The Influence of Relationship Marketing and Word of Mouth on Patient Loyalty Mediated by Digital Marketing at BC Clinic

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Abstract. This research examines the influence of marketing on patient loyalty at BC Clinic, located in the Cilegon industrial area. Amid fierce competition for healthcare services, it is important for clinics to utilize effective marketing strategies to improve relationships with patients. This study aims to analyze the impact of relationship marketing and word of mouth on patient loyalty, as well as the role of digital marketing as a mediator in these relationships. The method used was a quantitative approach through the distribution of questionnaires to 100 respondents. The collected data were analyzed using the partial least squares (PLS) method to evaluate the relationships between variables. The research also involved descriptive statistical analysis to understand the characteristics of patients and their visit patterns. The results show that relationship marketing has a significant positive effect on patient loyalty, and word of mouth also contributes to increasing loyalty. However, digital marketing did not prove to be an effective mediator in these relationships. These findings provide important insights for BC Clinic in developing a more integrated marketing strategy. Suggestions for BC Clinic include strengthening direct interactions with patients and utilizing positive testimonials to enhance word of mouth. Further research is suggested to explore other influential variables as well as the broader context of health services.

Keywords: Marketing Strategy, Patient Loyalty, *Relationship Marketing*, *Word of Mouth* (WOM), *Digital Marketing*, Healthcare

INTRODUCTION

In conditions of increasingly fierce competition, every company must still be able to survive and even grow (Porter & Heppelmann, 2017). The success of a service provider, whether of goods or services, lies in meeting customer needs (Zeithaml et al., 2020). In the current era, business sustainability is not assessed solely by the ability to sell products but by retaining customers who return to buy or use them repeatedly (Kumar & Reinartz, 2018; Payne et al., 2017). When customers are satisfied with the services offered, they will consistently choose that provider despite competition and become loyal (Rather & Sharma, 2019; Slack & Singh, 2020). This also applies to health service providers; the health sector, especially clinics, demands close attention (Fatima et al., 2018).

Loyalty can manifest as commitment to people, jobs, or products. Loyalty to a product—whether goods or services—can extend to the business itself (Alghizzawi et al., 2024; Mujahidin; Yusuf Rian; Sutaguna, I. Nyoman Tri; Sampe, Ferdianndus, 2022; Susriyanti et al., 2023). Loyalty represents a person's commitment to continuously purchase a service in the future.

According to Trisno and Berlianto (2023), loyalty is defined as a multidimensional construct that reflects the patient's desire for sustainable relationships with healthcare providers. Conceptually, loyalty manifests as complex behaviors encompassing four main indicators: (1) a desire to tell others positive things about the hospital, (2) a willingness to recommend the hospital to individuals seeking advice, (3) an intention to return for treatment when needed, and (4) considering the hospital as the primary choice for health care.

Primary clinics (both BPJS and non-BPJS), as private health service providers, must optimally meet patients' needs and expectations to maintain loyalty—the key to long-term success.

BC Clinic is a non-BPJS clinic located in Cilegon City. Established on November 11, 2022, it began when Covid-19 Bintang Corp actively organized free vaccinations. Since then, PT B Corp has committed to community health services with the vision of becoming the top health service center.

To address this challenge, effective marketing strategies are vital. Modern marketing extends beyond transactional approaches to relationship-building, known as Relationship Marketing (RM). Previous research has established the foundation for understanding these key variables. RM focuses on building and maintaining long-term customer relationships and positively influences patient loyalty, as shown in Jakarta dental hospitals where personalized communication and loyalty programs enhanced repeat visits (Kotler et al., 2018; Rahayu, 2023). Similarly, Word of Mouth (WOM)—the informal sharing of service experiences—significantly impacts patient trust and repurchase intentions, as supported by studies at Batavia Hospital (Ruswanti et al., 2020); its digital evolution, eWOM, further shapes online patient choices (Shan et al., 2024). Furthermore, Digital Marketing (DM), which leverages online platforms for promotion and engagement, boosts patient loyalty in hospitals by improving communication and accessibility (Erwin et al., 2023; Burhanuddin et al., 2024). Finally, patient loyalty is a long-term commitment driven by satisfaction, service quality, and relationships; studies show that experiential and relationship marketing enhance it through satisfaction (Tüfekçi & Eser, 2023; Ayu Kusumastuti et al., 2024).

Even though classified as a new clinic, Klinik BC competes effectively by prioritizing unique and superior health facilities. These include general practitioners, dentists, midwifery, home care, vaccination, pharmacy, and supporting services.

In 2024, BC Clinic served 2,905 patients total. Patient numbers generally increased month-to-month from the initial surgery stage. The most significant growth occurred in October, with 273 patients compared to 189 in September—an increase of 84 patients (44.44%). Despite this growth, only 1,471 patients (50.63%) made repeat visits. By December 2024, numbers dropped sharply to 125 patients from 311—a decline of 186 patients (40.19%).

From January to June 2025, BC Clinic served 560 patients total. Numbers generally decreased compared to the previous year, with only 232 patients (41.42%) making repeat visits.

