketing have been studied as independent concepts, no prior research has integrated these concepts with respect to start-ups, and hence, the current conceptual article leans towards filling the knowledge gap by proposing the concept of AI marketing platforms and their role in facilitating customer interaction and brand loyalty through the entrepreneurial marketing culture created by digital start-ups.

Table 1

<i>Literature Domain</i>	<i>Key Contributions</i>	<i>Gaps Identified</i>
AI in Marketing	Tools like Chatbot & Recommender Systems facilitate personalization	Lack of focus on the use of AI in resource-constrained start-ups
Customer Engagement	First of all, engagement is multi-dimensional, while AI has the potential	No research directly relates artificial intelligence-driven engagement and loyalty.
Brand Loyalty	Loyalty related to trust, satisfaction, and emotional attachment	Over-Automation Risk, Lack of Emotional Depth in AI Interactions
Start-up Marketing	EM uses tech for market engagement under constraints	Limited theory linking EM, AI, and loyalty in digital start-ups

Conceptual Framework

The research paper puts forward the idea of a blended conceptual model regarding the relationships between marketing tools that use artificial intelligence for engagement of the customers and brand loyalty, in particular, in relation to the digital startups. In the context of this research, customer engagement is used as an intermediary role between the use of AI and brand loyalty, relying on the foundations of the Customer Engagement Theory, the Technology Acceptance Theory, and the concept of Entrepreneurial Marketing.

The model reflects the reality of the start-up world in that:

- Constrained resources but with high innovation potential.
- Having to quickly gain customers and build trust in the brand.
- Heavily using digital channels that AI technologies can accelerate, personalize, and scale.

Model Components and Relationships

Independent Variable-AI-driven marketing tools

AI-powered applications-which range from chatbots and recommendation engines to predictive analytics-can automate, personalize, and optimize marketing activities.

AI enables dynamic segmentation, personalized offers, and availability for service any time of the day; hence, it provides a base for engagement.

Mediating Variable-Customer Engagement

The affective, cognitive, and conative commitment of customers to brand experiences Brodie et al., 2011

Engagement is crucial in any start-up scenario to get the brand differentiated and into early markets. AI elevates engagement by making interaction much more salient, timely, and convenient.

Dependent Variable -Brand Loyalty

Loyalty of a customer to purchase or recommend a brand. (Oliver, 1999)

In start-ups, building loyalty is a tenuous concept, and building trust has to happen quickly, with a high dependence on repetition of positive experiences. Scalability of personalization experiences enables loyalty building, and this is where AI applications have tremendous opportunities.

Moderating Context-Digital Start-up Context

The engagement and loyalty in the context of the adoption of AI would be influenced by the agility and innovativeness of the start-ups and the volatility of the market. The entrepreneurial marketing attitude would dictate the AI implementation.

Theoretical Propositions

The propositions are as follows based on the literature review:

P1: When it comes to customer engagement, the effect of the use of AI-based marketing tools by digital start-ups in the case is positive.

P2: Customer engagement mediates the relationship between AI-based marketing tools and brand loyalty, and the effects of more customer engagement actually increase brand loyalty.

P3: The impact of AI-based marketing tools in developing brand loyalty is higher in high entrepreneurial orientation start-up businesses than in low orientation start-up businesses.

P4: Too much dependence on AI, if not supplemented with humanized interaction, may reduce the level of emotional engagement, thus minimizing the levels of loyalty acquisition

