

Digital Strategic Communication through Social Media: Building Brand Relationships and Customer Loyalty

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Abstract

Atariki Japan is a local culinary brand offering ramen and Japanese cuisine with flavors adapted to the preferences of the Acehnese community. Amid increasing culinary competition, Atariki Japan utilizes social media as a strategic communication platform to build relationships with customers and strengthen brand loyalty. This study aims to examine how Atariki Japan implements digital strategic communication through social media, how these strategies contribute to brand–customer relationships, and how these relationships influence customer loyalty. This study employs a qualitative case study approach using Relationship Management Theory. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with five informants, consisting of Atariki Japan’s chief marketing officer, content creator, and three customers, supported by social media documentation analysis. The findings reveal that Atariki Japan implements digital strategic communication through four strategies: content creation, content sharing, connecting, and community building. These strategies enable Atariki to establish interactive communication, develop emotional connections, and foster a sense of belonging among customers. Furthermore, brand relationships developed through social media contribute to customer loyalty, reflected in customer trust, emotional attachment, continued preference, repeat visits, and recommendations to others. This study concludes that social media functions as a strategic platform for managing sustainable brand–customer relationships.

Keywords: digital strategic communication, Relationship Management Theory, social media, brand loyalty, Japanese culinary

INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of social media has transformed how culinary businesses communicate with customers and build long-term relationships. Culinary businesses increasingly utilize platforms such as Instagram and TikTok to communicate their brand identity, present product experiences, and interact with customers. Japanese cuisine, in particular, has gained popularity among Indonesian consumers due to its unique cultural representation and adaptation to local preferences (Umam & Umuri, 2026). This development encourages culinary businesses to utilize digital communication strategies to differentiate themselves and establish stronger relationships with their audiences.

One example of a local culinary business that actively utilizes social media communication is Atariki Japan. Atariki Japan is a Japanese restaurant specializing in ramen and Japanese-inspired dishes adapted to the preferences of Acehnese consumers. The restaurant combines Japanese culinary characteristics with local taste preferences, creating a distinctive brand experience for customers. Since its establishment in 2022, Atariki Japan has expanded through several branches in Aceh and actively uses Instagram and TikTok as platforms to communicate with its audiences. Atariki Japan uses social media as its primary communication channel to engage with customers and deliver brand messages. The profile of Atariki's social media accounts is shown in Figure 1.

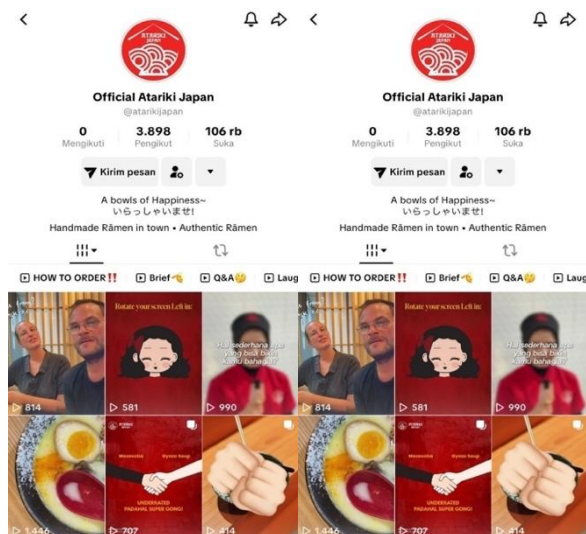


Figure 1. The Profile of Atariki's Social Media
Source: Instagram dan TikTok (@atarikijapan)

Atariki Japan's digital communication activities demonstrate how social media can function as a relationship-building medium rather than merely a promotional tool. Through content creation, customer interaction, and online engagement, Atariki Japan attempts to create closer connections with its customers. Building relationships with customers has become increasingly important in competitive business environments, particularly in the culinary industry, where businesses need effective communication strategies to create

distinctive brand experiences and develop emotional connections with customers. Through relevant content, interactive communication, and online community engagement, social media provides opportunities for brands to strengthen relationships with their customers (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014).

The advancement of digital technology has transformed the way organizations communicate with their stakeholders. Social media platforms have developed beyond being spaces for information exchange and personal interaction into strategic communication channels that enable organizations to establish, maintain, and strengthen relationships with their audiences. Social media allows individuals and communities to gather, communicate, share information, and collaborate through digital platforms (Mailoor et al., 2017). Unlike traditional media, social media enables organizations and audiences to participate in two-way communication, allowing organizations to deliver messages, receive feedback, respond to consumer needs, and create communities around their brands. Kottler and Keller (2009) highlight that social media allows users to share various forms of content, while Mangold and Faulds (2009) describe social media as a hybrid element of the promotion mix that combines organizational communication with consumer-generated communication. Consequently, social media has become an important component of digital strategic communication, enabling organizations not only to promote products and services but also to develop meaningful relationships with stakeholders (Kesar, 2025).

In organizational contexts, communication activities through digital platforms are closely related to marketing communication practices. Marketing communication enables organizations to inform, persuade, and remind consumers about products and brands (Hamud & Mujahidin, 2021). Similarly, Kottler and Keller (2009) argue that marketing communication allows organizations to build dialogue with consumers while strengthening customer relationships. Therefore, contemporary marketing communication should not be understood merely as a promotional activity but also as a strategic process for developing relationships with stakeholders.

