

Social Media Marketing and Brand Image: The Mediating Role of Brand Trust on Purchase Intention among Generation Z

Dewi Pratiwi Indriasari^{□1}

¹Universitas Esa Unggul

Abstract

This study aims to examine the influence of social media marketing and brand image on purchase intention through the mediating role of brand trust among Generation Z consumers. In the digital era, Generation Z represents a dominant consumer segment that is highly engaged with social media platforms and brand-related content. However, the effectiveness of social media marketing and brand image in shaping purchase intention remains inconsistent without considering psychological factors such as trust. This research employs a quantitative approach using a survey method. Data were collected from Generation Z respondents in Bandung through structured questionnaires measured on a five-point Likert scale. The analysis was conducted using Structural Equation Modeling–Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) to test both direct and indirect relationships among variables. The findings indicate that social media marketing and brand image significantly influence brand trust, which in turn significantly affects purchase intention. Furthermore, brand trust plays a mediating role in strengthening the relationship between marketing activities and consumers' purchase intention. This study contributes to marketing literature by emphasizing the strategic importance of trust-building in digital marketing strategies targeting Generation Z.

Keywords: Social Media Marketing; Brand Image; Brand Trust; Purchase Intention; Generation Z

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Corresponding author :

Email Address: dewisinaulan01@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technology has transformed contemporary marketing practices, particularly through social media platforms. Social media marketing refers to the use of social media channels to promote products, build brand awareness, and engage consumers through interactive content and digital communication. For businesses targeting Generation Z, social media has become a primary medium for influencing perceptions and stimulating purchasing behavior. Generation Z consumers are characterized by high digital engagement, responsiveness to online content, and reliance on peer interaction in decision-making processes.

In addition to social media marketing activities, brand image plays a fundamental role in shaping consumer perceptions. Brand image represents the set of associations and impressions held in consumers' minds regarding a brand. A

favorable brand image enhances perceived credibility and differentiation, which may positively influence purchase intention. Purchase intention itself refers to the likelihood that a consumer will plan or be willing to buy a particular product or service based on evaluation and perception.

However, the relationship between marketing efforts and purchase intention may not occur directly. In digital environments characterized by high information exposure and uncertainty, brand trust becomes a crucial determinant. Brand trust refers to consumers' confidence in a brand's reliability, integrity, and ability to fulfill its promises. Trust reduces perceived risk and strengthens consumers' willingness to engage in transactions. Therefore, brand trust may function as a mediating variable that explains how social media marketing and brand image ultimately influence purchase intention.

Although previous studies have examined the individual relationships among these variables, limited research has integrated social media marketing, brand image, brand trust, and purchase intention within a single structural model focusing on Generation Z consumers. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining the mediating role of brand trust in the relationship between marketing strategies and purchase intention among Generation Z in Bandung.

Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses Development

Social media marketing has become a strategic tool for firms to communicate brand value and influence consumer perceptions. Effective social media marketing activities, such as interactive content, informative messages, and engaging communication, enhance consumers' familiarity and emotional attachment toward a brand. When consumers perceive marketing content as credible and valuable, their confidence in the brand increases. Therefore, social media marketing is expected to positively influence brand trust.

Brand image represents consumers' overall perception of a brand based on accumulated experiences and associations. A strong and favorable brand image enhances perceived reliability and credibility, which are essential components in building trust. Consumers who perceive a brand positively are more likely to develop confidence in its products and services. Thus, brand image is assumed to have a significant positive effect on brand trust.

In addition to its indirect role through trust, social media marketing may also directly influence purchase intention. Generation Z consumers, who are highly exposed to digital content, often rely on social media information when evaluating products. Engaging and persuasive marketing messages may directly stimulate their willingness to purchase.

Similarly, brand image may directly influence purchase intention. A favorable brand image reduces perceived risk and increases consumers' desire to choose a

particular brand over competitors. Consumers who associate positive values with a brand are more inclined to form purchase intentions.

Brand trust plays a critical role in reducing uncertainty and perceived risk in online environments. Trust strengthens consumers' confidence in making purchasing decisions. When consumers believe that a brand is reliable and capable of delivering its promises, they are more likely to develop strong purchase intentions. Therefore, brand trust is expected to mediate the relationship between social media marketing, brand image, and purchase intention.

Based on the theoretical arguments above, the hypotheses of this study are formulated as follows:

- H1 : Social media marketing has a positive effect on brand trust.
- H2 : Brand image has a positive effect on brand trust.
- H3 : Social media marketing has a positive effect on purchase intention.
- H4 : Brand image has a positive effect on purchase intention.
- H5 : Brand trust has a positive effect on purchase intention.
- H6 : Brand trust mediates the relationship between social media marketing and purchase intention.
- H7 : Brand trust mediates the relationship between brand image and purchase intention.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative research approach with an explanatory research design to examine the causal relationships among social media marketing, brand image, brand trust, and purchase intention. The research aimed to test both direct and indirect effects among variables within a structural model framework.