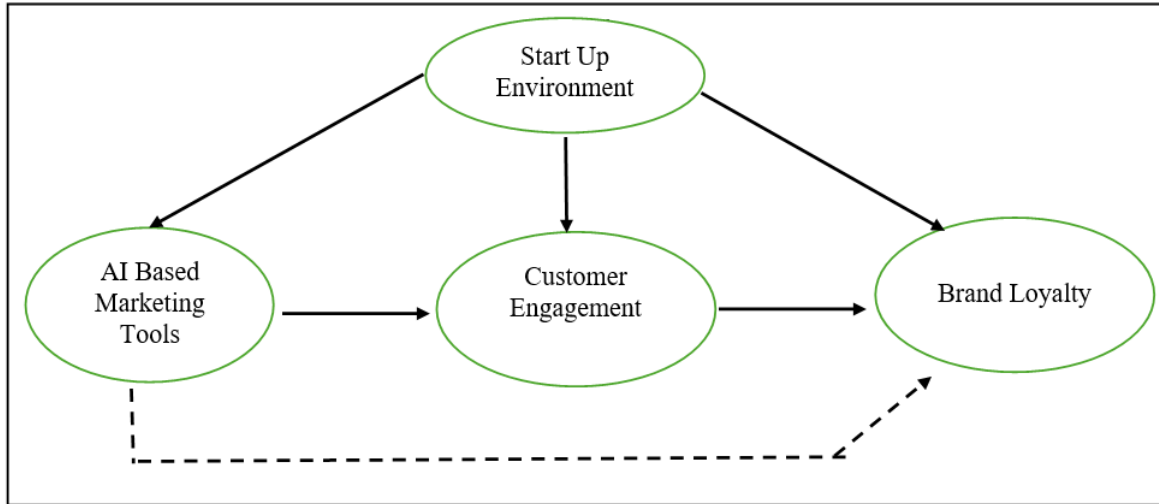
Conceptual Model Diagram

The following diagram shows the variable and relationship in the suggested framework.

Model Description:

- Lines from AI-based marketing tools → Customer Engagement → Brand Loyalty (mediation path).
- Dotted line from AI-based marketing tools → Brand Loyalty (direct impact).
- Moderating variable – Start-up environment – influencing the AI → Engagement and Engagement → Loyalty paths.

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Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Source: Developed by the authors based on literature review (Huang & Rust, 2021; Brodie et al., 2011; Oliver, 1999).

Methodology

Research Design

The conceptual research design followed in this paper is aimed at creating and describing a theoretical framework that would connect AI-driven marketing tools and customer engagement and brand loyalty within the digital start-up ecosystem. Conceptual papers are useful in building academic knowledge when a phenomenon is relatively new and empirical data on the topic are scarce (Jaakkola, 2020). Instead of collecting primary data, the paper synthesizes and integrates knowledge from existing peer-reviewed articles, industry reports, and theoretical models of marketing, entrepreneurship, and information systems.

Framework Development Approach

The research process followed an integrated research method (integrated reviews, Torraco, 2005). This method integrates various sources and viewpoints:

- Identification of Core Constructs – Customer engagement, AI-based marketing tools, and brand loyalty were operationally defined and conceptually defined with the help of seminal studies (e.g., Huang & Rust, 2021; Brodie et al., 2011; Oliver, 1999).
- Theory Selection – In this step, the theory has chosen Customer Engagement Theory, Technology Acceptance Theory, and Entrepreneurial Marketing Theory to describe the relationships.
- Conceptualization – The term was conceptualized and circulated within the digital start-up environment to encompass dimensions such as agility, resource shortage, and market uncertainty.
- Proposition Development – Logical connections were made based on identified thematic patterns in the literature, and testable theoretical propositions were established.

Data Sources

Although no primary data has been collected, the following secondary sources are used in the research:

- Academic Journal Articles accessed from databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar.
- Reports from global consultancy firms on AI in marketing (McKinsey, Deloitte).
- Case studies of AI adoption in start-ups from entrepreneurship literature.

Sample Size

The study does not use a sample of data to support its research as it is based on a conceptual research design. Instead, it is based on an extensive study of literature available on the subject of artificial intelligence marketing and start-ups.

Rationale

This study aims to create a theoretical framework rather than test a hypothesis empirically, a conceptual methodology was deemed appropriate. This is because a conceptual methodology would enable the integration of multiple theoretical perspectives from multiple sources and create propositions which could guide future studies with appropriate sample sizes.

Analytical Process

The literature has been assessed using thematic synthesis, which comprised:

- Classifications - Classify the data based on technological, behavioral, and entrepreneurial aspects.
- Comparison: An analysis of similarities and differences in information about resulting effects.
- Integration: Keeping in mind the overall integration-things fitting together-in developing an integrated conceptual model in terms of what variables and what relationships.