The importance of relationship-building in organizational communication can be understood through Relationship Management Theory. This perspective emphasizes that effective communication between organizations and their publics aims to establish and maintain mutually beneficial relationships (Ledingham, 2003). In the digital environment, social media facilitates relationship-building by enabling organizations to communicate directly with customers, encourage participation, and create a sense of connection with the brand (Saffer et al., 2013). Thus, customer loyalty is not merely the result of repeated transactions but can emerge from continuous communication processes and positive relationships between brands and customers. Brand loyalty represents one of the important outcomes of successful brand relationships (Kalia et al., 2024). Loyal customers provide significant value for organizations because they tend to maintain their commitment, repurchase products, and recommend brands to others. Therefore, understanding how communication strategies contribute to relationship development and

loyalty formation has become an important issue in contemporary strategic communication research.

However, limited studies have explored how local culinary businesses utilize social media as a form of digital strategic communication to build brand relationships and develop customer loyalty. Previous studies have primarily emphasized the marketing effectiveness of social media, focusing on brand awareness, engagement, and promotional outcomes of social media (Fahmi & Swarnawati, 2025; Kalia et al., 2024; Pramonoputri et al., 2024), while studies on brand relationships have mainly examined the associations between relationship constructs and customer loyalty using quantitative approaches (Francisco-Maffezzoli et al., 2014; Khamitov et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2020). Consequently, little is known about how digital strategic communication practices facilitate the development of brand relationships that subsequently foster customer loyalty, particularly in the context of local culinary businesses.

This study offers a novel perspective by integrating digital strategic communication and Relationship Management Theory to explain the process through which social media communication builds brand relationships and strengthens customer loyalty. Unlike previous studies that primarily examined the outcomes of social media marketing or the statistical relationships between brand relationship constructs and loyalty, this study focuses on the communication practices underlying relationship development in a local culinary business context.

Therefore, this study aims to examine how Atariki Japan implements digital strategic communication through social media and how these communication practices contribute to building brand relationships and customer loyalty. Specifically, this research addresses three questions: (1) How does Atariki Japan implement digital strategic communication through social media? (2) How do these communication strategies build relationships between the brand and customers? and (3) How do these relationships contribute to customer loyalty? By applying Relationship Management Theory, this study contributes to strategic communication scholarship by highlighting the role of social media as a platform for developing sustainable relationships between organizations and their stakeholders.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media Marketing as a Relationship-Building Strategy

Social media marketing has increasingly become an important practice for organizations seeking to engage consumers in digital environments. Social media marketing is promotional activities conducted through social media platforms using specific strategies to introduce products and establish communication relationships with consumers (Hanjaya et al., 2023). This definition indicates that social media marketing involves both promotional and relational functions. Another definition is that social media marketing is a process through which organizations create, communicate, and deliver value

through social media platforms by facilitating interaction, information sharing, recommendations, and electronic word-of-mouth (Damayanti et al., 2021). Therefore, social media marketing represents a communication process through which organizations create value and maintain relationships with consumers.

This study adopts the social media marketing dimensions of content creation, content sharing, connecting, and community building as discussed by Taan et al. (2021). These dimensions are used to examine how digital communication practices facilitate interaction and relationship building between brands and customers. First, content creation refers to the production of meaningful digital content in the form of images, videos, and text. Effective content allows brands to communicate their identity and create consumer interest. Second, content sharing refers to the distribution of brand-related content through digital channels. Through content sharing, organizations can increase brand visibility while encouraging audiences to participate in spreading information. Third, connecting emphasizes interaction between brands and audiences through comments, direct messages, and online discussions. This interaction enables organizations to understand consumer needs while developing closer relationships with audiences. Fourth, community building involves creating online communities consisting of consumers who share similar interests toward a brand. Lubiana and Fauzi (2018) explain that community building aims to strengthen relationships and encourage consumer loyalty toward brands. These dimensions indicate that social media marketing functions as a relationship-building mechanism rather than merely a promotional strategy. Through continuous interaction and engagement, organizations can develop emotional connections and strengthen consumer commitment.

Relationship Management Theory in Digital Brand Communication

Relationship Management Theory provides an important theoretical foundation for understanding communication between organizations and their publics. This theory emphasizes that the primary function of communication is to establish, maintain, and develop mutually beneficial relationships (Ledingham, 2003; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). In contrast to traditional communication approaches that focus mainly on message transmission, relationship management highlights the importance of interaction, trust, commitment, and ongoing engagement.

In digital environments, social media provides organizations with opportunities to practice relationship management through direct communication with audiences. Features such as comments, direct messages, interactive content, and online communities allow organizations to maintain continuous relationships with stakeholders. Therefore, social media platforms become strategic spaces where organizations can construct relationships rather than simply distribute promotional messages (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Saffer et al., 2013).

Recent studies have demonstrated the relevance of Relationship Management Theory in understanding how organizations build and maintain relationships with their publics. Parker et al. (2024) applied a relationship management framework to examine how nonprofit organizations engage with millennial donors. The study revealed that trust and openness are important relational factors that facilitate stronger connections between organizations and their target audiences. These findings highlight that sustainable relationships are developed through meaningful communication and relational qualities rather than merely through transactional exchanges.

Similarly, Putri et al. (2021) examined relationship management practices in the context of PT Smartfren Telecom Tbk through the Rejeki Smartfren Care program on Twitter. The study found that relationship-oriented communication activities on social media significantly contributed to customer loyalty. The findings demonstrate that digital platforms can function as strategic spaces for maintaining customer relationships through communication, mutual benefits, and continuous engagement.

