AI-Enabled Customer Engagement, Online Brand Trust, and Sustainable Brand Equity in Platform-Based E-Commerce Distribution: A Conceptual Framework

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Abstract

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has significantly influenced interactions between e-commerce businesses and their customers on a day-to-day basis today. Recommendation engines, chatbots, automated service replies, and customer analytics can improve the frequency and efficacy of a brand's interactions with customers. However, increasing contact does not necessarily add value to a brand. This is a conceptual framework paper that presents a theoretical model that describes the impact of AI-Enabled Customer Engagement (AICE) on Sustainable Brand Equity (SBE) via online brand trust. This paper does not seek to make an environmental or social sustainability claim, but rather a claim that SBE is an attribute of customer-based brand value in the long term. The model is grounded in customer engagement theory, online trust research, the customer-based brand equity tradition, and the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) framework. It proposes four core relationships: AICE is proposed to influence SBE, AICE is proposed to influence online brand trust, online brand trust is proposed to influence SBE, and online brand trust is proposed to partially mediate the AICE-SBE relationship. Three new boundary conditions are formulated to extend this framework: non-linear (inverted-U) engagement-trust linkage, the role of perceived risk as a moderator, and the importance of algorithmic transparency as a condition that shifts the saturation point. The Thai e-commerce environment is chosen because official market statistics show that e-marketplaces and social commerce play significant roles as sales channels where AI-mediated engagement can be observed in customer journeys. As a conceptual contribution, this work presents a theory-building framework as opposed to empirical results in a platform-based and social-commerce distribution channels setting. Its main contribution is the introduction of the AI Engagement Saturation Model (AIESM), which postulates an inverted-U saturation effect of AICE on online brand trust until a certain saturation point, after which additional AI engagement deteriorates online brand trust.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence; Customer Engagement; Online Brand Trust; Sustainable Brand Equity; E-Commerce; Thailand; Perceived Risk

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การมีส่วนร่วมของลูกค้าที่ขับเคลื่อนด้วยปัญญาประดิษฐ์ ความไว้วางใจในตราสินค้าออนไลน์ และคุณค่าตราสินค้าที่ยั่งยืนในการกระจายสินค้าอีคอมเมิร์ซบนแพลตฟอร์ม: กรอบแนวคิดเชิงทฤษฎี

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บทคัดย่อ

ปัจจุบันปัญญาประดิษฐ์ (AI) มีอิทธิพลอย่างมากต่อปฏิสัมพันธ์ระหว่างธุรกิจอีคอมเมิร์ซกับลูกค้าในชีวิตประจำวัน ระบบแนะนำสินค้า แชตบอต การตอบกลับบริการอัตโนมัติ และการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลลูกค้า สามารถเพิ่มความถี่และประสิทธิผลของการปฏิสัมพันธ์ระหว่างตราสินค้ากับลูกค้าได้ อย่างไรก็ตาม การมีปฏิสัมพันธ์กับลูกค้าที่มากขึ้นไม่จำเป็นต้องเพิ่มคุณค่าให้แก่ตราสินค้าเสมอไป บทความนี้เป็นบทความเชิงแนวคิดที่นำเสนอแบบจำลองเชิงทฤษฎี ซึ่งอธิบายผลกระทบของการมีส่วนร่วมของลูกค้าที่ขับเคลื่อนด้วยปัญญาประดิษฐ์ (AICE) ต่อคุณค่าตราสินค้าที่ยั่งยืน (SBE) ผ่านความไว้วางใจในตราสินค้าออนไลน์ ทั้งนี้ บทความมิได้มุ่งอ้างความยั่งยืนด้านสิ่งแวดล้อมหรือสังคม แต่หมายถึง SBE ในฐานะคุณค่าตราสินค้าที่อิงกับลูกค้าในระยะยาว แบบจำลองนี้ตั้งอยู่บนทฤษฎีการมีส่วนร่วมของลูกค้า งานวิจัยด้านความไว้วางใจออนไลน์ แนวคิดคุณค่าตราสินค้าที่อิงกับลูกค้า และกรอบสิ่งเร้า-สภาวะภายใน-การตอบสนอง (SOR) โดยเสนอความสัมพันธ์หลัก 4 ประการ ได้แก่ AICE ส่งผลต่อ SBE, AICE ส่งผลต่อความไว้วางใจในตราสินค้าออนไลน์, ความไว้วางใจในตราสินค้าออนไลน์ส่งผลต่อ SBE และความไว้วางใจในตราสินค้าออนไลน์เป็นตัวแปรส่งผ่านบางส่วนของความสัมพันธ์ระหว่าง AICE กับ SBE จากนั้นขยายกรอบด้วยข้อเสนอเชิงขอบเขต 3 ประการ คือ ขีดจำกัดความสัมพันธ์ไม่เป็นเชิงเส้นแบบรูปตัวยูคว่ำ (Inverted-U) ระหว่างการมีส่วนร่วมกับความไว้วางใจ การรับรู้ความเสี่ยงในฐานะตัวแปรกำกับ และความโปร่งใสของอัลกอริทึมในฐานะเงื่อนไขที่เลื่อนจุดอิ่มตัว บริบทอีคอมเมิร์ซไทยถูกเลือกเนื่องจากหลักฐานเชิงตลาดอย่างเป็นทางการบ่งชี้ว่าตลาดกลางออนไลน์และโซเชียลคอมเมิร์ซเป็นช่องทางการขายหลักที่การมีส่วนร่วมผ่าน AI ปรากฏชัดในเส้นทางของลูกค้าประจำวัน ในฐานะบทความเชิงแนวคิด บทความนี้นำเสนอกรอบสำหรับการสร้างทฤษฎีมากกว่าการรายงานผลการวิจัย โดยวางอยู่ในบริบทช่องทางการกระจายสินค้าแบบแพลตฟอร์มและโซเชียลคอมเมิร์ซ ข้อเสนอหลักของบทความคือ แบบจำลองภาวะอิ่มตัวของการมีส่วนร่วมผ่าน AI (AIESM) ซึ่งอธิบายผลของภาวะอิ่มตัวแบบรูปตัวยูคว่ำ กล่าวคือ AI สร้างความไว้วางใจในตราสินค้าออนไลน์ได้เพียงจนถึงจุดอิ่มตัวที่ขึ้นกับความโปร่งใสและความเสี่ยง หลังจากนั้นการมีส่วนร่วมที่เพิ่มขึ้นจะบั่นทอนความไว้วางใจ

คำสำคัญ: ปัญญาประดิษฐ์; การมีส่วนร่วมของลูกค้า; ความไว้วางใจในตราสินค้าออนไลน์; คุณค่าตราสินค้าที่ยั่งยืน; อีคอมเมิร์ซ; ประเทศไทย; การรับรู้ความเสี่ยง

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Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) now shapes how e-commerce businesses interact with their customers. AI-powered recommendation engines suggest relevant offers before the customer makes a search request, bots reply to customers' queries, the process of abandoned cart recovery is conducted through automated emails, and customers' analysis determines the next offers to make. Studies demonstrate the impact of AI on service provision, personalization, and engagement (Davenport et al., 2020; Huang & Rust, 2018). Therefore, the main question of this work is to what extent the customer online journey with the help of AI helps build a stronger, more meaningful relationship with them. Thailand is used as a fitting example since the country has a well-developed digital commerce environment and a platform-based nature of its sales channels. According to the ETDA market release for 2024, e-commerce value amounts to THB 5.43 trillion in 2022 and is expected to reach THB 5.96 trillion in 2023. In 2022, e-marketplaces and social commerce became the primary selling channels for online retailers, contributing 51.7% of total e-commerce value as indicated in the B2C release by ETDA (Electronic Transactions Development Agency, 2024).

