Nike's Strategy in Cultivating Customer Advocacy: A Case Study on Successful Brand Engagement and Consumer Loyalty

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Abstract

This study examines Nike's strategy for building customer advocacy through a brand engagement and consumer loyalty approach, by analyzing content contained on Nike's official website and the Nike Run Club (NRC) application. In the era of digital interconnectedness, consumer behavior is undergoing a transformation that extends beyond buying products to include being observers, reviewers, and even brand advocates. This dynamic drives the emergence of an experience-based economy, where consumers expect personal and meaningful engagement. The qualitative method employed is the case study approach, which utilizes a thematic analysis based on the Empathy map framework to explore how Nike's digital messages evoke emotional and psychological experiences in consumers. The results of the study show that Nike has succeeded in orchestrating an immersive and integrated digital experience through NRC, which not only strengthens brand engagement but also transforms users into consistent and empowered brand advocates. It was found that strong brand engagement is needed as a strategic bridge between loyalty and advocacy, facilitating the shift from passive consumers to active and vocal communities. These findings contribute to understanding how digital content can strengthen the relationship between brands and consumers in the digital era..

Keywords: Customer advocacy, brand management, loayalitas konsumen, Nike run club, emphathy map

I. INTRODUCTION

In the digital era where everything is connected, consumer behavior has undergone a significant transformation. People now act not only as buyers, but also as observers, reviewers, and even brand advocates on various digital platforms. This dynamic has driven the emergence of an experience-based economy, where consumers increasingly expect personal and meaningful engagement beyond mere consumption activities, opening up new opportunities for brands to attract and retain their attention (de Regt et al., 2021). In this condition, companies are required to do more than just offer products; they must be able to build emotional connections, create meaningful experiences, and deliver values that resonate with the lifestyles and aspirations of their audiences (Ding et al., 2025; Mostafa & Kasamani, 2021)

While digital platforms such as social media and e-commerce provide a great opportunity to reach consumers more widely and personally, not all brands are successful in creating deep engagement. Technological changes and social dynamics also influence consumer preferences, making traditional loyalty approaches less relevant in explaining today's engagement patterns (Bing et al., 2024). In this highly competitive landscape, consumers have many choices and can easily switch to another brand if they do not feel emotionally connected or valued (Yuan, 2024). Therefore, the main challenge for brands today is not just to attract attention, but to retain and convert customers into active supporters or brand advocates (Sweeney et al., 2020).

How can communication and brand engagement strategies build strong loyalty and customer advocacy? Specifically, how does Nike, as one of the leading global brands, build a brand narrative that can form an emotional connection with its consumers and encourage them to voluntarily become brand advocates?

This study aims to examine Nike's strategy in building customer advocacy through a brand engagement and consumer loyalty approach, by analyzing strategic content on Nike's official website. The analysis was conducted using a thematic method based on the Empathy Map framework to reveal how Nike's digital messages create emotional and psychological experiences for consumers. The findings of this study are expected to provide theoretical and practical contributions in understanding how digital content can be used as a tool to strengthen the relationship between brands and consumers in today's digital era.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Brand Engagement Concept

Brand engagement refers to the psychological involvement of consumers in a brand, whether cognitively, affectively, or behaviorally. Brand engagement is defined as a motivational condition reflected in meaningful interactions between consumers and brands (Mostafa & Kasamani, 2021). In today's digital world, engagement is not only in the form of direct interactions, but also a narrative, visual content, and participation in brand communities.

Brand engagement is a dynamic process formed through experiences, shared values, and emotional connections between brands and consumers (Obiegbu & Larsen, 2024). This engagement is very important because it drives loyalty and advocacy behavior. Nike, as a large global brand, must build engagement through storytelling, social campaigns, and also a value-based approach.

B. Consumer Loyalty

Consumer loyalty is a strategic asset that goes beyond repeat purchases, becoming the foundation of a sustainable relationship between customers and companies. loyalty develops through four stages, namely cognitive (logic-based), affective (emotional), cognitive (strong intention to repurchase), to action loyalty (actual loyalty) (Meeprom & Kokkhangplu, 2025). The key to driving customers to this higher and more profitable stage of loyalty is through an effective brand engagement strategy, which is able to transform rational preferences into emotional attachments (Orea-Giner et al., 2025; Tegambwage & Kasoga, 2025).