Building on these studies, the present research extends the application of Relationship Management Theory by examining how a local culinary brand utilizes social media as a relational platform. While previous studies have focused on nonprofit organizations and large corporate contexts, this study explores how Atariki Japan develops brand–customer relationships through everyday digital communication practices, including content creation, content sharing, connecting, and community building.

Relationship Management Theory provides a useful conceptual lens for understanding how communication contributes to the development of brand–customer relationships and customer loyalty. From this perspective, continuous interactions between brands and customers may foster trust, emotional attachment, and commitment, which are associated with long-term loyalty (Ledingham, 2003). This perspective is particularly relevant for exploring the communication practices of local culinary businesses such as Atariki Japan, where social media is used to create brand experiences, facilitate customer interactions, and strengthen relationships with audiences. Rather than seeking to verify the theory, this study uses Relationship Management Theory to interpret the findings and to provide a richer understanding of how digital strategic communication contributes to relationship development and customer loyalty.

Brand Loyalty as an Outcome of Brand Relationships

Brand loyalty represents an important outcome of successful relationships between organizations and consumers. In increasingly competitive markets, maintaining existing customers has become essential because loyal customers contribute to organizational sustainability through repeated purchases and positive recommendations.

Brand loyalty is defined as customer commitment to continuously purchase or use a brand, demonstrated through repeated purchasing behavior and positive advocacy (Ramdanni & Sirait, 2025). Similarly, Haudi et al. (2022) explains that brand loyalty involves

positive attitudes, commitment, and intention to continue choosing a particular brand. However, brand loyalty should not be viewed only as behavioral repetition. From a relationship perspective, loyalty also involves emotional and social dimensions.

Diallo et al. (2020) identifies three dimensions of brand loyalty. First, affective loyalty refers to emotional attachment between consumers and brands. Consumers demonstrate this loyalty when they experience positive feelings, comfort, and emotional connection with a brand. Second, cognitive loyalty refers to loyalty based on rational evaluation, habit, and perceived convenience. Consumers continue choosing a brand because they consider it a preferred and reliable option. Third, normative loyalty refers to loyalty influenced by social factors and group identification. Consumers maintain relationships with brands because the brand becomes associated with their identity and social environment. These dimensions demonstrate that brand loyalty develops through complex processes involving cognitive evaluation, emotional attachment, and social relationships. Therefore, examining how communication strategies contribute to relationship formation is essential for understanding loyalty development.

Another perspective explains customer loyalty through customers' behavioral commitment toward a brand. Griffin (2002) explains that customer loyalty is reflected through several behavioral indicators. Loyal customers make regular repeat purchases, purchase across product or service lines, recommend the brand to others, and demonstrate resistance to competitors' offerings (Griffin, 2002; Subagiyo et al., 2022). These indicators suggest that customer loyalty extends beyond repeated purchasing behavior and reflects a strong commitment to maintaining a long-term relationship with the brand. In the context of Relationship Management Theory, these behaviors are developed through continuous communication, trust, and positive relational experiences between organizations and their customers.

Previous Studies and Research Gap

Previous studies have examined digital communication and social media from different perspectives. Kalia et al. (2024) found that digital marketing communication strategies using multiple digital platforms helped maintain consumer interest and strengthen brand communication. Fahmi and Swarnawati (2025) highlighted the role of social media content strategies in increasing brand awareness, while Pramonoputri et al. (2024) demonstrated that interaction, customization, and electronic word-of-mouth contributed to consumer engagement and brand relationships. However, these studies primarily focused on marketing outcomes, such as brand awareness, engagement, and promotional effectiveness.

Studies examining brand relationships and customer loyalty provide further insights into how these relationships contribute to long-term customer commitment. Zhang et al. (2020) found that expressive brand relationships significantly strengthen brand loyalty through brand trust and brand love. Similarly, Francisco-Maffezzolli et al. (2014) found that

Brand Relationship Quality fully mediates the relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty, suggesting that positive brand experiences alone are insufficient to generate loyalty unless they develop into strong customer–brand relationships. Supporting these findings, Khamitov et al. (2019), through a meta-analysis of 290 studies, confirmed that stronger consumer–brand relationships consistently lead to higher customer brand loyalty across different contexts.

However, these studies predominantly employ quantitative approaches and provide limited understanding of how digital strategic communication facilitates the development of brand relationships that subsequently foster customer loyalty. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by examining how Atariki Japan utilizes digital strategic communication through social media to strengthen brand relationships and customer loyalty through the lens of Relationship Management Theory.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative single-case study design (Yin, 2018). A single-case study was considered appropriate because the research focused on one local culinary business, Atariki Japan, to obtain an in-depth understanding of how digital strategic communication through social media contributes to the development of brand relationships and customer loyalty. By examining a single case in its real-life context, this study was able to explore the communication practices, interactions, and experiences that shape the relationship between the brand and its customers. The selection of Atariki Japan as a case was based on its active utilization of Instagram and TikTok as digital communication platforms to engage with customers and strengthen its brand identity.

The research participants consisted of Atariki Japan's management representatives and customers. Research subjects are individuals who provide relevant information related to the research phenomenon (Sugiyono, 2020). The participants were selected using purposive sampling because they were considered capable of providing meaningful information regarding Atariki Japan's digital communication practices. Purposive sampling involves selecting participants based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives (Sugiyono, 2020).

