

The Influence of Social Media Engagement on Generation Z's Purchase Intention: The Mediating Role of Brand Trust

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ABSTRACT

Introduction:

The development of social media has transformed marketing strategies, positioning social media engagement as the primary means of building relationships between brands and consumers. However, consumer engagement on social media does not always lead to purchase intention, necessitating an understanding of the role of brand trust as a bridging mechanism for this relationship. This study aims to analyze the influence of social media engagement on brand trust and purchase intention, and to examine the mediating role of brand trust.

Methods:

This study used a quantitative explanatory approach with a sample of 116 respondents selected through purposive sampling. Data analysis was conducted using SEM-PLS. Instrument testing included convergent and discriminant validity, as well as reliability using Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability. Mediation analysis refers to the Baron and Kenny approach.

Results:

The results show that social media engagement has a positive and significant effect on brand trust, and brand trust has a positive and significant effect on purchase intention. Mediation testing indicates that brand trust mediates the relationship between social media engagement and purchase intention in certain pathways, although not all mediation pathways are significant.

Conclusion and Suggestion:

This study concludes that the effectiveness of social media engagement in driving purchase intention is highly dependent on its ability to build brand trust. Future research is recommended to expand the sample, use a longitudinal design, and add other variables to enhance the model's explanatory power.

INTRODUCTION

The development of social media has fundamentally changed the way companies build relationships with consumers, particularly among Generation Z, known as digital natives and highly engaged in using social media platforms as a source of information, entertainment, and consumption references (Dewantoro et al., 2025; Mude & Undale, 2023). Generation Z is no longer a passive consumer, but rather an active participant engaged in various forms of social

media engagement, such as liking, commenting, sharing content, and interacting directly with brands. From a modern marketing perspective, this engagement is seen as a crucial stimulus capable of influencing consumers' cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses (Cheung et al., 2021). This aligns with the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) Theory framework, which explains that stimuli in the form of social media content and interactions are processed by the individual (organism) before generating a behavioral response, in this case, purchase intention. However, engagement on social media does not automatically lead to purchase intention, especially among Generation Z, who tend to be critical, selective, and highly skeptical of marketing messages deemed inauthentic. This condition suggests that other psychological mechanisms act as a link between social media engagement and purchase intention (Luthuli et al., 2019). One key construct widely discussed in relationship marketing literature is brand trust, which is the consumer's belief that a brand has integrity, reliability, and good intentions in fulfilling its promises.

Based on Commitment Trust Theory, trust is the main foundation in building long-term relationships between brands and consumers and is an important determinant in the formation of purchase intentions (Anora et al., 2024). In the context of social media, consistent, responsive, and transparent interactions can strengthen the perception of trust in a brand, especially when the content presented is considered relevant, authentic, and in line with the values held by Generation Z. Furthermore, Social Exchange Theory also explains that consumers will be willing to provide a positive response, including purchase intentions, if they feel value and trust in the exchange relationship with the brand (Wu & Huang, 2023). Thus, brand trust has the potential to play a mediating role that bridges the influence of social media engagement on purchase intention. Although various studies have examined the direct relationship between social media and purchase intention (Ao et al., 2023; Nekmahmud et al., 2022; Samaniego-Arias et al., 2025), the findings still show inconsistencies, and relatively few studies explicitly position brand trust as a mediating mechanism, especially in the generation Z segment in the context of the Indonesian digital market.

Based on the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) Theory framework, consumer engagement on social media as a stimulus requires a strong internal process (organism) to generate behavioral responses, and in the context of brand–consumer relationships, this process is closely related to the formation of brand trust. On the other hand, Relationship Marketing Theory and Commitment–Trust Theory emphasize that trust is the main foundation in building long-term relationships and driving purchase intentions, especially for Generation Z who highly demands transparency, authenticity, and value in digital interactions. However, research that empirically integrates social media engagement, brand trust, and purchase intention in one complete conceptual model, especially with a focus on Generation Z in the context of the Indonesian digital market, is still relatively limited and produces inconsistent findings. Therefore, the novelty of this research lies in the effort to fill this gap by developing and testing an empirical model that positions brand trust as a key mediating mechanism in explaining the influence of social media engagement on purchase intention, as well as integrating the S-O-R Theory and Relationship Marketing Theory approaches simultaneously. This approach not only enriches the theoretical treasury of digital marketing, but also offers a new, more contextual empirical perspective in understanding the consumption behavior of generation Z in the social media era.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media Engagement