Nike is a real-life example of how this theory is applied in practice. Through its digital ecosystem such as Nike Membership, the Nike Run Club (NRC) app, and Nike Training Club (NTC), Nike is not just selling products, but has succeeded in building an active and emotionally engaged global community. By providing added value beyond its physical products, Nike creates a strong affective bond, making customers feel like they are part of a movement

C. Customer Advocacy

Customer advocacy represents the highest level of customer loyalty, where a transactional relationship has transformed into a genuine, proactive support. An advocate not only makes repeat purchases, but also voluntarily recommends, defends, and promotes the brand to others. This process describes it as the peak phase in the customer engagement cycle, born of deep satisfaction and strong emotional connections. The main foundations for achieving this level are solid trust, a series of consistently positive customer experiences, and the alignment of values between the brand and the consumer's personal identity (Chell et al., 2024).

Nike is a prime case study that masterfully turns customer advocacy into a strategic asset. This is most evident when users of the Nike Run Club (NRC) or NTC app share their personal accomplishments, effectively serving as authentic and credible User-Generated Content (UGC). This phenomenon extends to the external realm, from detailed reviews by the sneakerhead community on YouTube, the organic spread of inspirational campaigns such as "You Can't Stop Us" whose resonance is rooted in value alignment, to proactive brand advocacy in online discussions. In doing so, Nike has successfully engineered an ecosystem where advocacy is no longer just a passive token of loyalty, but has become the most powerful and efficient word-of-mouth marketing engine, transforming its millions of customers into the most authentic brand ambassadors in the digital era (Irawan & Cheng, 2025; Lubis, 2024).
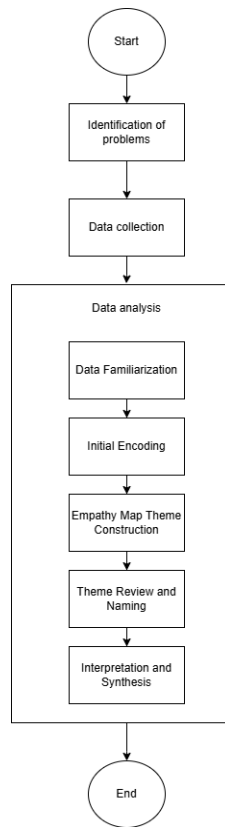
D. Empathy Map in Consumer Analysis

In this study, Empathy Map is adopted as the primary analytical framework. The aim is to gain a holistic understanding of the interaction between consumers and brand digital content. This visual tool systematically dissects the user experience across six key dimensions: Says, Thinks, Feels, and Does, complemented by fundamental motivator analysis of Pains and Gains (Sweeney et al., 2020).

By applying this framework to Nike website content, this study aims to map how values and emotions are communicated by the brand, while projecting the spectrum of psychological responses that consumers may experience (Chow & Ho, 2025). Therefore, the Empathy Map in this study serves not only as a visualization tool, but as a conceptual instrument that allows for in-depth interpretation of the meaning and effectiveness of Nike's brand engagement strategy.

III. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative method with a case study approach to explore Nike's communication strategy in building customer advocacy. With Nike as a representative example in brand engagement and building a global digital community. The research stages are as follows:

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A. Identification of problems

At this stage, researchers read and understand the content of the Nike website, then mark important parts (text, symbols, messages) by coding them. This code is then entered into the Empathy Map framework to understand the brand strategy from the emotional and psychological side of consumers. The final results will be analyzed thematically to find patterns of engagement and advocacy.

B. Data collection

The data collection stage in this study was carried out using the documentation study method, namely by accessing and browsing various contents available on the official Nike website (http://www.nike.com). The main focus was directed at pages that display digital campaigns, brand value narratives (brand purpose), and consumer loyalty programs such as Nike Membership. Data was collected in the form of text, images, and narrative elements officially published by Nike. Each content that was considered relevant was then archived and classified based on topic categories, such as brand engagement, loyalty, and consumer advocacy, to be further analyzed in the coding and mapping stages using the Empathy Map framework .