These conditions are important because marketplaces and social commerce are where customers will come across recommendation systems, chatbots, automatic replies, and data-driven offers.

Thailand is a meaningful market, rather than just a convenient one, as the online retail distribution network is significantly platform-centric and AI-driven. The distribution mode is still controlled by a handful of marketplace platforms (Shopee, Lazada, TikTok Shop); social commerce via LINE, Facebook, and Instagram is very prevalent; mobile payment (prominent, such as PromptPay, e-wallets) is common; and cash on delivery and last-mile logistics are still important factors of trust (ETDA, 2024). These factors focus on AI-mediated touchpoints (recommendation engines, chatbots, automated messaging) in a limited number of distribution channels, which makes Thailand an ideal context to understand the role of AI-mediated engagement and online brand trust in Sustainable Brand Equity (SBE). Thailand was selected as the focal setting not for convenience but because of the exceptionally rapid, leapfrog growth of its digital commerce and its highly platform-concentrated market structure, which together render it a theoretically rich context for examining AI-Enabled Customer Engagement (AICE) and online brand trust.

Customer engagement has long been regarded as a driver of brand outcomes. Engaged customers pay attention, interact, contribute, and return (Brodie et al., 2011; Van Doorn et al., 2010). AI alters the character of engagement because the interaction is partly delegated to a system. That delegation can create value when the system is competent and relevant. It can also damage the relationship when customers experience the system as intrusive, opaque, or indifferent. The same personalization which makes the brand useful for a customer can also make it intrusive for him/her. Recent reviews on the topic of AI and engagement ask for more research on mechanisms behind the AI-enabled engagement

effect and its downstream consequences (Suraña-Sánchez & Aramendia-Muneta, 2024). In order to bridge the gap, this work will pay attention to sustainable brand equity (SBE). In the current treatment, SBE is a concept of customer-based brand value–loyalty, associations, perceived quality, reputation, and relationship continuity–which is robust to repeated transactions, competitive offers, and occasional service failures. Sustainability does not imply ecological sustainability unless this aspect is separately measured. The main argument is simple: AI-enabled engagement can help to establish SBE, but it is not an automatic process. Trust serves as the mediator through which the repeated contact mediated by AI turns into SBE. When a customer believes in the reliability, security, transparency, and non-opportunistic behavior of the online brand, AI can enhance the customer-brand relationship, but in the opposite case, it makes the customer active without building brand loyalty. The current paper contributes to the literature by presenting the link between AI-enabled engagement and SBE, highlighting online brand trust as a mediator, situating the model in the Thai e-commerce distribution setting, and specifying the linkages based on the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) framework along with adding the boundary conditions of P5 (non-linear relationship), P6 (perceived risk), and P7 (algorithmic transparency) as moderators. Recent studies began to explore the effect of AI-driven interaction on engagement and loyalty in e-commerce platforms (Hassan et al., 2025; Shabankareh et al., 2025) and revealed that AI-powered personalization affects engagement indirectly, through trust and perceived usefulness rather than directly (Teepapal, 2025). However, these studies focused on the immediate effects of engagement, satisfaction, or loyalty and rarely theorized the moment when intensive AI engagement starts to destroy the online brand trust in a platform-based distribution channel.

The distinctive contribution of this paper is in the development of the AI Engagement Saturation Model (AIESM). Opposite to previous models that considered AI-enabled engagement to be always beneficial, this framework theorizes the existence of the AI engagement saturation effect, namely a non-linear (inverted-U) relationship in which AI-enabled engagement enhances online brand trust until a saturation point and deteriorates it after that point. This model is unique in three aspects. First, it names and specifies the AI engagement saturation effect, while although curvilinear and uncanny-valley effects of AI personalization are known (Nikolov et al., 2025; Song & Shin, 2022; Sun et al., 2025), to the authors' knowledge, none of these were integrated and specified as a saturation effect on the AI-enabled engagement-online brand trust path.

Second, it integrates three perspectives not previously combined: the SOR paradigm, privacy-calculus reasoning, and an uncanny-valley logic of over-humanised automation. Third, it locates the saturation point as a function of algorithmic transparency and perceived risk and organises the relationship into a four-regime typology of AI-enabled engagement (Table 2).

Research Objective

The objective of this conceptual paper is the development and theoretical discussion of a framework explicating how the AI-Enabled Customer Engagement (AICE) influences Sustainable Brand Equity (SBE) through online brand trust within platform-based and social-commerce distribution channels, as well as conditions that affect the degree of this influence.

Building on this, the study addresses four specific gaps: (a) prior AI-engagement studies have emphasised immediate engagement or customer experience rather than durable brand equity; (b) prior brand-trust studies have not sufficiently examined AI-mediated engagement within e-commerce distribution channels; (c) prior e-commerce research has not explained the non-linear trust effects of excessive AI engagement; and (d) Thai platform-based e-commerce has not been sufficiently examined in relation to AI-enabled brand trust. In this regard, the paper is guided by three research questions. RQ1: To what extent AICE contributes to SBE in e-commerce distribution channels? RQ2: How does online brand trust mediate the relationship between AICE and SBE? RQ3: Under what conditions does AI-enabled engagement strengthen or weaken online brand trust? This work addresses the research questions in order to contribute to the distribution science by clarifying the role of AI engagement in shaping the customer-brand relationship within platform-based and social-commerce distribution channels and not just using the e-commerce as a background.

Scope of the Research

Scope conditions and assumptions. The model is limited to B2C, platform-based, and social-commerce distribution environments, assumes customers have previous experience with AI-driven features (e.g., product recommendations or chatbots), posits online brand trust as the primary referent of trust, and theorises customer-level outcomes rather than firm-level outcomes. These scope conditions restrict the model and give the reader clues where the model's propositions are assumed to apply.

Literature Review

This framework is understood based on the SOR theory (Jacoby, 2002; Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), where AICE represents the stimulus, online brand trust is the organismic internal state, and SBE is the response. Thus, trust plays the role of the mechanism through which AI engagement creates brand value rather than just an intermediate factor. Furthermore, this framework includes the privacy-calculus reasoning where consumers evaluate the trade-off between the benefits of AI-driven personalization and the cost of the data disclosure (Aydin, 2026; Martin et al., 2017) and employs the logic of uncanny

valley where the excessive personalization and human-likeness of AI produce the feeling of discomfort rather than attraction (cf. Puntoni et al., 2021). They are interconnected and together account for the fact that the organismic state of trust does not increase without bound as the AI stimulus increases. The SOR framework is used here in preference to alternative viewpoints such as the TAM and self-service technology (SST) approaches due to three reasons. First, TAM explains initial acceptance of the technology by customers as based on perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use (Pavlou, 2003), while the question of concern is about what kind of impact multiple encounters through AI technology make on an already established brand relationship. Second, the focus of SST is on customers' evaluation of the technological interface rather than on the underlying brand. Third, only the SOR approach explicitly separates the external stimulus (AI-mediated engagement), the internal psychological state (online brand trust) and the relational response (SBE), which is exactly the stimulus-state-response structure the proposed framework needs to incorporate.