This study involved five informants based on their knowledge and experience regarding Atariki Japan's digital strategic communication practices and customer relationships. The informants consisted of two internal representatives and three customers of Atariki Japan. The first informant, RM, serves as Chief Marketing of Atariki Japan and is responsible for developing marketing strategies and digital communication planning. The second informant, RZ, works as a content creator responsible for producing and managing Atariki Japan's social media content. The remaining informants were customers who were selected based on several criteria: they were familiar with the Atariki Japan brand, actively used social media, followed Atariki Japan's Instagram or TikTok accounts, and had experience interacting with the brand's digital content. CSA, IF, and SI provided customer perspectives regarding their experiences with Atariki Japan's digital

communication and their relationship with the brand. The combination of organizational and customer perspectives allows this study to examine both the strategic process of digital communication development and how these practices influence customer perceptions and relationships.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation. To protect participants' privacy and confidentiality, this study does not disclose participants' full names. Instead, participant identification is presented using initials only. The use of initials was applied to ensure anonymity while still allowing the researchers to distinguish between participants during the analysis process.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and digital documentation analysis. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they allow researchers to use prepared questions while maintaining flexibility to explore additional information emerging during the interview process. Semi-structured interviews enable researchers to obtain detailed information while allowing informants to express their experiences and perspectives more openly (Kriyantono, 2015). The interview data were obtained from five informants, including the chief marketing officer, a content creator, and three customers of Atariki Japan. Meanwhile, documentation data consisted of screenshots of Atariki Japan's Instagram and TikTok content, including posts, storytelling content, customer interactions, and community-building activities. These digital traces were analyzed to complement interview findings and provide a deeper understanding of how social media marketing practices contribute to the development of brand relationships and customer loyalty.

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive data analysis model developed by Miles et al. (2014), which consists of three interconnected stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. During the data condensation stage, interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts along with social media documentation were carefully reviewed to identify relevant statements and patterns. The data were then coded and categorized based on themes related to digital strategic communication practices, brand–customer relationships, and customer loyalty. The emerging categories were further organized according to the dimensions of Relationship Management Theory and the research questions, including social media practices, relational processes, and loyalty outcomes.

In the data display stage, the categorized data were organized into narrative descriptions and thematic matrices to identify relationships among findings from interviews and social media observations. The researchers compared information obtained from different informants and digital documentation to ensure consistency and obtain a comprehensive understanding of Atariki Japan's communication practices. The final stage involved drawing and verifying conclusions by interpreting the identified themes and relating the empirical findings to the theoretical framework of Relationship Management Theory. Through this process, the analysis aimed to explain not only what communication

strategies were implemented by Atariki Japan but also how these strategies contributed to the development of brand–customer relationships and customer loyalty.

To ensure research trustworthiness, this study applied four criteria of qualitative research quality: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Alexander, 2019). Credibility was established through source triangulation by comparing information obtained from the owner, employees, and customers, as well as methodological triangulation by comparing interview data with observations of Atariki Japan's Instagram and TikTok content. Transferability was enhanced by providing rich descriptions of the research setting, participant characteristics, and Atariki Japan's digital communication practices, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar contexts. Dependability was maintained through a clear documentation of the research process, including participant selection, interview procedures, data coding, and thematic analysis, thereby providing an audit trail of the study. Confirmability was ensured by grounding all interpretations in interview excerpts and social media documentation, while continuously comparing emerging themes with the empirical data to minimize researcher bias.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Digital Strategic Communication Practices of Atariki Japan through Social Media

The implementation of digital strategic communication by Atariki Japan can be understood through its social media marketing practices, which function not only as promotional activities but also as relational strategies for engaging with customers. Social media enables Atariki to communicate brand values, share meaningful content, maintain direct interactions, and create a sense of community among customers. These practices reflect the relational dimension of digital communication, where brands actively develop and maintain relationships with their publics rather than simply deliver marketing messages.

Based on the findings, Atariki Japan's social media marketing practices can be analyzed through four main dimensions: content creation, content sharing, connecting, and community building. These dimensions illustrate how social media activities contribute to different stages of relationship development, from creating initial awareness and engagement to strengthening emotional attachment, trust, and customer loyalty.

Viewed as a single case, Atariki Japan demonstrates how digital strategic communication is implemented as an integrated relational process rather than as a series of isolated marketing activities. The four communication practices—content creation, content sharing, connecting, and community building—operate collectively to strengthen relationships between the brand and its customers. Therefore, the following findings describe how each practice contributes to the development of brand relationships and customer loyalty within the Atariki Japan case.

1. Strategic Content Creation through Storytelling

Atariki Japan applies a structured approach to content creation by establishing a dedicated marketing team responsible for developing digital content. Ryan Mustafa explained that content production involves several individuals with different expertise:

“We have a team specifically responsible for creating content. Our marketing team currently consists of six people, and each person has their own job description and expertise. I am responsible for developing the content strategy, while Eja is responsible for creating content and developing stories. We also have an illustrator who creates visual designs.” (RM, Interview, September 30, 2025)

This finding demonstrates that Atariki Japan’s digital communication is strategically managed through role specialization and content planning. Content production is not conducted randomly but follows an organized process to maintain consistency and brand identity. RM further explained that content creation is conducted continuously:

“We create content every day. We also upload content every day, but the content we create today may be prepared for uploading three days later. Therefore, we already have a content stock.” (RM, Interview, September 30, 2025)

The preparation of content stock shows that Atariki Japan manages social media communication through consistency and planning. This practice enables the brand to maintain continuous visibility among digital audiences.