Clinics employ various strategies to retain patient loyalty, including effective marketing. Contemporary marketing emphasizes not just selling products or services but building customer relationships, known as Relationship Marketing.

Klinik BC has forged partnerships with companies and secured insurance collaborations, including several MoUs. These involve varied contract types, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Types of BC Clinic Cooperation Contracts

Contract Type	Total Cooperation	Percentage
Relationship Marketing	3	18,75%
Insurance	13	81,25%

Source: Data obtained from BC Clinic's administrative records and Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) documents for the 2023-2024 period

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From Table 1, the number of companies using the Relationship Marketing (RM) type is only 3 companies, or around 18.75%, while companies that use the Insurance type number 13, or around 81.25%. This shows that the majority of companies associated with BC Clinic choose Insurance over RM. However, regardless of the contract type, the customer relationship aspect remains an important component of BC Clinic's marketing strategy.

In addition to Relationship Marketing, Word of Mouth (WOM) is also an effective marketing strategy with a significant impact on business development. WOM is a form of informal communication in which consumers share information, experiences, and recommendations about a product or service. In the healthcare context, WOM is highly influential because patients' decisions to choose a clinic often rely on the experiences and recommendations of those closest to them.

In today's digital era, marketing strategies extend beyond conventional methods. Digital Marketing (DM) has become an important component of modern marketing strategies, including in the healthcare sector. DM encompasses various marketing activities conducted through digital platforms such as social media, websites, emails, and mobile applications. BC Clinics have adopted several DM strategies to reach potential patients and maintain relationships with existing ones.

Based on the background described, this study aims to address several key questions regarding the factors influencing Patient Loyalty at BC Clinic. The research problem can be formulated as a set of inquiries to guide the investigation: First, how does Relationship Marketing affect Patient Loyalty at BC Clinic? Second, what is the impact of Word of Mouth on the same outcome? Third and fourth, to what extent do Relationship Marketing and Word of Mouth each influence the clinic's implementation of Digital Marketing? Fifth, does Digital Marketing itself have a direct effect on Patient Loyalty? Finally, the study seeks to understand the mediating role of Digital Marketing: specifically, does it mediate the relationship between Relationship Marketing and Patient Loyalty, and does it similarly mediate the relationship between Word of Mouth and Patient Loyalty?

The objectives of this research derive directly from the problem formulation and are designed to provide empirical answers to the questions posed. The study aims, first, to analyze the direct influence of Relationship Marketing on BC Clinic Patient Loyalty. Second, it seeks to analyze the direct influence of Word of Mouth on Patient Loyalty. Third and fourth, it will examine the influence of Relationship Marketing and Word of Mouth, respectively, on the clinic's Digital Marketing strategies. Fifth, the research aims to determine the influence of Digital Marketing on Patient Loyalty. Finally, the study will investigate the mediated pathways: specifically, to analyze whether the influence of Relationship Marketing on Patient Loyalty is mediated by Digital Marketing, and similarly, whether the influence of Word of Mouth on Patient Loyalty is mediated by Digital Marketing.

Practically, this research is expected to provide valuable input for BC Clinic management in designing more integrated and effective marketing strategies to build long-term Patient Loyalty. The findings regarding the effectiveness of Relationship Marketing and Word of Mouth can serve as a basis for strengthening direct interactions and leveraging positive testimonials. Meanwhile, the understanding that Digital Marketing has not been effective as a mediator offers insights for evaluating and revitalizing digital strategies to make them more personal and impactful. Academically, this research contributes to the development of

marketing literature in the healthcare sector, particularly in the context of private clinics in Indonesia, by testing a model of relationships between conventional and digital marketing variables.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a quantitative approach with a survey method. The quantitative approach was chosen because this study aims to analyze the causal relationships between variables and test the hypotheses that have been formulated. Data was collected through a structured questionnaire that was distributed to respondents.

The population in this study is all BC Clinic patients who have made at least two visits. The sampling technique used is purposive sampling with the criteria that respondents are patients who have used BC Clinic services at least twice in the last 6 months. Based on calculations using the Slovin formula with an error rate of 10%, the number of samples used was 100 respondents.

The variables in this study consisted of:
- **Independent Variable:** Relationship Marketing (X1) dan Word of Mouth (X2)
- **Mediation Variable:** Digital Marketing (M)
- Dependent Variable: Patient Loyalty (Y)

The operationalization of the research variables can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Operationalization of Research Variables

Variable	Indicator	Measurement Scale
Relationship Marketing (X1)	Communication, trust, commitment, complaint handling	Likert 1-5
Word of Mouth (X2)	Talking positively, recommending, encouraging others	Likert 1-5
Digital Marketing (M)	Social media, websites, mobile apps, email marketing	Likert 1-5
Patient Loyalty (Y)	Repeat visits, recommendations, top preferences, resistance to competitors	Likert 1-5

Source: The questionnaire was developed based on a literature review

Primary data in this study was collected through questionnaires distributed to respondents. The questionnaire was compiled using a Likert scale of 1-5, where 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree. The questionnaire included questions related to four main variables: Relationship Marketing, Word of Mouth, Digital Marketing, and Patient Loyalty.