1. AI-Enabled Customer Engagement

Customer engagement represents a customer's interactive and value-laden connection with a brand beyond the act of purchase (Brodie et al., 2011; Van Doorn et al., 2010). AICE refers to engagement that is initiated, sustained, or shaped by AI-enabled tools rather than by human staff alone. In e-commerce, these tools include recommendation systems, chatbots, automated service replies, personalised offers and customer analytics (Davenport et al., 2020; Huang & Rust, 2018).

AICE has five operational qualities that matter for brand outcomes: personalisation, responsiveness, interactivity, convenience and automation. These qualities are useful because they reduce search costs, shorten service waiting time and make brand contact more frequent. They are also risky because AI can make customers feel monitored, misclassified or handled by a system that cannot understand their situation. Literature on consumers and AI suggests that responses depend not only on performance but also on the perception of the agent's agency and transparency during the interaction (Puntoni et al., 2021). Recent studies also confirm this approach: Perez-Vega et al. (2021) theorized the influence of AI on online customer engagement, Rahman et al. (2023) proposed the mechanism through which AI-driven multisensory cues enhance brand engagement. The more recent platform-based evidence confirms this suggestion: the AI service quality positively impacts online brand engagement and electronic brand loyalty on e-commerce platforms (Shabankareh et al., 2025), while AI-driven personalization affects engagement mainly through trust and perceived usefulness rather than directly (Teepapal, 2025).

These five qualities are retained because each captures a conceptually distinct way in which AI reconfigures the customer journey in distribution channels: personalisation (what is offered), responsiveness and interactivity (how the exchange unfolds), convenience (the effort required) and automation (who or what performs the task). Because the dimensions describe different, non-interchangeable facets that jointly

define AI-enabled engagement rather than interchangeable reflections of a single latent state, AICE is treated here as a formative, multidimensional conceptual construct. Responsiveness, which overlaps with service quality, is included only insofar as it reflects AI-mediated interaction. This formative interpretation is offered as a conceptual boundary that clarifies what belongs inside AICE and what does not.

2. Online Brand Trust

Trust is the willingness to be contingent on an exchange partner under uncertainty (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In brand research, trust is linked to loyalty and brand performance because it reduces perceived risk and makes future exchange more likely (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Online commerce heightens the role of trust because customers must evaluate product information, payment security, fulfilment, and service quality without the cues available in face-to-face exchange. Pavlou (2003) shows that trust and risk are central to consumer acceptance of e-commerce.

In AI-mediated e-commerce, online brand trust has a specific content. Customers are not only asking whether the retailer will deliver the product. They are also asking whether the recommendation is fair, whether the chatbot answer is reliable, whether their data are protected, and whether the brand is being transparent about automation. Evidence on AI-based chatbots shows that disclosure and the design of the interaction can affect user compliance and customer response (Adam et al., 2021). Online brand trust in this paper therefore means confidence that the brand and its AI-mediated touchpoints are reliable, competent, secure, transparent, and not opportunistic. Studies of chatbot interactions also show that customers' initial trust depends on how well the AI is designed and how competent it seems (Mostafa & Kasamani, 2022). In platform-based e-commerce, online brand trust should also be distinguished from platform trust, seller trust and trust in the AI technology itself, because customers interact with a marketplace, sellers, payment and delivery providers and AI systems at the same time (Shabankareh et al., 2025). Experimental evidence further shows that the communication style of AI agents shapes trust: socially oriented chatbots elicit higher consumer trust than task-oriented ones, an effect mediated by perceived warmth (Cai et al., 2024).

3. Sustainable Brand Equity

The brand equity is understood as a value of the brand added to the product or service through awareness, associations, perceived quality, and loyalty (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993; Yoo & Donthu, 2001). The term "sustainable" is introduced into this concept in order to refer to the durability of the brand equity assets. Ishaq and Di Maria (2020) analyzed the concept of sustainability in branding and suggested looking into the brand value beyond the immediate market responses. In the current work, SBE is understood as a customer-based brand value which remains resilient to repeated online interactions, competitive offers, and occasional service failures. The term "sustainable" is used in the customer-based, durability

meaning and is purposefully separated from the triple-bottom-line meaning of SBE in the ESG-related literature (Dananjoyo & Udin, 2023). Although the research on consumer brand equity started to consider sustainability as the equity dimension (Baalbaki & Guzman, 2016), in this work, the term SBE is limited to the durability of customer-based brand value and is separated from the brand loyalty which is an output of such durable brand value.

Table 1 Core Constructs, Working Definitions and Verification Sources

Construct or Context	Working Definition Used in this Paper	Verification Sources
AI-Enabled Customer Engagement (AICE)	Customer attention, interaction and repeated brand contact that is initiated, sustained or shaped by AI-enabled tools such as recommendation systems, chatbots, automated service replies and customer analytics	(Brodie et al., 2011; Davenport et al., 2020; Huang & Rust, 2018; Van Doorn et al., 2010)
Online Brand Trust	Customer confidence that the online brand and its AI-mediated touchpoints are reliable, competent, secure, transparent and not opportunistic	(Adam et al., 2021; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Pavlou, 2003; Puntoni et al., 2021)
Sustainable Brand Equity (SBE)	Durable customer-based brand value reflected in loyalty, positive associations, perceived quality, reputation and relationship continuity. The term is used here to mean resilience over time, not an ESG claim by itself	(Aaker, 1991; Ishaq & Di Maria, 2020; Keller, 1993)
Thai E-Commerce Setting	A high-volume digital commerce context in which e-marketplaces and social commerce are prominent sales channels and AI-mediated interactions are visible to customers	(Electronic Transactions Development Agency, 2024)

Research Methods

The literature utilised to construct this conceptual framework was chosen using a purposive conceptual review. In the review, only peer-reviewed journal articles and fundamental books in marketing, service research, information systems and consumer research that are mainly indexed in Scopus and Web of Science were considered. Recent studies from the past decade were emphasised for AI, customer

experience and digital commerce, while classic works were retained when they defined core constructs such as engagement, trust and customer-based brand equity. Sources were included when they directly informed one of the three focal constructs, the Thai e-commerce context, or the proposed mediation mechanism.

The literature was compiled using a structured, replicable OpenAlex search (June 2026): 975 title and abstract-level queries were reduced to 434 articles from journals (2015-2026, English), and then synthesized purposively (Figure 1).