Among various content formats, storytelling becomes the dominant strategy because it generates higher audience engagement:

“For specific types of content, we mainly focus on storytelling. There is interaction between customers, Beski, and our social media platform. Storytelling content receives higher engagement compared to other types of content.” (RM, Interview, September 30, 2025)

An example of Atariki’s storytelling-based content that represents its effort to create engaging and relatable communication with customers is shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2. One of Atariki's Storytelling Content Posts
Source: Instagram @atarikijapan

Customers also perceived this communication approach positively. CSA stated:

"From Atariki's content, the first thing I noticed is that it is very entertaining, and I can also get a lot of information about Atariki." (CSA, Interview, September 14, 2025)

Similarly, IF highlighted the cultural identity presented through Atariki's content:

"Perhaps it is because the quality of the content is impressive, and the Japanese cultural elements presented in Atariki's content are very strong." (IF, Interview, September 14, 2025)

Atariki's effort to maintain an appealing visual identity can also be observed through the arrangement of its Instagram feed, as shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3. An Attractive Instagram Feed of Atariki

Source: Instagram @atarikijapan

Therefore, content creation functions not only as a means of delivering brand information but also as an initial relational mechanism that shapes customers' awareness, knowledge, and emotional perception of Atariki Japan. Atariki's use of storytelling content and the character "Beski" operate as relational mechanisms that humanize the brand, strengthen brand identity, and establish the foundation for long-term relationships with customers.

2. Strategic Content Sharing through Platform Adaptation

Besides content production, Atariki Japan manages content distribution by adapting communication strategies according to different social media platforms. RZ explained:

"We upload content every day on both Instagram and TikTok. Regarding audience segmentation, Instagram reaches families, while TikTok reaches university students aged around 18 to 25 years old." (RZ, Interview, September 30, 2025)

This indicates that Atariki Japan does not apply identical communication strategies across platforms. Instead, it considers audience characteristics and platform cultures in delivering messages.

Customers confirmed that digital exposure contributed to their awareness of Atariki Japan. CSA explained:

"I usually see Atariki's content on TikTok because their content often appears on my For You Page. This makes me interested in purchasing Atariki." (CSA, Interview, September 14, 2025)

Furthermore, Atariki emphasizes original content rather than relying on paid promotion or influencer endorsement:

"Regarding brand ambassadors or collaborations with influencers, we believe that original content is more convincing and more trusted by customers." (RM, Interview, September 30, 2025)

Thus, content sharing represents more than the distribution of promotional messages; it serves as a continuous communication process that maintains customers' connection with the brand. By consistently sharing relevant and engaging content, Atariki Japan strengthens brand familiarity, reinforces positive perceptions, and supports the development of customer engagement and loyalty.

Building Brand Relationships through Connecting and Community Building

The findings reveal that Atariki Japan develops brand–customer relationships through interactive communication, emotional connection, and digital community building. Social media functions not only as a communication channel but also as a relational space where customers develop familiarity and attachment toward the brand.

1. Creating Emotional Connections through Two-Way Communication

One of the strongest relationship-building practices is the creation of a personal brand identity through the character "Beski." RM explained:

"We do not see Atariki merely as a brand, but as a figure. We imagine it as a 13-year-old girl named Beski. Among loyal customers, when they send direct messages, they usually ask, 'What is Beski doing?' The name Beski comes from 'Bestie Atariki.' Initially, many customers sent messages saying 'Bestie, please help,' and eventually the identity of Beski was created." (RM, Interview, September 30, 2025)

This finding demonstrates that Atariki Japan applies brand personification to reduce the distance between the brand and customers. Instead of interacting with a purely commercial entity, customers interact with a brand personality that feels more familiar and approachable.

The relationship is also maintained through responsive communication. RM stated: *"If customers want to complain or provide suggestions, we are open to receiving their feedback." (RM, Interview, September 30, 2025)*

RZ emphasized that interaction is central to developing customer relationships:

“Brand loyalty at Atariki is not formed merely through one-way advertising, but through interaction between customers and Atariki itself, or with Beski.” (RZ, Interview, September 30, 2025)

Customers also recognized this relational communication. CSA explained:

“The admin is also quite responsive, so I can get a lot of information, and it makes me feel closer to the Atariki brand.” (CSA, Interview, September 14, 2025)

An example of Atariki’s responsive interaction with customers is presented in Figure 4.