Social media engagement refers to the level of active consumer involvement in interacting with content and brands on social media platforms through activities such as liking, commenting, sharing, and creating brand-related content (Santos et al., 2022). From a digital marketing perspective, engagement is seen as an indicator of the quality of the relationship between consumers and brands, not simply a measure of exposure or reach of marketing messages. Cheung et al (2021) define customer engagement as a psychological state that arises from repeated interactions between consumers and brands, encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. In the context of social media, this engagement becomes increasingly important because consumers not only passively receive information but also act as co-creators of brand value. Previous research has shown that social media engagement can increase perceptions of brand value, emotional closeness, and the intensity of long-term relationships between consumers and companies (Dessart, 2017). However, high levels of engagement do not always guarantee the formation of purchase intentions, especially among Generation Z, who tend to be selective, critical, and have high expectations for the authenticity of brand content and interactions.

Purchase Intention

Purchase intention is defined as a consumer's subjective tendency or intention to purchase a product or brand within a specific timeframe. This construct is often used as a predictor of actual purchasing behavior in various consumer behavior models (Kytö et al., 2019). Based on the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), purchase intention is influenced by attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Müller-Pérez et al., 2025). In the context of digital marketing, purchase intention is also influenced by psychological factors such as trust, perceived risk, and online interaction experience. Several studies have found that intensive interaction on social media can increase purchase intention by increasing product knowledge and emotional closeness to the brand. However, empirical results still show inconsistencies, indicating that there are intermediary variables that play a role in explaining the relationship between digital marketing activities and consumer purchase intention.

Brand Trust

Brand trust is a consumer's belief that a brand has the capability, integrity, and good intentions to fulfill its promises (Cardoso et al., 2022). Within the framework of Relationship Marketing Theory, trust is seen as the primary foundation for building long-term relationships between brands and consumers. Commitment–Trust Theory asserts that trust is a key prerequisite for commitment and positive relational behavior, including purchase intention and loyalty (Portal et al., 2019).. In the context of social media, brand trust is formed through message consistency, information transparency, brand responsiveness, and positive experiences in digital interactions. For Generation Z, brand trust is crucial because this group tends to be skeptical of persuasive marketing messages and relies more on authenticity and social recommendations. Therefore, brand trust is seen as an important psychological mechanism that bridges the influence of digital interactions on consumption behavior.

Social Media Engagement and Brand Trust

The first hypothesis states that social media engagement has a positive effect on brand trust. Theoretically, consumer engagement on social media reflects the intensity of interaction, active participation, and emotional attachment between consumers and brands (Santos et al.,

2022). Through activities such as comments, likes, shares, and two-way communication, consumers obtain more transparent information and a more personalized experience with brands. The Relationship Marketing Theory perspective asserts that repeated and valuable interactions will strengthen trust as the foundation of long-term relationships between consumers and companies (Portal et al., 2019). Furthermore, Social Exchange Theory explains that when consumers perceive benefits, responses, and attention from brands through social media, they will develop the belief that the brand is trustworthy. Therefore, the higher the level of consumer engagement in a brand's social media activities, the greater the level of trust formed in that brand.

H1: Social Media Engagement has a positive effect on Brand Trust

Brand Trust and Purchase Intention

The second hypothesis states that brand trust has a positive effect on purchase intention. Brand trust is a consumer's belief that a brand has integrity, competence, and good intentions in fulfilling its promises (Cardoso et al., 2022). Based on the Theory of Planned Behavior, trust plays a role in determining positive attitudes, which then drive behavioral intentions, including purchase intentions (Jayesh et al., 2025). In the context of purchasing decisions, brand trust can reduce perceived risk, increase feelings of security, and strengthen consumer confidence in the quality and consistency of products or services (Sabina & Marsasi, 2024). This becomes increasingly important in a digital environment filled with uncertainty and information asymmetry. Therefore, the higher the level of consumer trust in a brand, the greater the consumer's tendency to express purchase intention from that brand's products or services.

H2: Brand Trust has a positive effect on Purchase Intention

Social Media Engagement and Purchase Intention

The third hypothesis states that social media engagement has a positive effect on purchase intention. From the perspective of Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) Theory, consumer engagement on social media acts as a stimulus that influences consumers' psychological state, ultimately driving a response in the form of purchase intention (Safeer, 2024). Engagement activities enable consumers to obtain product information, reviews from other users, and social proof, which strengthen positive brand evaluations (Wardana, 2025). Furthermore, Uses and Gratifications Theory explains that consumers who actively engage on social media tend to have informational, entertainment, and social identity motivations that can lead to consumption decisions (Yang et al., 2025). Thus, high engagement on social media not only increases brand awareness but also directly drives preference and purchase intention.