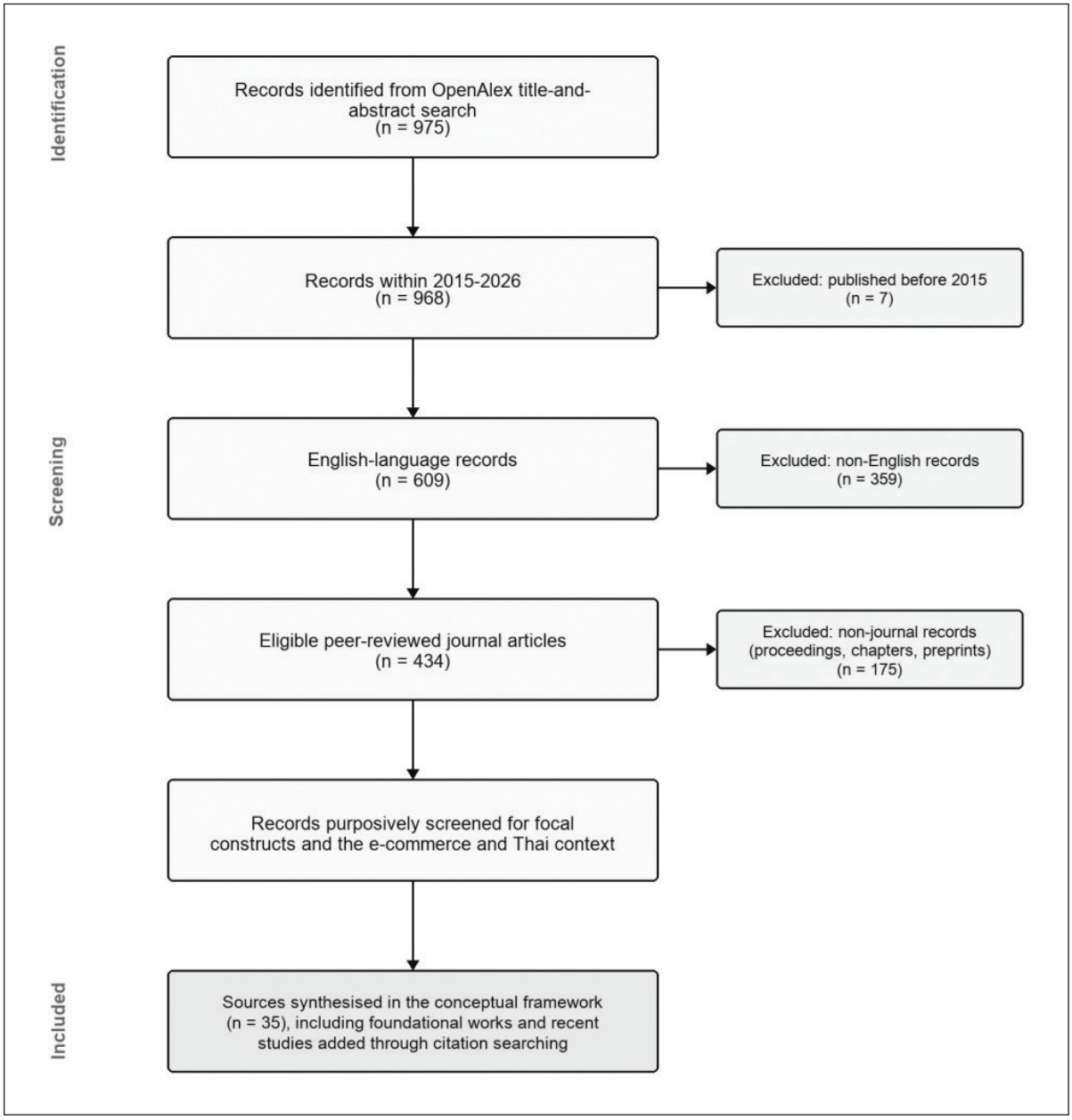


Figure 1 Literature Search and Selection Flow (Structured Search Informing a Purposive Synthesis)

To make the review reproducible, the search combined the terms AI, customer engagement, brand trust, brand equity, e-commerce and distribution channel in titles and abstracts; inclusion was restricted to peer-reviewed journal articles written in English-language (2015-2026) indexed in Scopus or Web of Science that directly informed one of the focal constructs, the SOR mechanism or the Thai distribution context, while non-peer-reviewed items, conference abstracts and off-topic records were excluded. Specifically, the search string used in Scopus consisted of ("artificial intelligence" OR "AI") AND ("customer engagement" OR "brand trust" OR "brand equity") AND ("e-commerce" OR "online retail" OR "distribution channel"). Screening was done in three stages: 1) duplicate records produced by the overlapping search queries were removed; 2) titles and abstracts of the remaining papers were reviewed for matching the inclusion criteria listed above; and 3) full-text analysis was conducted to identify papers which do not directly address one of the focal constructs, the SOR process or the Thai distribution context. From the eligible pool, foundational works defining the core constructs and the most relevant recent studies were retained for synthesis. The conceptual framework synthesises 35 core sources identified through this process (Figure 1); the reference list contains 42 entries in total, the additional items being supporting theoretical and methodological citations–for example, the foundational SOR works and guidance on conceptual-article design–cited to position the framework. Consistent with this design, the paper is positioned as a theory-synthesis and theory-adaptation conceptual article rather than an empirical study (Jaakkola, 2020; MacInnis, 2011); a conceptual contribution is appropriate for the Journal of Distribution Science because it integrates fragmented evidence on AI-enabled engagement, online trust and brand equity into a single conceptual model of customer-brand relationships in platform-based distribution.

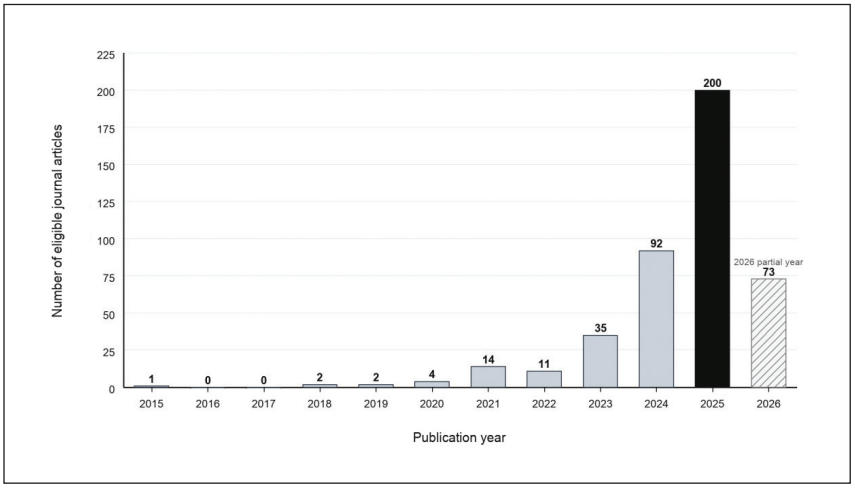


Figure 2 Annual Growth of AI-Enabled Engagement, Brand-Trust and Brand-Equity Research in E-Commerce (OpenAlex Eligible Records, 2015-2026; n = 434)

Note: The 2026 count represents records available at the time of search and should not be interpreted as a full-year total.

Results

The model proposes that AICE affects SBE directly and indirectly through online brand trust. The propositions are developed as theoretical claims rather than as tested hypotheses. AICE is treated as a multidimensional conceptual construct, online brand trust as the organismic trust mechanism, and SBE as a durable customer-based brand-equity outcome. Figure 3 summarises the full conceptual framework.