The population of this study consisted of Generation Z consumers in Bandung who actively use social media and have experience interacting with brand-related content online. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, with criteria including individuals aged between 17 and 26 years and active users of at least one social media platform. A total of 200 respondents were collected, which meets the minimum requirement for Structural Equation Modeling-Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) analysis.

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire distributed online using Google Forms. All variables were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The measurement of social media marketing was adapted from established indicators such as content quality, interactivity, informativeness, and entertainment value. Brand image was measured through perceptions of brand reputation, distinctiveness, and credibility. Brand trust was assessed based on reliability, honesty, and confidence in the brand. Purchase intention was measured using indicators related to consumers' willingness, likelihood, and intention to purchase.

Prior to data analysis, instrument testing was conducted to ensure validity and reliability. Convergent validity was evaluated using outer loading values and

Average Variance Extracted (AVE), while reliability was assessed using Composite Reliability and Cronbach's Alpha. The data analysis technique employed Structural Equation Modeling-Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) using SmartPLS software. The analysis included evaluation of the measurement model (outer model) and structural model (inner model), as well as hypothesis testing through bootstrapping procedures to determine the significance of path coefficients and mediating effects.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data analysis was conducted using Structural Equation Modeling-Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS). The evaluation included measurement model assessment (outer model) and structural model assessment (inner model).

Measurement Model Evaluation (Outer Model)

The measurement model was first evaluated to ensure construct validity and reliability. Convergent validity was assessed through outer loading values and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). All indicator loadings exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating that each indicator adequately represents its respective construct. The AVE values for all variables were above 0.50, confirming that more than 50% of the variance in the indicators is explained by the latent construct.

Table 1. Convergent Validity and Reliability

Variable	Outer Loading (Range)	AVE	Composite Reliability	Cronbach's Alpha
Social Media Marketing	0.72 - 0.88	0.64	0.90	0.87
Brand Image	0.75 - 0.89	0.67	0.91	0.88
Brand Trust	0.78 - 0.90	0.69	0.92	0.89
Purchase Intention	0.74 - 0.91	0.71	0.93	0.90

Source: Data Primary 2026

Table 1 presents the results of convergent validity and reliability testing for all constructs in the measurement model. Convergent validity was evaluated using outer loading values and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). All outer loading values exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating that each indicator adequately represents its respective construct. This suggests that the measurement items for social media marketing, brand image, brand trust, and purchase intention are strongly correlated with their latent variables.

The AVE values for all constructs are above 0.50, ranging from 0.64 to 0.71. These results confirm that more than 50% of the variance in the indicators is explained by their respective constructs, indicating satisfactory convergent validity. In addition, the Composite Reliability values range from 0.90 to 0.93, while Cronbach's Alpha values range from 0.87 to 0.90. These values exceed the minimum threshold of 0.70, demonstrating strong internal consistency reliability.

Table 2. R-Square Values

Endogenous Variable	R-Square
Brand Trust	0.58
Purchase Intention	0.65

Source: Data Primary 2026

Table 2 presents the R-square (R^2) values, which indicate the explanatory power of the structural model. The R-square value for Brand Trust is 0.58, meaning that 58% of the variance in brand trust is explained by social media marketing and brand image. This result suggests that both marketing activities and consumers' perceptions of brand image play a substantial role in building trust among Generation Z consumers. Meanwhile, the R-square value for Purchase Intention is 0.65, indicating that 65% of the variance in purchase intention is explained by social media marketing, brand image, and brand trust. According to SEM-PLS evaluation standards, this value can be considered substantial, reflecting that the model has strong predictive capability.

These findings demonstrate that the inclusion of brand trust as a mediating variable strengthens the model's explanatory power in predicting purchase intention among Generation Z.

Table 3. Direct Effects

Hypothesis	Path	Coefficient	T-Statistic	P-Value	Result
H1	SMM → Brand Trust	0.35	4.12	0.000	Supported
H2	Brand Image → Brand Trust	0.42	5.21	0.000	Supported
H3	SMM → Purchase Intention	0.21	2.45	0.014	Supported
H4	Brand Image → Purchase Intention	0.19	2.17	0.030	Supported
H5	Brand Trust → Purchase Intention	0.46	6.03	0.000	Supported

Source: Data Primary 2026

Table 3 presents the results of hypothesis testing for direct relationships among variables using bootstrapping procedures. The results show that Social Media Marketing has a positive and significant effect on Brand Trust ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that interactive and engaging social media activities enhance consumers' trust in a brand. Similarly, Brand Image significantly influences Brand Trust ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that a positive brand perception strengthens consumer confidence.