H3: Social Media Engagement has a positive effect on Purchase Intention

Brand Trust, Social Media Engagement, and Purchase Intention

The fourth hypothesis states that brand trust mediates the effect of social media engagement on purchase intention. Conceptually, while social media engagement can directly drive purchase intention, the effect is stronger when the engagement successfully builds trust in the brand. Based on Mediation Theory and Commitment–Trust Theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), trust acts as a key psychological mechanism that bridges the relationship between interaction and decision behavior. Social media engagement enables brands to demonstrate credibility, message consistency, and responsiveness to consumers, ultimately strengthening brand trust (Brown et al., 2019). This trust then reduces doubt and increases consumer confidence in making a purchase (N. Chen & Yang, 2023; Lee, 2025). Therefore, brand trust is

seen as a mediating variable that explains how and why social media engagement can lead to increased consumer purchase intention.

H4: Brand Trust Mediates the Effect of Social Media Engagement on Purchase Intention

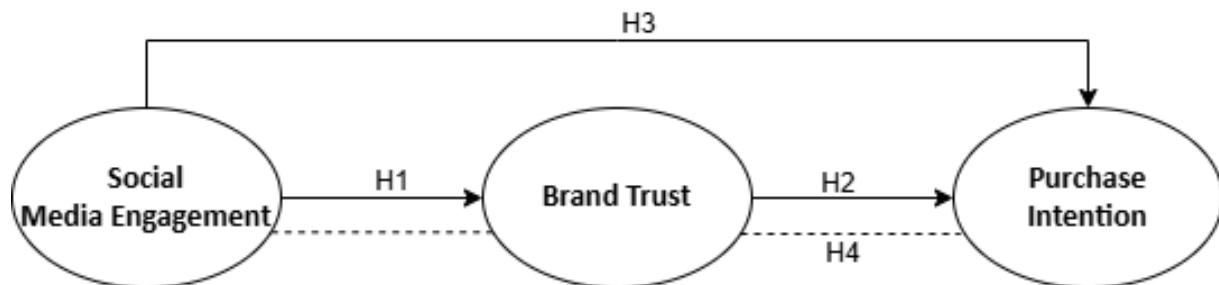


Figure 1. Research Model

METHOD

This study used a quantitative approach with an explanatory design, which aims to test the causal relationship between variables and explain the mechanisms of direct and indirect influence in the research model (Neuman, 2014). The study population included respondents relevant to the study context, with a sample size of 116 respondents determined based on considerations of sample size adequacy for Structural Equation Modeling—Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) analysis. The sampling technique was purposive sampling, namely by setting certain criteria so that respondents have experience and understanding appropriate to the variables studied. The sample size is considered adequate for SEM-PLS because this method does not require a large sample size and is more oriented towards prediction and theory development. Data analysis in this study was conducted using SEM-PLS, which was chosen because of its ability to test complex structural models, involving latent variables and multiple indicators, and its tolerance for non-normal data distributions. SEM-PLS analysis is conducted through two main stages, namely evaluation of the measurement model (outer model) and evaluation of the structural model (inner model). Evaluation of the structural model includes testing the path coefficients, significance values, and coefficients of determination (R^2) to assess the ability of the independent variables to explain the dependent variable. In analyzing the mediation model, this study uses an approach (Baron & Kenny, 1986) that emphasizes testing causal relationships in stages. This approach is carried out by testing: (1) the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable, (2) the effect of the independent variable on the mediator variable, (3) the effect of the mediator variable on the dependent variable, and (4) the decrease or loss of direct influence of the independent variable on the dependent variable after the mediator is entered into the model. This approach is used to determine whether the mediation is full or partial mediation, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the role of the mediator variable in the research model.

Furthermore, the validity of the research instrument was evaluated through convergent and discriminant validity tests. Convergent validity was assessed based on the outer loading and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values, where an indicator is declared valid if it has an outer loading ≥ 0.70 and an AVE value ≥ 0.50 (Hair et al., 2019), indicating that the construct is able to adequately explain the variance of its indicators. Meanwhile, discriminant validity was tested to ensure that each construct has a clear distinction from other constructs, which was evaluated by comparing the square root of the AVE with the correlation between constructs or through cross-loading criteria. The results of the discriminant validity test showed that each

construct had a higher value on its respective indicator compared to other constructs, thus it can be concluded that the research instrument has a good level of discrimination. The instrument reliability test was conducted using Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability, which aims to assess the internal consistency of indicators in measuring latent constructs. An instrument is declared reliable if the Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability values are each greater than 0.70 (Hair et al., 2022), which indicates that the indicators in each construct have a high level of consistency and stability.