Mitigating Internal Bias in the Study

In order to mitigate potential internal bias, a structured and transparent literature synthesis approach was followed in this conceptual study. First, the integrative review method suggested by Torraco (2005) was employed to systematically identify, compare, and synthesize scholarly contributions from multiple disciplines, including marketing, entrepreneurship, and information systems. The use of multiple and diverse academic databases like Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar helped to mitigate potential biases of selection. Second, a thematic synthesis approach was followed in which data was grouped into technological, behavioral, and entrepreneurial perspectives. This helped to mitigate potential internal bias since data was systematically grouped into categories, allowing patterns to emerge from data rather than from preconceived assumptions of researchers. Third, potential constructs like AI-driven marketing tools, customer engagement, and brand loyalty were defined using well-established theoretical foundations like Customer Engagement Theory, Technology Acceptance Theory, and Entrepreneurial Marketing Theory. Finally, triangulation of data sources from multiple literature sources like academic journals, industry reports, and start-up case studies helped to mitigate potential internal bias and enhance the reliability of the proposed conceptual framework.

Justification for Conceptual Approach

The conceptual approach is justified here:

- Novelty of the Phenomenon - AI as a marketing factor in start-ups is a developing concept. Hence, it has not been backed up by substantial empirical evidence.
- Prioritizing Theory Building: The propositions need to be constructed in a manner which allows for further testing at a later time, whether qualitative or quantitative.
- Multidisciplinary in Nature: As it focuses on marketing and entrepreneurship literature as well as technology adoption, it necessitates one to take a synthesizing approach.

Methodology guarantees:

- Theoretical contribution- this can be achieved through an explanation of the relationship between AI tools, engagement, and entrepreneurial loyalty.
- Managerial Relevance: A template for new entrepreneurs on how to effectively leverage AI for loyalty.
- Research Foundation: Propose or put forward something that can be empirically tested in the future.

Results and Discussion

Within the domain of this conceptual research paper, no specific data sets were collected, though concerning the model discussed, there are various theoretical and practical implications for the application of marketing AI technology in terms of the promotion of brand loyalty and consumer response for digital start-ups.

Theoretical Insights

- **AI as a Strategic Enabler in Start-ups**-The proposed model perceives AI, instead of being included in the marketing mix, as a vital component that could help entrepreneurs make their marketing more responsive, engage more with their target customers, and help build trust with them. This method expands on the entrepreneurly marketing theory by showing that this technique has the potential to reduce the resource gaps, which start-ups typically face.
- **Customer Engagement as a Mediator**-The importance of customer engagement between AI tools and brand loyalty is also demonstrated within this model. In addition, the successful use of AI tools relative to aspects of brand personalization, time sensitivity, and interactivity facilitates a cognitive and emotional connection that results in loyalty.
- **Entrepreneurial Context as a Moderator**-In the context of the start-up environment, the extent to which AI tool implementation occurs can be mediated or moderated by the level of agility, risk, and innovation that may spur the advancement of the process of loyalty development.

Managerial Implications

Specific to Founders and Start-up Teams: AI implementation can create a competitive advantage by offering highly personalized marketing experiences at a low or no additional cost of operation.

To Marketing Practitioners: Likewise, customer behavior may be predicted by using AI analytics, which in return could lead to suitable customer retention strategies, especially when early adopters are encouraged to become involved in advocacy and referral schemes.

For Policy Makers and Incubators: AI infrastructure and training offered to start-ups could help to increase inclusivity to enable small businesses to compete favorably with large brands.

Contribution to Literature

This study makes a contribution to the literature of AI marketing field, theory of customer engagement, studies on brand loyalty and entrepreneurial marketing in so far as it links them together in an integrated conceptual framework. It fills in part of the current lack of understanding of how the above concepts interplay with each other in the context of start-up companies.