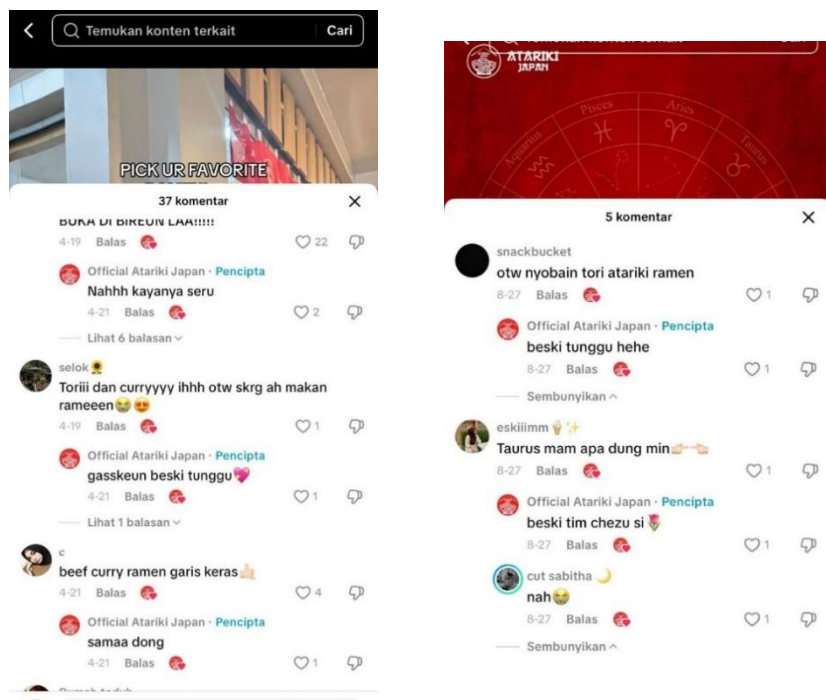


Figure 4. Responsive Atariki Admin in Interacting with Customers
Source: TikTok @atarikijapan

Therefore, connecting demonstrates how social media interaction becomes a relational practice that transforms communication into meaningful relationships. Through responsive and personalized interactions with customers, Atariki Japan builds trust, emotional closeness, and commitment, which are essential elements in strengthening long-term brand–customer relationships.

2. Building Customer Community through “Bestie Atariki”

Beyond interpersonal interaction, Atariki Japan develops relationships through community building. The “Bestie Atariki” Instagram channel provides customers with a digital space where they receive motivational messages and interactive content. RM explained:

“One of the things we created is an Instagram channel. We share daily reminders about everyday life, motivation, and encouragement. Eventually, customers feel that Atariki is not only about selling ramen, but also about being a friend.” (RM, Interview, September 20, 2025)

An example of Atariki’s Instagram community channel is illustrated in Figure 5.

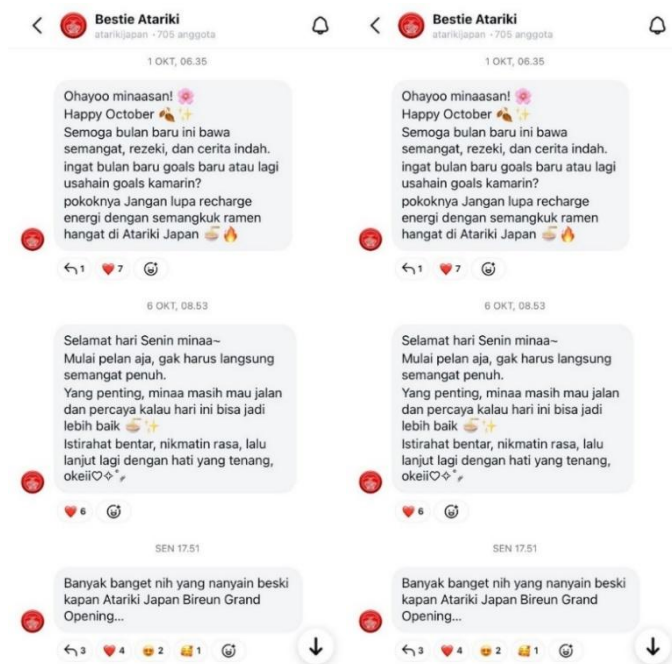


Figure 5. Atariki’s Instagram Community Channel

Source: Instagram @atarikijapan

Customers perceived this community positively because it created a sense of belonging. CSA stated:

“What makes me more loyal to Atariki is that they have an Instagram channel called Bestie Atariki. They created a community that I think is quite interesting. They often provide motivational messages, and they increase interaction with their followers. They successfully make customers feel special.” (CSA, Interview, December 28, 2025)

SI also explained:

“Besides the delicious food and active social media, I really like Atariki’s interaction with customers. They build chemistry very well. They also have an Instagram channel called Bestie Atariki where they often share funny motivational messages.” (SI, Interview, December 28, 2025)

In sum, community building represents the highest level of relational engagement in Atariki Japan’s social media strategy, where customers are positioned not only as consumers but also as members of a shared brand community. By creating a sense of belonging and collective identity, Atariki strengthens customer attachment and encourages continued support, recommendation, and long-term loyalty.

Developing Customer Loyalty through Social Media-Based Brand Relationships

The findings on social media marketing practices indicate that digital communication plays an important role in cultivating meaningful relationships between Atariki Japan and its customers. These relationships subsequently become the foundation for developing different forms of customer loyalty. This section further discusses how social media-based brand relationships contribute to affective loyalty, cognitive loyalty, and normative loyalty among Atariki Japan customers.

1. Affective Loyalty: Emotional Attachment toward Atariki Japan

Affective loyalty emerged through customers’ positive feelings toward Atariki Japan’s products, services, and communication practices. SI explained:

“For me, food review content and testimonials are very appealing because seeing people enjoying the food and commenting positively about Atariki’s products makes the content very appetizing.” (SI, Interview, September 20, 2025)



Figure 6. Atariki Ramen Food Review Content

Source: TikTok @atarikijapan

The development of affective loyalty is supported by Atariki's ability to create emotional experiences through social media content. Food review content that visually presents menu quality and customer experiences contributes to building positive perceptions and emotional attachment toward the brand, as illustrated in Figure 6.

CSA also emphasized:

"After I explored their account, I became more loyal because their content is very relatable to Gen Z and they interact with their followers. It feels like we become part of Atariki." (CSA, Interview, December 28, 2025)

A similar view was also expressed by another customer, who stated that exposure to Atariki's content on Instagram and TikTok increased their interest in trying Atariki again, even though they had previously visited the restaurant less frequently.