Table 1. Operational definition of variables

Construct	Operational Definition	Code	Indicator
Social Media Engagement (SME)	The level of consumer cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement with a brand through social media platforms, as reflected in active interactions such as liking, commenting, sharing, and participating in brand content (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek et al., 2014).	SME1	I frequently pay attention to this brand's content on social media.
		SME2	This brand's content is interesting and relevant to me.
		SME3	I feel emotionally engaged with this brand on social media.
		SME4	I frequently like this brand's content.
		SME5	I frequently comment on or share this brand's content.
		SME6	I actively follow the latest news from this brand on social media.
Brand Trust (BT)	Consumer confidence that a brand is reliable, honest, and able to consistently fulfill promises made to its consumers (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).	BT1	I believe this brand is reliable
		BT2	This brand keeps its promises
		BT3	I feel safe using this brand's products
		BT4	This brand is honest in its information delivery
		BT5	This brand cares about its customers' interests
Purchase Intention (PI)	Purchase Intention is the tendency or intention of consumers to purchase products or services from a brand within a certain time based on their evaluations and perceptions (Dodds et al., 1991).	PI1	I intend to purchase products from this brand.
		PI2	I will consider this brand as my first choice.
		PI3	I am willing to purchase products from this brand in the future.
		PI4	I will recommend this brand to others.

Source: data processed by researchers 2025.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Statistics

Based on the descriptive statistics presented, the characteristics of the respondents in this study show a fairly clear distribution and focus on specific groups. In terms of gender, the majority of respondents were male, at 87 (75%), while 29 (25%) were female. This composition indicates that male participation in the study may reflect the demographic characteristics of the study population or the higher level of male involvement in the research context. The dominance of male respondents also needs to be considered in interpreting the research results, especially if the variables studied are potentially influenced by gender differences. In

terms of experience, the majority of respondents fell into the 1–5 years experience category, at 57 (49%), indicating that nearly half of the respondents had an intermediate level of experience. Furthermore, respondents with more than 5 years of experience numbered 42 (36%), reflecting a relatively mature and experienced group of respondents in the field studied. Meanwhile, respondents with less than 1 year of experience numbered 17 (15%), a relatively small number compared to other categories. This distribution indicates that the majority of respondents have sufficient experience, and therefore are expected to provide more rational, objective assessments and responses based on real-life experiences.

Based on age, respondents were predominantly in the 20–30 age group, representing 105 respondents (90%). This dominance of the productive age group indicates that the majority of respondents in this study are from the younger generation, who are in an active decision-making phase and are adapting to developments in information and technology. Furthermore, nine respondents (8%) were under 20, while only two (2%) were over 30, indicating relatively limited representation of younger and older age groups. This age composition indicates that the study results are more representative of the perspectives and behaviors of the 20–30 age group, so generalizing the findings to other age groups requires caution.

Table 2. Characteristics of Research Respondents

	Frekuensi	Percentase
Gender		
Male	87	75%
Female	29	25%
Experience		
< 1 Years	17	15%
1-5 Years	57	49%
>5 Years	42	36%
Age		
<20 Tahun	9	8%
20-30	105	90%
>30	2	2%

Source: Data processed in SPSS 26.

Hypothesis Testing

Based on the results of the hypothesis testing presented in the table, it can be explained that this study examined both the direct and indirect effects between the variables studied, specifically social media engagement, brand trust, and purchase intention. The results of Hypothesis 1 (H1) testing indicate that social media engagement has a positive and significant effect on brand trust, with a path coefficient of 0.432 and a significance value of $p = 0.000$. This finding indicates that the higher the level of consumer engagement on social media, such as interaction, participation, and engagement with brand content, the higher the level of consumer trust in that brand. These results reinforce the theoretical view that social media plays a strategic role in building emotional relationships and trust between brands and consumers.