The object of the study is focused on the content of Nike's official website (nike.com), which is analyzed as a reflection of the designed communication strategy (intended strategy). The analysis is limited to the narrative elements of brand value, storytelling in digital campaigns, and loyalty program mechanisms such as Nike Membership, without examining the actual response from consumers.

C. Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using a hybrid approach that combines Thematic Analysis with the Empathy Map framework (Ding et al., 2025). Thematic Analysis serves to identify strategic patterns and themes in content, while Empathy Map is used to interpret these themes from the psychological perspective of projected consumers. The process systematically includes data coding, mapping codes into Empathy Map to build themes, and final interpretations linked to the theoretical framework (Steinebach et al., 2025). The data analysis process is carried out through five systematic stages:

1. Data Familiarization: The researcher read and reviewed all of the collected data to gain a thorough understanding of the context and nuances of Nike's communications.
2. Initial Coding: Data is broken down and labeled (coded) based on significant phrases, symbols, or narratives related to engagement, loyalty, and advocacy.
3. Theme Construction through Empathy Map: Relevant codes were then mapped into the six quadrants of the Empathy Map (Says, Thinks, Feels, Does, Pains, Gains). This process helped organize the data and transform it into coherent strategic themes.
4. Theme Review and Naming: Themes that emerge from the mapping are reviewed, refined, and given names that represent their strategic essence.
5. Interpretation and Synthesis: The final themes are interpreted and linked back to the relevant theoretical framework in the literature review to produce coherent research findings.

Thematic analysis was conducted using the Empathy Map approach that maps user experiences into eight main components: Says, Thinks, Feels, Does, Sees, Hears, Pain Points, and Gain Points (Lamoureux et al., 2024). The goal is to identify how consumers emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally respond to features in the NRC.

The quality and validity of this research were ensured through three main strategies: triangulation of sources by comparing multiple pieces of content across Nike's websites for consistency; an audit trail that transparently documented the entire analysis process; and researcher reflexivity to consciously manage subjectivity and ensure interpretations were firmly grounded in the data.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. General description of the content analyzed

Analysis of Nike Run Club (NRC) as Nike's main digital asset on the official website https://www.nike.com , accessed on June 6, 2025, reveals an integrated and immersive brand communication strategy. The app is not just a workout tool, but part of a brand narrative designed to transform users from casual runners to part of Nike's active, loyal and vocal global community. The consumer engagement journey begins with an emotional trigger, which is a personal motivation to live a healthy lifestyle and progress in running. Nike captures this need through guided runs, music integration and motivational narratives from professional coaches. This creates deep emotional resonance and makes the NRC app a personal companion on the fitness journey.

The next stage is relationship building, which occurs when users start interacting socially on the platform joining weekly challenges, sharing their runs on social media, and competing healthily on leaderboards. Nike has cleverly leveraged this digital community dynamic to build loyalty not just to the product, but to the lifestyle and values the brand stands for.

Ultimately, this engagement translates into active advocacy. Users who feel helped, motivated, and connected will voluntarily become brand promoters through various digital channels. They share their progress, encourage other runners, and even recommend the NRC app to friends. In this context, Nike Run Club becomes more than just an app it is a digital ecosystem that forms emotional, social, and functional loyalty simultaneously.

Thus, the content and features in the NRC demonstrate how Nike strategically orchestrates digital experiences that not only strengthen brand engagement but also transform users into consistent and empowered brand advocates.

B. Thematic Analysis based on Empathy Map Campaign A: Nike Run Club (NRC)

Nike Run Club (NRC) is one of the main digital assets of the Nike brand ecosystem, which not only functions as a sports activity tracker, but also as a tool to build emotional, social, and functional engagement with its consumers. This application offers various features such as guided runs, community challenges, personal performance tracking, and integration with social media and digital music.