Therefore, affective loyalty demonstrates that customers' attachment to Atariki Japan is developed through positive emotional experiences created by consistent social media interactions, engaging content, and meaningful brand communication. This finding highlights that emotional connection plays an important role in transforming customers from passive audiences into individuals who feel attached and personally connected to the brand.

2. Cognitive Loyalty: Developing Brand Knowledge and Preference

Cognitive loyalty was reflected in customers' rational evaluation of Atariki Japan based on information obtained through social media and direct experiences.

IF explained:

“Atariki was the first halal ramen pioneer in Banda Aceh. At that time, people were still unfamiliar with halal ramen, and through Atariki, people became more aware of halal ramen. I first knew Atariki from Instagram.” (IF, Interview, September 14, 2025)

“The content published by Atariki provides sufficient reasons for me to remain a loyal customer.” (IF, Interview, September 14, 2025)

In addition to evaluating the value of Atariki’s social media content, the same customer also highlighted the quality of products and services as important factors influencing their continued preference for the brand. IF further stated:

“Regarding the food quality, particularly the ramen, I consider it the best in Banda Aceh. Moreover, the service provided is also excellent.” (IF, Interview, September 14, 2025)

Thus, cognitive loyalty illustrates that customers’ continued preference for Atariki Japan is also influenced by their rational evaluation of the brand’s quality, value, and credibility. Through informative and consistent social media communication, customers develop greater knowledge and confidence in the brand, which strengthens their decision to maintain their relationship with Atariki Japan.

3. Normative Loyalty: Commitment beyond Promotional Offers

Normative loyalty was reflected in customers’ commitment to continue choosing Atariki despite competitors offering promotions.

IF stated:

“I would still choose Atariki because it is the pioneer and the quality offered by Atariki is the best ramen quality in Banda Aceh. Even if other brands offer promotions, what is the point of a cheaper price if the quality is lower?” (IF, Interview, September 14, 2025)

CSA similarly explained:

“I would still choose Atariki compared to other ramen brands in Banda Aceh. Atariki is still the top brand in my heart for ramen, even when other brands offer promotions.” (CSA, Interview, September 14, 2025)

Thus, normative loyalty reflects the highest level of customer commitment, where customers continue to support Atariki Japan based on established trust, positive experiences, and a sense of obligation toward the brand. This finding indicates that long-

term loyalty is not solely driven by product satisfaction but also by the relational bonds and shared values developed between the brand and its customers.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that customer loyalty toward Atariki Japan is developed through a gradual relational process facilitated by social media-based communication. Affective loyalty emerges from customers' emotional attachment and positive experiences with the brand, cognitive loyalty is strengthened through customers' understanding and evaluation of the brand's value and quality, while normative loyalty reflects customers' commitment to continuously choose and support Atariki despite alternative options. These findings indicate that loyalty in digital environments is not merely the result of repeated transactions but is constructed through continuous interactions, meaningful experiences, and strong brand–customer relationships.

Taken as a whole, the Atariki Japan case illustrates how digital strategic communication functions as an integrated relationship-building system. Rather than relying on a single communication strategy, the company combines storytelling, platform-specific content sharing, responsive interactions, and community building to cultivate trust, emotional attachment, and customer commitment. The convergence of these communication practices explains how Atariki Japan develops long-term brand relationships and customer loyalty within the context of a local culinary business.

Building Customer Loyalty through Digital Strategic Communication and Social Media-Based Brand Relationships

The findings demonstrate that Atariki Japan's digital strategic communication through social media plays an important role in developing brand–customer relationships and strengthening customer loyalty. Rather than functioning merely as a promotional platform, social media becomes a relational space where brands and customers interact, exchange meanings, and develop emotional connections. This finding supports the perspective of Relationship Management Theory, which emphasizes that effective communication is essential in building and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics (Ledingham, 2003; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998).

The implementation of digital strategic communication at Atariki Japan can be observed through four main practices: content creation, content sharing, connecting, and community building. In terms of content creation, Atariki consistently produces creative, relevant, and visually attractive content, particularly through storytelling approaches. The use of the character “Beski” as a representation of the brand demonstrates how digital communication can humanize a brand and create a more personal relationship with customers. This finding supports Mangold and Faulds (2009), who argue that social media enables brands to engage audiences through authentic and interactive communication, thereby strengthening brand identity and customer engagement.

Furthermore, content sharing through Instagram and TikTok allows Atariki to maintain continuous communication with different audience segments. The consistency of

content distribution does not only increase brand visibility but also creates opportunities for customers to become familiar with the brand's values and identity. This finding indicates that social media communication contributes not only to information dissemination but also to relationship cultivation by creating repeated and meaningful interactions with audiences (Appel et al., 2020).

The findings also reveal that connecting is an important element in strengthening brand–customer relationships. Through responsive communication, personal interactions, and openness toward customer feedback, Atariki reduces the distance between the brand and its customers. This finding is consistent with Etuk (2018), who highlight that two-way communication in social media is a key factor in developing trust and customer loyalty. In this context, Atariki's communication strategy demonstrates that loyalty is developed through continuous relational experiences rather than through transactional exchanges alone.