The collected data was analyzed using the Partial Least Square - Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) method with the help of SmartPLS software. PLS-SEM was chosen because this method is suitable for predictive analysis and can handle complex models with relatively small samples (Hair et al., 2021). The analysis is carried out in two stages:
- Evaluation of the measurement model (outer model) to assess the validity and reliability of the instrument

• Evaluation of structural models (inner models) to test research hypotheses

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Characteristics of Respondents

The characteristics of the respondents in this study included gender, age, education, occupation, and frequency of visits. Based on the results of data collection on 100 respondents, the following respondent profiles were obtained (Table 3).

Table 3. Respondent Characteristics

Category	Quantity	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	52	52,0
Women	48	48,0

Source: Data collected through questionnaires completed by 100 BC Clinic patient respondents in June 2025

From Table 3, it can be seen that the majority of respondents are male (52%) and female (48%), indicating a relatively balanced distribution. Respondents are dominated by productive age groups who actively use health services.

Evaluation of Measurement Models (*Outer Model*)

Evaluation of the measurement model was carried out to assess the validity and reliability of the construct. The results of the outer model test are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Evaluation Results of Measurement Model (Outer Model)

Variable	AVE	Cronbach's α	CR
RM	0,652	0,832	0,880
WOM	0,738	0,894	0,919
DM	0,612	0,815	0,863
Loyalty	0,695	0,867	0,902

Source: Statistical analysis results using SmartPLS 4.0 software, based on questionnaire data from 100 respondents

Based on Table 4, all constructs have an Average Variance Extracted (AVE) value above 0.5, Cronbach's Alpha above 0.7, and Composite Reliability (CR) above 0.7. This indicates that all constructs meet the criteria of convergent validity and good reliability.

Evaluation of Structural Models (Inner Model)

Structural model evaluation was carried out to test the causal relationship between constructs. The results of hypothesis testing are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Hypothesis Testing Results

Connection	Coefficient	T-Stats	P-Value	Results
RM → Loyalty	0,425	4,832	0,000	Accepted
WOM → Loyalty	0,318	3,521	0,001	Accepted
RM → DM	0,512	6,245	0,000	Accepted
WOM → DM	0,152	1,452	0,147	Rejected
DM → Loyalty	0,087	0,892	0,373	Rejected
RM → DM → Loyalty	0,045	0,878	0,380	Rejected
WOM → DM → Loyalty	0,013	0,658	0,511	Rejected

Source: Results of Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) analysis using SmartPLS 4.0, with a significance level of α = 0.05

The results showed that Relationship Marketing (RM) had a significant positive effect on patient loyalty (β = 0.425; p < 0.05). These findings are in line with Rahayu (2023) research which found that RM has a positive influence on patient loyalty. The effective implementation of RM in BC Clinics, including good communication, trust-building, and responsive complaint handling, contributes to increased patient loyalty.

Word of Mouth (WOM) was also shown to have a significant positive effect on patient loyalty (β = 0.318; p < 0.05). These results support the research of Ruswanti et al. (2020) which shows that WOM has an effect on patient satisfaction and loyalty. Positive recommendations from satisfied patients are an important factor in building the trust of new potential patients and strengthening the loyalty of existing patients.

RM was shown to have a significant positive effect on Digital Marketing (β = 0.512; p < 0.05). This shows that a good RM strategy can increase the effectiveness of DM. Clinics that have a strong relationship with patients tend to be more successful in implementing digital marketing strategies.

However, the study found that WOM had no significant effect on DM (β = 0.152; p > 0.05), and DM also had no significant effect on patient loyalty (β = 0.087; p > 0.05). These findings are different from the research of Burhanuddin et al. (2024) which found a positive influence of DM on patient loyalty. This difference may be due to the characteristics of BC Clinic patients who value direct personal interaction more than digital communication.

The results of the mediation test showed that DM did not mediate the relationship between RM and patient loyalty (β = 0.045; p > 0.05), nor the relationship between WOM and patient loyalty (β = 0.013; p > 0.05). This indicates that in the context of the BC Clinic, the effects of RM and WOM on patient loyalty are more direct and do not require a DM intermediary.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that Relationship Marketing (RM) and Word of Mouth (WOM) exert significant positive effects on patient loyalty at BC Clinic, with optimal RM fostering loyalty through meaningful interactions and effective WOM enhancing trust and service quality perceptions via positive information sharing. Additionally, RM positively influences Digital

Marketing (DM), boosting its effectiveness in brand awareness and customer retention. However, DM neither directly increases patient loyalty nor mediates the effects of RM and WOM, owing to its often one-way, impersonal nature that fails to deliver holistic value without direct interaction. Thus, future marketing strategies should integrate RM and WOM with interactive digital channels reflecting authentic patient experiences. For future research, scholars could explore hybrid models combining DM with personalized AI-driven tools or patient co-creation platforms to test enhanced mediation effects in diverse Indonesian healthcare settings.

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