The focus of this study is to analyze the content, features, and user experience of NRC through the Empathy Map approach (Gray, 2010), to identify how Nike builds brand engagement and drives consumer loyalty and advocacy. The results of the thematic analysis based on the empathy map are presented in the following table:

Empathy Element Map	Findings from campaign content
Say	1. "Come on, join the challenge!" 2. "The guided run is very exciting." 3. "I just finished 10K!"
Thinking about it	1. Want to live healthy and fit through sports 2. Worried about stagnant progress or injury
Felt	1. Motivated 2. Proud of progress Worried about declining performance Feeling part of a community
Do	1. Join the weekly challenge 2. Practice with guided run 3. Share your running results on Instagram/Strava 4. Inviting a running buddy
Viewed	Another runner shares his progress Professional and intuitive application design "Just Do It" Campaign
Listened to	1. Motivation from the virtual coach in a guided run 2. Testimonials from other users on social media

Pains	1. Error tracking and technical bugs 2. Sync is unstable 3. Limited features when offline 4. Ul is confusing for beginners 5. Privacy is not optimal
Gains	1. Running training with audio guidance 2. Tracking performance & personal goals 3. Integration with music 4. Active and supportive community of runners

The table shows how Nike builds a powerful emotional, cognitive, and social experience through the NRC application. This mapping forms the basis for drawing strategic brand engagement themes that are discussed further.

Based on the table above, it can be seen that the Nike Run Club user experience is not only dominated by functional needs such as performance tracking and training guidance, but also includes strong emotional, social, and psychological aspects.

In the "Thinks" and "Feels" elements, users show intrinsic motivation to become healthier, feel proud of their progress, and worry about possible stagnation or injury. Meanwhile, the "Says" and "Does" dimensions indicate active social behavior, such as inviting running friends, joining challenges, and sharing running results on social media. This indicates that NRC is not only a personal tool, but also functions as a social medium that encourages collective participation.

The "Sees" and "Hears" dimensions emphasize how Nike constructs an uplifting and aspirational digital atmosphere through professional visual design, positive campaigns, and the voice of the coach that builds enthusiasm. In this context, users do not only see the application, but experience the brand narrative in a multisensory way.

Furthermore, "Pain Points" aspects such as technical errors, confusing UI, and limited offline features show that even though NRC offers an immersive experience, there are still barriers that can affect user loyalty if not addressed strategically.

On the other hand, "Gain Points" shows the added value perceived by users such as access to professional training, personalization features, and music integration, all of which strengthen emotional engagement and expand the possibility of voluntary advocacy for the brand.

Through NRC, Nike has successfully combined emotional, social and digital engagement into one complete experience, which strategically builds loyalty and encourages consumers to become brand promoters organically.

Based on the results of the mapping and initial code analysis, several main themes emerged that were repeated and consistent in user responses to Nike Run Club. These themes were formulated as the foundation for the strategic interpretation of brand engagement discussed in the following sub-chapters. These themes include:
1. Personal and emotional motivation (healthy motivation, guided runs, self-improvement)
2. Social interaction and digital community (sharing running results, challenges, inviting friends)
3. Gamification and progress tracking (badges, personal targets, leaderboard) Coach support and audio coaching (motivation from the coach)
4. User technical barriers (error tracking, confusing UI, privacy)
5. Convenience and digital integration (music, UX, connection with other devices)

C. Nike Brand Engagement Strategic Themes

Based on the results of thematic mapping of content and features in Nike Run Club (NRC), a number of strategic themes were found that describe how Nike builds consumer engagement comprehensively, both emotionally, functionally, and socially. These themes not only show the brand's strength in creating meaningful digital experiences, but also explain the process of consumer transformation from passive users to brand advocates.
1. Emotional Engagement through Personal Motivation

    Nike Run Club delivers a personalized experience that motivates users to set and achieve health and fitness goals. Through features like guided runs , audio coaching systems, and music integration, users feel cared for and emotionally supported. This experience forms a strong affective connection between consumers and the brand.
2. Community Activation and Social Participation

    NRC serves not only as a running tracker, but also as a digital community space. The challenge feature , leaderboard , and the ability to share running results on social media allow users to connect and support each other. This interaction forms a sense of belonging that becomes the basis for loyalty and advocacy.
3. Gamification and Performance Tracking for Long-Term Loyalty

    Nike implements gamification elements such as achievements (badges), performance tracking, and personal goals. This creates an intrinsic reward system that encourages users to stay active. Repeated use and engagement with personal progress indirectly strengthen brand loyalty.

4. Digital Integration and Technological Convenience

NRC is designed with a professional, intuitive interface and is connected to various other platforms such as Strava, Spotify, and Apple Health. This shows Nike's ability to provide a seamless digital experience that blends with the lifestyle of urban modern users.