Before the propositions are stated, the main themes identified in the reviewed literature are outlined first so that the following propositions are derived from it rather than read off a theoretical model. Three themes emerged from the review. First, AI-mediated engagement is consistently positively related to customer and brand outcomes, but almost exclusively to short-term outcomes like satisfaction, purchase intention and loyalty (Bilal et al., 2024; Shabankareh et al., 2025). Second, the effect of AI-mediated engagement operates mainly indirectly through trust mechanisms rather than directly (Hassan et al., 2025; Teepapal, 2025). Third, the proportion of the studies reporting negative or curvilinear consumers' reactions to extensive personalization and hyperhumanized automation grows (Nikolov et al., 2025; Song & Shin, 2022; Sun et al., 2025). Below, the propositions formalizing these synthesized themes are offered: P1 represents the first theme, P2-P4 the second and P5-P7 the third theme; the conceptual model represented in Figure 3 presents the integration of the proposed propositions.

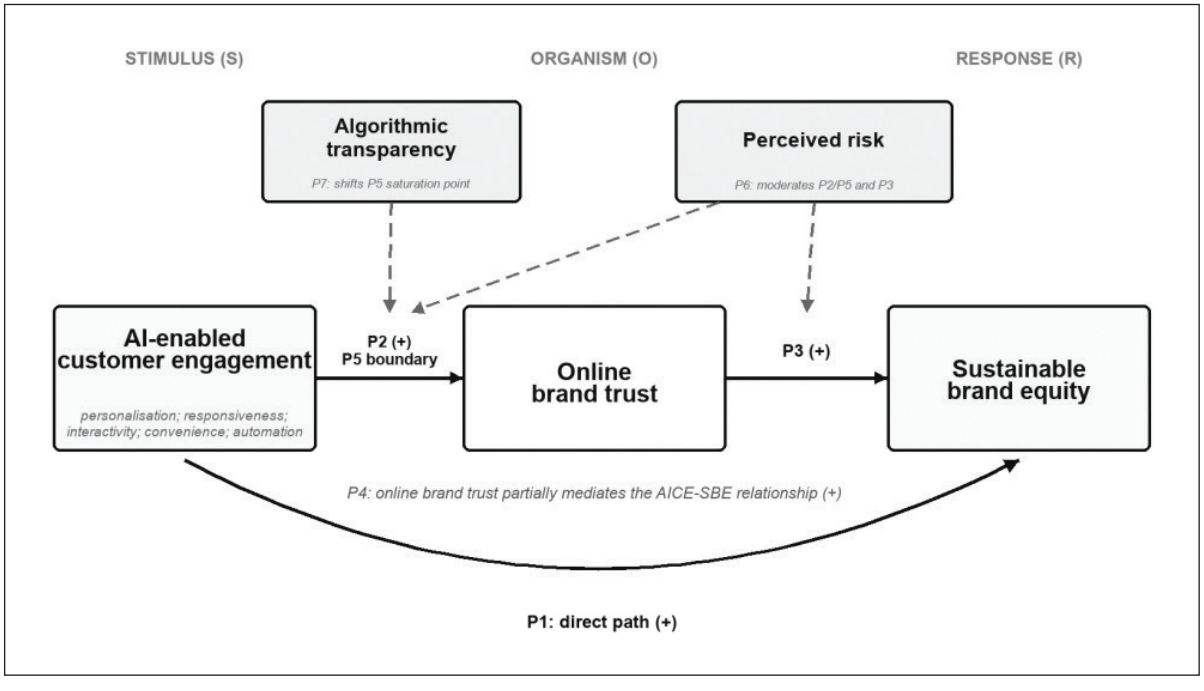


Figure 3 Proposed Conceptual Model

Note: Solid arrows indicate proposed paths; dashed arrows indicate moderation. AICE = AI-enabled customer engagement.

1. AI-Enabled Customer Engagement and Sustainable Brand Equity

The AI-Enabled Customer Engagement (AICE) can help to establish the SBE through the generation of the repeated, relevant, and frictionless brand contact. The personalized recommendations can help to strengthen the associations with the brand, the perceived quality can be ensured with the help of service automation, and increased convenience can help to increase the satisfaction and repeat purchases. These mechanisms are consistent with the previous studies revealing the positive correlation between the engagement and customer experience and brand/relationship outcomes (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Since the AI-mediated contact is characterized by the continuity of communication rather than its sporadic episodes, it can help to build brand equity as a relational asset in the long-term perspective and not just as a sales trigger. Based on the SOR framework, AICE acts as an external stimulus and SBE is a durable response to this stimulus. Recent platform-based evidence shows that AI positively influences customer experience and engagement, thus increasing the satisfaction and purchase intentions (Bilal et al., 2024). This hypothesis expands the previous studies on engagement by considering the influence of AICE on SBE rather than just on the customer satisfaction, purchase intention, or loyalty (Bilal et al., 2024; Hollebeek et al., 2014).

P1: AI-enabled customer engagement is proposed to positively influence sustainable brand equity.

2. AI-Enabled Customer Engagement and Online Brand Trust

AICE should also have an impact on online brand trust. Trust is built through repeated evidence of competence and reliability in an exchange partner (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Evidence of this can be identified in small interactions in AI-enabled e-commerce, such as a relevant recommendation, an accurate chatbot response, a timely automatic update, or a secure payment and delivery process. Nevertheless, AICE can only gain trust if a customer perceives the system as helpful rather than manipulative. In other words, transparency when using data and when automating is not something that can be taken for granted when it comes to design. It is a part of how trust is built (Adam et al., 2021; Pavlou, 2003; Puntoni et al., 2021). Consistent with this, recent experimental evidence shows that the design of AI-enabled encounters causally affects online trust (Cai et al., 2024), and that AI service quality is positively associated with online brand engagement when trust is present (Shabankareh et al., 2025). In SOR terms, this path captures how the stimulus (AICE) shapes the organismic state of online brand trust.

P2: AI-enabled customer engagement is proposed to positively influence online brand trust.

3. Online Brand Trust and Sustainable Brand Equity

Online brand trust should enhance SBE because when customers trust the brand, the perceived risk is reduced, and they become willing to sustain the relationship.

The likelihood of repeat purchase, favourable word of mouth, and forgiveness following occasional service failure (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001) is higher for a trusted brand. These customer behaviors are essential for the customer-based brand equity since they contribute to the sustainability of the loyalty, reputation, and favorable brand associations (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). Therefore, trust is not just a positive customer attitude but a phenomenon which helps to stabilize brand equity. This serves as the organism-to-response link in the SOR sequence, in which the inner organismic state of trust is converted into the durable response of brand equity. The recent AI-based evidence on e-commerce supports this process as the consumer trust increases satisfaction and partially explains the trust-loyalty relationship (Hassan et al., 2025).

P3: Online brand trust is proposed to positively influence sustainable brand equity.

4. The Mediating Role of Online Brand Trust

The mediation argument links with the preceding propositions. While AI-enabled engagement generates interactions, they do not necessarily build long-term value. A customer can visit the site, make a query, or take up recommendations with no obligation to keep their loyalty. The conceptual claim is that repeated contact with AI contributes to SBE through the development of trust. When used effectively and appropriately, personalisation can contribute to building equity. Automation is a strategy for equity when it creates reliability and transparency. Meanwhile, service analytics foster equity when they create less friction and are not perceived as additional exploitation.