Moreover, community building through the “Bestie Atariki” Instagram channel further strengthens customers' sense of belonging toward the brand. The community provides customers with opportunities to receive personalized messages, interact with the brand, and feel recognized as part of the Atariki community. This finding supports the concept of brand community proposed by Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001), which explains that communities are formed through shared values, experiences, and identification among members. Therefore, digital communities can function as important mechanisms for maintaining long-term relationships between brands and customers (Bi, 2019).

The “Bestie Atariki” online community strengthens customer loyalty by facilitating continuous interaction between the brand and its customers beyond transactional exchanges. Through regular communication, exclusive content, customer participation, and responsive interactions, the community fosters trust, emotional attachment, and a sense of belonging among its members. These relational experiences encourage customers not only to revisit Atariki Japan but also to recommend the brand to others and remain committed despite competitors' promotional offers. Thus, the online community serves as a relationship-building platform that transforms customer engagement into long-term loyalty.

In relation to brand loyalty, the findings indicate that social media communication contributes to strengthening brand–customer relationships through relational processes based on interaction, trust, emotional connection, and commitment. From the perspective of Relationship Management Theory, loyalty is developed when organizations successfully establish and maintain mutually beneficial relationships with their publics. Among the identified dimensions, affective loyalty appears to be the most dominant, as customers develop emotional attachment through positive experiences with Atariki's content, services, and online interactions. These relational experiences strengthen customers' trust and commitment toward the brand, which subsequently encourage continued preference, repeat visits, and willingness to support Atariki Japan. Therefore, the findings demonstrate

that social media functions not only as a promotional channel but also as a strategic relational platform through which brands can cultivate meaningful relationships and strengthen long-term customer loyalty. These findings support the concept of loyalty by Diallo et al. (2020), which explains that loyalty develops through psychological and emotional processes beyond simple purchase behavior.

The findings further suggest that Atariki Japan's digital strategic communication cultivates a high level of customer loyalty, as reflected in Griffin's (2002) characteristics of loyal customers. Customers not only revisited Atariki Japan regularly but also recommended the brand to others and remained committed despite competitors' promotional offers. These behaviors are consistent with Griffin's indicators of customer loyalty, which include regular repeat purchases, recommending the brand to others, and demonstrating resistance to competitors' offerings. Therefore, the relationships developed through Atariki Japan's digital strategic communication extend beyond transactional exchanges and reflect the long-term relational outcomes emphasized in Relationship Management Theory.

In brief, this study shows that digital strategic communication enables Atariki Japan to transform social media from a marketing channel into a relationship-building platform. Content creation and community building emerge as particularly influential practices because they combine informational value with emotional engagement, allowing customers to develop trust, attachment, and commitment toward the brand.

Theoretically, this study extends Relationship Management Theory by demonstrating how digital strategic communication practices contribute to the development of organization–public relationships in the context of local culinary brands. Previous studies have emphasized trust, commitment, and interaction as fundamental elements of relationship management. However, this study shows that these relational outcomes are developed through specific digital communication practices, including content creation, content sharing, connecting, and community building. These practices function not only as promotional activities but also as relational mechanisms that enable brands to create emotional attachment, customer engagement, and a sense of belonging.

Furthermore, the findings provide a more nuanced understanding of digital relationship management by showing that customer loyalty develops through a relational process rather than merely through repeated purchase behavior. The study reveals that social media facilitates a transition from initial brand awareness to deeper relational outcomes, where customers gradually develop trust, emotional connection, commitment, and loyalty. Therefore, this research contributes to expanding Relationship Management Theory by highlighting social media as a relational space where local brands actively construct and maintain long-term relationships with customers.

Practically, the findings suggest that local businesses should not only focus on promotional activities but also develop authentic communication strategies that emphasize engagement, responsiveness, and community building. Through these

approaches, brands can establish stronger emotional connections and achieve sustainable customer loyalty in increasingly competitive digital environments.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how Atariki Japan implements digital strategic communication through social media and how these communication practices contribute to building brand relationships and customer loyalty. The findings indicate that digital strategic communication extends beyond promotional activities by facilitating continuous interaction, customer engagement, and relationship development through social media. Rather than functioning solely as a marketing channel, social media serves as a strategic communication platform that enables brands to establish meaningful and long-term relationships with customers.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates that brand relationships are developed through consistent communication practices that foster trust, emotional attachment, and a sense of belonging. These relational experiences subsequently contribute to customer loyalty by encouraging customers to maintain their commitment to the brand, revisit the restaurant, and recommend Atariki Japan to others. Thus, customer loyalty is not merely a consequence of product satisfaction but also the result of sustained communication and relationship-building processes.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the discussion of digital strategic communication by showing that social media marketing can function as a relationship-building mechanism rather than only a marketing tool. The findings extend the application of Relationship Management Theory by highlighting how digital interactions and online communities facilitate the transition from consumer awareness to emotional attachment and long-term loyalty. Practically, this study suggests that culinary businesses can strengthen customer loyalty by developing authentic content, maintaining interactive communication, and creating online communities that provide customers with meaningful experiences beyond product consumption.

This study is limited to a single-case investigation of Atariki Japan and focuses on existing customers and internal stakeholders. Consequently, the findings may not fully explain how brand relationships are formed among potential customers or in different business contexts. Future research is therefore encouraged to examine audiences who are newly exposed to Atariki in order to understand the initial process of forming brand perceptions, attitudes, and loyalty. Future studies may also employ quantitative approaches to statistically measure the influence of social media marketing on brand loyalty. Furthermore, subsequent research can explore the relationship between social media marketing and other relevant variables, such as brand trust, customer engagement, and purchase intention.

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