Conclusion

The paper is a theory-based paper that bases its argument on the concept of bridging marketing software that employs the use of artificial intelligence and customer relations/engagements within the entrepreneurship start-ups. Through its focus on customer engagement theory, entrepreneurial marketing, and brand loyalty, the paper aims to illuminate and underscore the revolution espoused by artificial intelligence as opposed to its traditional use as a mere enabler.

Three insights can be gleaned from the model:

- Adoption of AI technology by start-ups holds the potential with reference to strategies related to enhancing engagement and loyalty.
- Customer engagement is probably going to be a critical factor as a mediator variable linking customer loyalty and AI adoption.
- The nature of the start-up company, with its flexible nature and willingness to take risks, plays part in determining the possible use of the potential of AI.

While the approach of the model is theoretical, it provides means for its further empirical test by qualitative or mixed-methods inquiry. For instance, such testing could involve qualitative interviews with founders, case studies of AI-facilitated start-ups, or consumer perception research. Empirical test would enhance the strength of the proposed

relationships and lead to more specific managerial advice. Conclusion: AI marketing allows start-ups to balance scarce resources with competitive exposure in markets toward sustainable brand relationships in the digital economy.

Bias Mitigation and Validity of Conclusions

Although the present study is based on a conceptual approach without primary empirical data, a number of methodological measures were taken to mitigate bias and increase the validity of the conclusions drawn from the study. The conceptual model and propositions were developed by conducting an integrative literature review of peer-reviewed articles, ensuring that the conclusions drawn are not based on personal opinion but are grounded in existing theoretical and empirical literature. The study's propositions are further strengthened by the use of insights from multiple academic disciplines like marketing, entrepreneurship, and information systems. This helps to mitigate bias and ensures a comprehensive understanding of AI-driven customer engagement. Moreover, the use of widely accepted theories like Customer Engagement Theory, Technology Acceptance Theory, and Entrepreneurial Marketing Theory ensures a robust theoretical foundation for deriving conclusions from the study. The propositions drawn in this study are not hypothetical but are logically derived from consistent patterns observed in literature. Moreover, it is also important to note that the framework is meant to be a guide for testing through qualitative or quantitative research methodologies in the future. Such an approach ensures that the results remain amenable to testing and refinement as new evidence becomes available, thereby providing a more robust contribution to knowledge.

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Shwetha S is a Research Scholar in the Department of Business Administration, Tumkur University, Karnataka, India. Currently, she is working as an Assistant Professor in PES University, Bengaluru. She possesses over fifteen years of academic experience in teaching and research in various subjects like marketing, entrepreneurship, accounting, and digital business. Her research areas of interest include artificial intelligence in marketing, customer engagement strategies, brand loyalty, digital business, and entrepreneurial ecosystems.

She is actively involved in presenting research papers in various conferences and continues to contribute to academic discussions on emerging areas in digital marketing and technology-based business strategies. Along with her research contributions, she is also a co-author of academic books on Management Accounting, Cost Management, and International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS). She is actively involved in expanding and enriching her research knowledge in areas like exploring emerging technologies and their impact on customer engagement strategies, marketing innovation, and business growth strategies. Her current research work is focused on exploring the strategic impact of artificial intelligence-based marketing tools in improving customer engagement and brand loyalty in digital business ecosystems.

Prof Noor Afza

Prof. Noor Afza is currently serving as the Head and Chairperson of the Department of Business Administration at Tumkur University in Karnataka, India. She has considerable academic experience in teaching and research in marketing management, consumer behavior, and entrepreneurship. She has guided numerous research scholars for their postgraduate and doctoral degrees and published numerous research articles in various national and international journals of repute. She is currently involved in various research activities in areas such as customer relationship management, digital marketing strategies, consumer behavior, entrepreneurial marketing, and sustainable business practices. She actively participates in various national and international conferences and research activities with the aim of contributing to knowledge creation in marketing and management fields.

Prof. Noor Afza is currently interested in carrying out inter-disciplinary research in areas that combine emerging technologies with various strategic marketing approaches. She is currently engaged in academic activities that aim at creating knowledge in areas related to how technological innovation and digital transformation impact consumer behavior and business growth. She is currently contributing to knowledge creation in marketing and management fields through her leadership and academic work.