The mediation is expected to be partial and not complete. Some of AICE's benefits may directly affect SBE, such as convenience, habit, and repeated exposure. At the same time, a significant part of the effect of AICE operates through the online brand trust because trust explains the reasons why repeated contact turns into the relationship and not into just the sequence of transactions. The mediating effect is supported by the SOR framework as the recent evidence shows that the AI-driven personalization affects the customer engagement indirectly through trust and perceived usefulness rather than directly (Teepapal, 2025). The theoretical basis of this mediation hypothesis consists in the convergence of two existing frameworks and not in the analogies.

The commitment-trust theory posits trust to be the mediating variable that converts relationship investment into relational outcomes (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), while the SOR paradigm requires the external stimulus to change behavior indirectly through the internal organismic state rather than directly (Jacoby, 2002). Putting AICE in both perspectives implies that trust, not engagement frequency, is the mediating factor. Empirical evidence supports this expectation on all links of the chain: trust mediates the effect of website stimuli on consumer acceptance in e-commerce (Pavlou, 2003), the effect of AI-driven personalization on engagement on social media platforms (Teepapal, 2025) and the effect of personalized recommendations by AI on brand loyalty (Hassan et al., 2025). This proposition extends these studies by incorporating the mediation process beyond engagement or loyalty to customer-based brand equity.

P4: Online brand trust is proposed to partially mediate the relationship between AI-enabled customer engagement and sustainable brand equity.

5. The Non-Linear Boundary of AI-Enabled Engagement

AI-enabled engagement is unlikely to build trust without limit. Past a certain point, heavy personalisation and automation can feel intrusive and gradually weaken trust, the personalisation-privacy paradox (Aguirre et al., 2015; Martin et al., 2017; Puntoni et al., 2021). There are several mechanisms behind this negative effect. The excessive AI-driven personalization leads to the personalization-privacy paradox when privacy concerns become a hidden social cost that decreases the sustainability of data-intensive engagement unless it is controlled by brand trust (Aydin, 2026). The AI-mediated interaction can also induce feelings of discomfort and creepiness due to inaccuracy, deception, and intrusion of the AI, thus decreasing customers' willingness to interact (Akhtar et al., 2026). Generally, the customer engagement is related to customer reaction in a curvilinear way such that the extremely high engagement level is linked with more negative reactions to the service failure (Park & Gong, 2023). By analogy, it supports the bounded instead of monotonic engagement-trust relationship such that after some level of AI-mediated engagement, it starts to decrease. This AI engagement saturation effect is posited such that the saturation point–the level of engagement at which the maximum of online brand trust is achieved–is shifted by the algorithmic transparency and perceived risk: the higher transparency and the lower risk shift the saturation point in the positive direction, making the trust-building region wider, while the algorithmic opacity and higher risk shift it in the other direction, making this region smaller. Contemporary research confirms this bounded effect as the AI-driven personalization produces the inverted-U effect on the consumer attitudes, with the moderate levels being the most effective and the higher ones deteriorating the favorable attitudes due to the increased perceived threat (Sun et al., 2025); chatbot anthropomorphism has the U-shaped effect on the privacy concerns (Nikolov et al., 2025); and excessive human-likeness of AI induces the uncanny-valley eerie feelings which reduce the chatbot trust and purchase intentions (Song & Shin, 2022).

The personalisation-privacy paradox can be formalised as a transformative privacy calculus in which consumers continuously weigh personalisation benefits against privacy costs (Cloarec et al., 2024).

Well-documented real-world evidence shows that the logic of saturation is valid. Experimental and field evidence shows that highly personalized advertisements built on the basis of covert data collection reduce click-through rates if customers find out about the personalization, but have a reverse effect if data collection is transparent and disclosed (Aguirre et al., 2015). The customer-service research shows that chatbot transparency and interaction design directly impact the user compliance (Adam et al., 2021). On hospitality booking platforms, excessive personalization has likewise been shown to result in creepy feelings and avoidance (Akhtar et al., 2026). The official surveys revealed the concentration of transactions on the limited number of the AI-intensive marketplaces and social media, which implies that the excessive messaging by one brand competes with the rivals on the same platform (ETDA, 2024).

Relationship of the proposed framework to the evidence is clear: while previous studies have documented individual pieces of evidence representing different segments of the curve–positive engagement effects at moderate intensity and privacy, creepiness or uncanny reactions at high intensity -, AIESM integrates them into one trust trajectory. Unlike previous research, AIESM does not assume the monotonic nature of the relationship between AICE and trust, but provides the inverted-U shape of the curve and the conditions shifting the saturation point; it is this integration that is the intended contribution of AIESM to the literature and which is rendered falsifiable by propositions P5-P7 in terms of empirical testing.

Table 2 A Four-Regime Typology of AI-Enabled Engagement and the AI Engagement Saturation Effect

AI-Enabled Engagement Regime	Engagement Intensity and Algorithmic Transparency	Predicted Effect on Online Brand Trust
Under-Engagement	Low AI intensity	Trust remains low and flat; the stimulus is too weak to build confidence
Optimal Trust Zone	Moderate intensity with high transparency	Trust is maximised (peak of the curve); benefits outweigh privacy costs
Saturation (Creepy) Zone	High intensity with low transparency	Trust begins to decline as privacy concern, perceived surveillance, and opacity rise
Trust Collapse	Very high intensity with opacity and high perceived risk	Trust falls sharply through perceived manipulation and uncanny discomfort

P5: AI-enabled customer engagement has a non-linear (inverted-U) relationship with online brand trust, such that trust rises with engagement up to an optimal point and then declines.

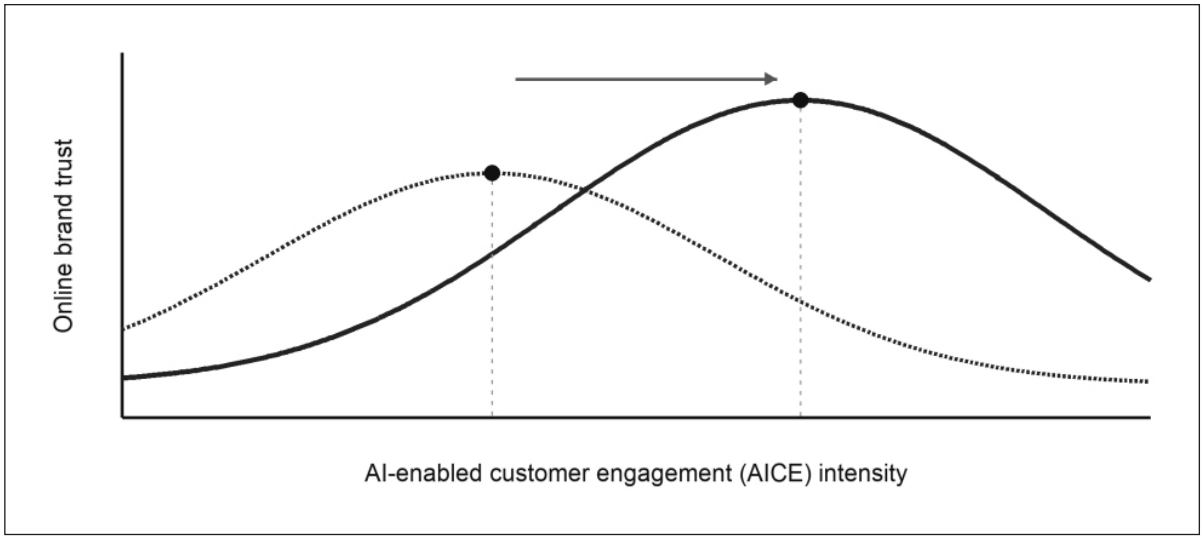


Figure 4 Proposed Inverted-U Relationship between AI-Enabled Customer Engagement and Online Brand Trust, Moderated by Perceived Risk (P5, P6) and Algorithmic Transparency (P7)