Regarding purchase intention, Social Media Marketing shows a significant positive effect ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.05$), implying that exposure to persuasive social media content directly increases consumers' willingness to purchase. Brand Image also has a significant positive impact on Purchase Intention ($\beta = 0.19$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that favorable brand associations encourage buying intentions.

Among all direct effects, Brand Trust has the strongest influence on Purchase Intention ($\beta = 0.46$, $p < 0.001$). This finding highlights the critical role of trust as a key determinant in shaping Generation Z consumers' purchasing decisions. Overall, all proposed direct hypotheses are supported.

Table 4. Indirect Effects (Mediation Test)

Hypothesis	Path	Coefficient	T-Statistic	P-Value	Result
H6	SMM → Brand Trust → Purchase Intention	0.16	3.18	0.002	Supported
H7	Brand Image → Brand Trust → Purchase Intention	0.19	3.75	0.000	Supported

Source: Data Primary 2026

Table 4 presents the results of the mediation analysis using bootstrapping procedures. The findings indicate that Brand Trust significantly mediates the relationship between Social Media Marketing and Purchase Intention ($\beta = 0.16$, $p < 0.01$). This suggests that social media marketing not only influences purchase intention directly but also indirectly by strengthening consumers' trust in the brand. In other words, effective digital marketing strategies increase purchase intention when they successfully build consumer trust.

Similarly, Brand Trust significantly mediates the relationship between Brand Image and Purchase Intention ($\beta = 0.19$, $p < 0.001$). This finding implies that a positive brand image enhances purchase intention through the development of trust. Consumers are more likely to translate favorable brand perceptions into buying intentions when they feel confident in the brand's reliability and credibility.

Overall, the results confirm that Brand Trust plays a partial mediating role. Both social media marketing and brand image affect purchase intention directly and indirectly through trust, highlighting the strategic importance of trust-building efforts in targeting Generation Z consumers.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that social media marketing significantly influences brand trust among Generation Z consumers. This result indicates that interactive, informative, and engaging digital content plays a crucial role in building consumer confidence. For Generation Z, who are highly exposed to social media platforms, marketing communication that emphasizes authenticity and transparency strengthens trust in a brand. This finding supports the view that digital engagement enhances perceived credibility and reduces uncertainty in online purchasing environments.

Brand image was also found to have a significant positive effect on brand trust. This suggests that consumers who perceive a brand as reputable, distinctive, and reliable are more likely to develop confidence in that brand. A strong brand image functions as a quality signal that reduces perceived risk, particularly in digital contexts where physical product evaluation is limited. This result reinforces the importance of consistent brand positioning in shaping consumer trust.

Furthermore, both social media marketing and brand image directly influence purchase intention. This indicates that persuasive digital communication and favorable brand perceptions can directly stimulate consumers' willingness to buy. However, the effect sizes of these direct relationships are smaller compared to the effect of brand trust on purchase intention. This suggests that while marketing exposure is important, consumers' psychological confidence in the brand plays a more decisive role in influencing purchasing decisions.

Brand trust shows the strongest impact on purchase intention, highlighting its central role in consumer behavior among Generation Z. Trust reduces perceived risk and strengthens commitment toward a brand, making consumers more confident in their purchasing decisions. The mediation analysis further confirms that brand trust partially mediates the relationships between social media marketing, brand image, and purchase intention. This means that marketing strategies are more effective when they successfully build trust rather than merely attract attention.

Overall, the discussion emphasizes that trust is a critical mechanism that connects marketing activities and consumer behavioral outcomes. Companies targeting Generation Z should therefore focus not only on creating engaging social media content and maintaining a strong brand image but also on developing credibility and authenticity to enhance consumer trust and ultimately drive purchase intention.

CONCLUSION

This study investigates the influence of social media marketing and brand image on purchase intention through the mediating role of brand trust among Generation Z consumers in Bandung. The findings demonstrate that both social media marketing and brand image significantly contribute to building brand trust. In turn, brand trust has a strong and significant impact on purchase intention.

Although social media marketing and brand image directly influence purchase intention, brand trust emerges as the most influential variable in the model. The mediation results confirm that brand trust partially mediates the relationships between marketing activities and purchase intention, indicating that trust serves as a key mechanism in transforming marketing exposure into actual buying intention.

These findings highlight the strategic importance of trust-building in digital marketing efforts targeting Generation Z. Companies should not only focus on creating engaging content and maintaining a positive brand image but also emphasize credibility, authenticity, and consistent brand communication to strengthen consumer trust and enhance purchase intention.

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