5. Technical Barriers as Engagement Challenges

While NRC generally offers a positive experience, several pain points were found, such as tracking errors, limited features when offline, and an interface that is less friendly to new users. These findings are important to consider in the context of developing future brand engagement.

The five themes above show that Nike's brand engagement strategy, especially through NRC, is comprehensive and structured. Nike does not just offer products or services, but presents an ecosystem of experiences that combine emotion, community, technology, and intrinsic motivation in one cohesive brand narrative. From the results of the empathy map, draw out the main themes such as Brand as a trigger for empowerment, Involvement through social issues, Community identity and inclusivity, Emotional narrative as a tool for building loyalty.

D. The Relationship between Engagement, Loyalty, and Advocacy

From the results of the empathy map , draw out the main themes such as Brand as a trigger for empowerment, Involvement through social issues, Community identity and inclusivity, Emotional narrative as a tool for building loyalty. The Relationship between Engagement, Loyalty, and Advocacy
The results of the analysis of Nike Run Club show that Nike's brand communication strategy is not only aimed at creating momentary engagement, but is designed to lead consumers through a progressive strategic path: from emotional and functional engagement, to ongoing loyalty, and ultimately to voluntary brand advocacy.

1. Engagement as the Initial Stage of Involvement

Nike built early engagement by creating personal and emotionally engaging experiences through features like guided runs , motivational coaching , and music integration. These engagements were personal and emotional, triggering a sense of being motivated, supported, and cared for by the brand. Users felt the app was not just a tool, but a digital companion who understood their personal goals.

2. Loyalty Through Experience and Repeat Participation

Strong engagement transforms into loyalty when users consistently use NRC to achieve their fitness goals. Through elements such as performance tracking, badges , and training programs, users experience personal growth that is tied to the app. Additionally, social interactions through community features and leaderboards strengthen the emotional connection, making NRC a part of their daily routine.

3. Advocacy As The Peak Of Engagement

The loyalty that is formed then gives rise to advocacy, where users voluntarily share their experiences, encourage other runners, and recommend Nike Run Club to their friends. Activities such as sharing running results on social media, participating in community challenges, and providing positive reviews are real forms of digital advocacy. Users are no longer just interacting with the brand, but are becoming active representatives of the values and lifestyle offered by Nike.

4. Nike's Brand Engagement Strategic Cycle

This process demonstrates the existence of a strategic cycle that is interconnected: Engagement, Loyalty, Advocacy, New Engagement. Advocacy by users indirectly creates new entry points for other consumers, who then start their own engagement cycles. Nike effectively builds a self-sustaining system , where the consumer community helps spread the brand value and strengthens Nike's position in the market. Thus, Nike Run Club is a concrete example of how an integrated and experience-based digital strategy can build deep emotional and social engagement, ultimately encouraging consumers to actively become part of the brand's narrative and growth.

V. Conclusion

This study has examined Nike's strategy in building customer advocacy through a brand engagement and consumer loyalty approach, by analyzing the content displayed on Nike's official website, especially through the Nike Run club (NRC) application. The findings of this study are that Nike effectively orchestrates an immersive and integrated digital experience, which not only strengthens brand engagement but also transforms users into consistent and empowered brand advocates.

Thematic analysis conducted using the Empathy Map framework reveals how Nike creates deep emotional and psychological experiences for its consumers. This strategy involves emotions through personal motivation, community activities, and social participation, as well as gamification and performance tracking for long-term loyalty. While there are technical challenges that hinder engagement, the implementation of digital and the ease of use of technology in general actually increases user engagement.

Conceptually, this study reinforces the understanding that brand engagement is not a separate element, but rather acts as a strategic link that drives the transition from customer loyalty to customer advocacy. Nike Run Club proves that in the digital era, an effective engagement platform such as a digital application is needed to facilitate the shift of consumers from ordinary users to active communities. The strategic cycle of Engagement-Loyalty-Advocacy found in this study shows how advocacy carried out by users indirectly

creates new entry points for other consumers, forming a self-sustaining system where the consumer community helps spread brand values and strengthens Nike's position in the market. Thus, Nike becomes a concrete case study of how an experience-based digital communication strategy can build deep emotional and social bonds, encouraging consumers to become an active part of the brand's narrative and growth.

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