Note: Solid curve = higher algorithmic transparency/lower perceived risk; dashed curve = lower transparency/higher perceived risk. The arrow indicates the proposed rightward shift in the saturation point under P6 and P7. Curves are conceptual illustrations, not empirical estimates.

6. The Moderating Roles of Perceived Risk and Algorithmic Transparency

The strength of these paths should be moderated by the level of perceived risk. When the perceived risk is high, the reliability and security of AI touchpoints become important, and the trust path becomes stronger; when it is low, the convenience plays a larger role (Featherman & Pavlou, 2003; Martin et al., 2017; Pavlou, 2003). Recent research corroborates this conditional effect as it shows that brand trust mediates the negative effect of AI-driven personalization (Aydin, 2026) and personalized AI recommendations amplify the trust-satisfaction-loyalty sequence (Hassan et al., 2025). In the related distribution settings, signaling of the algorithmic transparency positively impacts the relational satisfaction entirely through the trust (full mediation), supporting the P7 (Park & Yoon, 2024).

Because brand equity on marketplaces and social commerce is co-produced by the wider distribution channel, the proposed relationships should be interpreted within a platform context. Platform trust, seller credibility, fulfilment and delivery reliability, payment security, return policies and online review credibility may all act as contextual factors, boundary conditions or scope conditions that shape, and may partly substitute for, the effect of AI-enabled engagement on online brand trust. The framework therefore cautions that brand equity should not be attributed to AI-enabled engagement alone; it is shaped by the wider distribution-channel system in which AI touchpoints are embedded.

P6: Perceived risk is proposed to moderate the relationships, strengthening the AICE-trust and trust-SBE paths when perceived risk is high and weakening them when it is low.

P7: Algorithmic transparency is proposed to moderate the AI-enabled engagement-online brand trust relationship by shifting the saturation point of the AI engagement saturation effect, such that higher transparency raises the engagement level at which online brand trust peaks.

Table 3 Summary Matrix of Propositions and Theoretical Support

Proposition and Relationship	Direct Theoretical/Research Support	Core Theoretical Logic
P1: AICE -> SBE	Customer engagement and customer experience research (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Van Doorn et al., 2010), supported by customer-based brand equity theory (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993)	AI-enabled personalisation, responsiveness, interactivity and convenience can create repeated, relevant brand contact that strengthens loyalty, perceived quality and brand associations
P2: AICE -> Online Brand Trust	Commitment-trust theory and e-commerce trust research (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Pavlou, 2003), together with AI service and transparency studies (Adam et al., 2021; Huang & Rust, 2018; Puntoni et al., 2021)	Reliable, secure, and transparent AI-enabled encounters provide evidence of brand competence and reduce uncertainty in online exchange
P3: Online Brand Trust -> SBE	Brand trust and brand equity research (Aaker, 1991; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Keller, 1993; Morgan & Hunt, 1994)	Trust lowers perceived risk and stabilises repeat purchase, favourable brand associations, reputation and relationship continuity
P4: Online Brand Trust is Proposed to Mediate AICE -> SBE	The mediation logic combines engagement theory, online trust research and customer-based brand equity research (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Pavlou, 2003)	Online brand trust explains how AI-enabled activity becomes durable brand value, while allowing direct effects from convenience, habit and repeated exposure
P5: AICE and Online Brand Trust, Non-Linear (Inverted-U)	Personalisation paradox and consumer-privacy research (Aguirre et al., 2015; Martin et al., 2017; Puntoni et al., 2021)	Once past the point of optimal engagement, consumers feel watched, and trust decreases rather than increases with AI involvement

Table 3 Summary Matrix of Propositions and Theoretical Support (Continue)

Proposition and Relationship	Direct Theoretical/Research Support	Core Theoretical Logic
P6: Perceived Risk Moderates the AICE-Trust and Trust-SBE Paths	Trust-and-risk research in e-commerce acceptance (Pavlou, 2003; Martin et al., 2017)	If risk is high, security and reliability become more important, and the trust path grows stronger; if risk is low, the trust path weakens
P7: Algorithmic Transparency Moderates AICE -> Online Brand Trust (Shifts the Saturation Point)	Algorithm-transparency and signalling research (Park & Yoon, 2024); privacy-calculus reasoning (Cloarec et al., 2024)	Higher transparency translates to higher engagement levels where trust reaches its maximum level, expanding the trust-building zone prior to saturation

Conclusion and Discussion

1. Theoretical Implications

The model is part of three research conversations. First, it expands AI-in-marketing research by questioning whether or not an AI-powered interaction creates long-lasting brand value, or simply enhances engagement or advertising results (Davenport et al., 2020; Suraña-Sánchez & Aramendia-Muneta, 2024). Second, it defines the changes in the case of AI as a medium of engagement. The number of engagements is not the issue; it is the customer's understanding of the system. Third, it connects the concept of customer-based brand equity to the concept of trust in the online environment, defining trust as the process explaining how AI-mediated contact can become the relationship value (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Keller, 1993; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In addition to these, it employs the SOR paradigm and extends from the assumption of uniformly linear AI effects to the theorizing of a non-linear (inverted-U) boundary and a moderator of perceived risk.

This framework structure increases the theoretical contribution of the work by specifying the conditions under which this logic holds and under which it fails. The boundary conditions of the proposed framework are not only in the AI engagement saturation effect (P5) but also in the moderators' perceived risk (P6) and algorithmic transparency (P7) which are not continuously positive effects of AI engagement. They allow the proposed model to surpass the linear engagement-trust-equity sequence and to provide the more accurate theoretical explanations for the e-commerce distribution within a platform context.

Three questions help to clarify more precisely the conceptual contribution of AIESM. What is new? The AI engagement saturation effect, that is the named inverted-U relationship on the AICE-to-online brand trust path whose saturation point is specified as a function of algorithmic transparency and perceived risk, has not been suggested as an integrated concept to the best of the authors' knowledge; existing studies document only the pieces of the curve. Why cannot existing theories explain this? The engagement theory suggests that engagement is generally value-creating and contains no mechanism explaining that the more engagement decreases trust; TAM explains the initial adoption, but not the post-adoption relational erosion; the privacy calculus explains the discomfort caused by high personalization, but neither locates the turning point nor specifies what affects it; finally, SOR provides the stimulus-state-response chain, but says nothing about the non-linearity of the chain. Why is AIESM needed? Since each theory explains separately one part of the observed pattern, the integration into one model is needed in order to explain not only why AI-enabled engagement increases trust, but also at what point this increase becomes destructive for trust. AIESM provides this integration in falsifiable form (P5-P7). Table 4 summarizes how this paper differs from previous studies.

Table 4 Comparison between Previous Studies and This Paper

Aspect	Previous Studies (Representative)	This Paper (AIESM)
Focal Outcome	Immediate engagement, satisfaction, purchase intention or loyalty (Bilal et al., 2024; Hassan et al., 2025; Shabankareh et al., 2025)	Durable, sustainable customer-based brand equity (SBE)
Form of the AICE-Trust Link	Linear or monotonic positive; curvilinear effects examined only in isolation for attitudes, privacy concern or eeriness (Nikolov et al., 2025; Song & Shin, 2022; Sun et al., 2025)	A named inverted-U AI engagement saturation effect on the AICE-online brand trust path (P5)
Mechanism	Trust or perceived usefulness as mediator to engagement or loyalty (Hassan et al., 2025; Teepapal, 2025)	Online brand trust as the SOR organismic state converting AI-mediated contact into durable brand value; partial mediation (P2-P4)
Boundary Conditions	Moderators tested piecemeal and rarely theorised together	Perceived risk (P6) and algorithmic transparency (P7) jointly locate the saturation point; four-regime typology (Table 2)

Table 4 Comparison between Previous Studies and This Paper (Continue)

Aspect	Previous Studies (Representative)	This Paper (AIESM)
Theoretical Lens	Single-lens studies (engagement theory, TAM or privacy calculus alone)	SOR, privacy calculus and uncanny-valley logic integrated in one model
Distribution Context	Mostly western or unspecified platform settings	Thai platform-based and social-commerce distribution channels (ETDA, 2024)

2. Managerial Implications

For Thai e-commerce managers, it is apparent that AI should play a role in both conversion and brand relationships. The ETDA evidence indicates that Thailand is an important country for e-marketplaces and social commerce. Those channels are more likely to show the same "automated suggestions, automated answers, and data-driven offers over and over again. All interactions build or break trust.

The mechanism of trust can be created in the moments of payment and after selling the product. For example, if the customer reads the AI-generated suggestion, follows the steps, and then pays the amount through the same digital banking/card touchpoints, the customer builds more trust. This is because customers can observe that the payment is confirmed with security; they will receive confirmation of the payment, alerts about fraud, a complete transaction history, and know exactly how to ask for a refund or handle a dispute. In this context, online brand trust is not created by AI personalisation. It is derived from the ability to connect AI-driven engagement with systems that customers know are safe, traceable, and accountable for their transactions. The proposed model emphasizes the following practical considerations. First, before intensively using AI, one needs to guarantee the reliability of the brand since the incorrect suggestions and errors in the responses of the chatbots can make the customers perceive the brand as unreliable. Second, one needs to make clear the reasons for the recommendations or offers and the logic of data usage. Third, one needs to retain the possibility of human assistance since AI can resolve the routine issues while the customers need humans to solve more complicated problems.

Fourth, consider security and privacy as investments in the brand, not compliance requirements. A lack of safety can create more engagement in the short term, but can damage the brand relationship in the long term. These principles manifest in hard-to-implement channel practices for e-commerce distribution managers, online retailers and platform operators and social-commerce sellers: utilizing AI to optimize product discovery and personalised merchandising, customer retention and win-back, service recovery and return management, payment confidence and fraud alerts, and proactive delivery

communication, such that AI-powered engagement solidifies continuity of the relationship across channels and distribution-chain competitiveness, rather than just increasing conversions in the short term.

A managerial question to follow from AIESM is how a company can estimate whether the intensity of its AI engagement efforts is still below or has already exceeded the saturation point. Three decision-making tools are suggested. First, behavioral warnings which can be easily detected in platform dashboards: increasing opt-out, unsubscribe and notification mute rates; decreasing click-through rates on recommendations; increased chatbot abandonments or immediate requests for a human agent; and increasing rate of negative reviews or service contacts complaining about spam, surveillance and "creepy" personalization. As soon as these signs start to emerge while engagement intensity increases, the brand enters the saturation area defined in Table 2. Second, experimentation, since the saturation point is not observable directly: the firm can approximate the saturation point by A/B testing various levels of engagement intensity, such as message frequency or degree of personalization, and observing trust-related responses like repeat purchase, complaints rates and opt-out instead of just conversions. Third, marginal cost-benefit analysis: even if the brand does not exceed the saturation point yet, the deployment of additional AI-mediated communications makes sense economically only if the increment of engagement outcomes exceeds the incremental costs and risks of AI deployment, data management and possible trust erosion; a simple decision rule is to deploy additional AI-mediated communication only if the marginal benefit calculated including these costs remains positive. These tools ensure managerial relevance of the proposed framework, recognizing that the saturation point depends on the algorithmic transparency and perceived risk (P6, P7).

Limitations and Future Research

This is a conceptual framework paper that involves developing and arguing a set of propositions based on previous theory and literature as opposed to reporting primary data. The following limitations apply: the model is theoretical, the distribution context in Thailand is discussed based on secondary sources, no causal claims are made, and the proposed saturation and moderation mechanisms are conceptual boundary conditions. The goal is not to present a survey design, sampling procedure, or model-estimation exercise, but rather to provide a theory-building framework for e-commerce distribution channels. Accordingly, primary data collection to test P5-P7 is the next planned stage of this research.

The framework could be expanded to explore other boundary conditions and moderators in the study in the future. The relations proposed above may be mediated through perceived risk (P6) as well as prior experience with AI, age cohort, privacy concern, platform type, and product category. The engagement of products is especially significant as it is likely that engagement for routine, low-involvement products is established differently than engagement for high-value, financial or health-related

products. Future research can build on this framework by adding security, transparency, and credible recovery processes to the moderator of perceived risk, which is already theorised (P6). It would be particularly rewarding to conduct the research on a longitudinal basis, as durable brand equity is a relationship product that should be the outcome of a relationship that takes place over time.

Conclusion

Nowadays, AI influences many of the relationships between online brands and their customers. Those interactions can help to drive and grow engagement, but engagement is not sufficient. The present paper suggests that AI customer engagement can be instrumental in establishing SBE when it is associated with the creation of trust in an online brand. The claim is deliberately concise and abstract: AI must enhance the enduring value of the brand by providing consistent, transparent, and secure interactions with customers. In the Thai e-commerce landscape, where interactions with marketplaces and social commerce are often routine, AI-driven brands stand to gain the most in building trust, reputation, and the continuity of the relationship. The framework also indicates when the rationale may fail: as soon as engaging with AI becomes an intrusive experience, and when risk levels become high for the customer. The value of the paper in the distribution sciences lies in the definition of the role of engagement (via the creation of online brand trust) in the construction and destruction of SBE in platform-based and social-commerce distribution channels. The model is presented as a theoretical model for building and not as causal evidence. The AI Engagement Saturation Model provides a unique conceptualization and explanation of when AI engagement will strengthen and when it will hinder SBE in e-commerce distribution channels.

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