Furthermore, Hypothesis 2 (H2), which tests the effect of brand trust on purchase intention, also showed positive and significant results, with a coefficient of 0.454 and a significance value of $p = 0.000$. This indicates that trust in a brand plays a very important role in driving consumer purchase intention. The higher a consumer's level of trust in a brand, the more likely they are to have purchase intention. This finding aligns with marketing literature,

which confirms that brand trust is a key determinant in the purchase decision-making process, especially in the context of increasingly intense brand competition. Furthermore, the results of the mediation effect test showed varying findings. In Hypothesis 3 (H3), the indirect effect of social media engagement on purchase intention through brand trust showed a coefficient of 0.093 with a significance value of $p = 0.466$, indicating statistical insignificance. This finding indicates that, in this particular mediation pathway, brand trust is not yet effective as an intervening variable in bridging the effect of social media engagement on purchase intention. In other words, although social media engagement can increase brand trust, this effect is not strong enough to consistently drive purchase intention through this mediation mechanism.

The results of the Hypothesis 4 (H4) test showed a significant indirect effect of social media engagement on purchase intention through brand trust, with a coefficient of 0.196 and a p value of 0.000. These results confirm that, within this particular model, brand trust has been shown to act as an effective mediating variable. This means that consumer engagement on social media not only has a direct impact on building brand trust but can also significantly increase purchase intention when brand trust is well-established. This finding suggests a strong psychological mechanism, where trust serves as a key bridge between digital interactions and purchasing behavior. Testing the coefficient of determination of the research model revealed an R^2 value of social media engagement explaining 18.6% ($R^2 = 0.186$) of the variation in brand trust, while the combination of variables in the model explained 25.1% ($R^2 = 0.251$) of the variation in purchase intention. These values indicate that although the model has moderate explanatory power, other factors outside the model still influence brand trust and consumer purchase intention. Overall, the results of this study confirm the importance of social media engagement and brand trust as strategic factors in increasing purchase intention, while also providing theoretical and practical implications for the development of social media-based marketing strategies.

Table 3. Research Hypothesis Test

Hipotesis	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Decision
H1 Social Media Engagement -> Brand Trust	0.432 (0.000)	-	Significant
H2 Brand Trust -> Purchase Intention	0.454 (0.000)	-	Significant
H3 Social Media Engagement -> Purchase Intention	0.093 (0.466)	-	Not Significant
H4 Social Media Engagement -> Brand Trust -> Purchase Intention		0.196 (0.000)	Significant
R^2	0.186	0.251	

Source: Data processed using SmartPLS 3.

Discussion

This study provides several important findings regarding the role of social media engagement and brand trust in influencing purchase intention, and confirms the position of brand trust as a key psychological mechanism in the context of digital marketing. Overall, the findings support the theoretical framework of relationship marketing and trust theory, which emphasize the importance of long-term relationships between brands and consumers in driving purchasing behavior. First, the test results show that social media engagement has a positive and significant effect on brand trust. This finding indicates that the intensity and quality of consumer engagement with brands on social media—such as interaction, active participation, and responses to content—can increase consumer trust in the brand. These results align with relationship marketing theory, which states that ongoing interaction and two-way

communication are the main foundations for building trust (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Furthermore, these findings are consistent with previous research that found that interactive, informative, and authentic social media activity can strengthen perceptions of brand credibility and reliability (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek et al., 2014). Thus, social media not only functions as a promotional tool, but also as a strategic means of building emotional relationships and trust between consumers and brands.

Second, this study demonstrates that brand trust has a positive and significant effect on purchase intention. This finding confirms that trust is a key determinant in the purchasing decision-making process, particularly in a digital environment rife with uncertainty and information asymmetry. Theoretically, this finding supports the trust-based consumer behavior theory, which states that consumers tend to have higher purchase intentions for brands perceived as trustworthy, honest, and consistent in fulfilling their value promises (Jayesh et al., 2025; Portal et al., 2019). These results also reinforce previous research findings that suggest brand trust plays a significant role in reducing perceived risk and increasing consumer confidence in making a purchase (Sabina & Marsasi, 2024). Furthermore, the mediation analysis revealed interesting and contextual findings. In one mediation pathway, the indirect effect of social media engagement on purchase intention through brand trust was found to be insignificant. This finding indicates that consumer engagement on social media does not automatically translate into purchase intention through brand trust (Santos et al., 2022; Wardana, 2025). Conceptually, this can be explained by the fact that not all forms of engagement on social media are transactional; some engagement is purely entertainment, social, or informational, which does not necessarily drive direct purchase intentions. This finding aligns with several previous studies that suggest that high engagement does not necessarily result in purchase conversions if it is not accompanied by strong perceptions of value and trust (Yang et al., 2025).

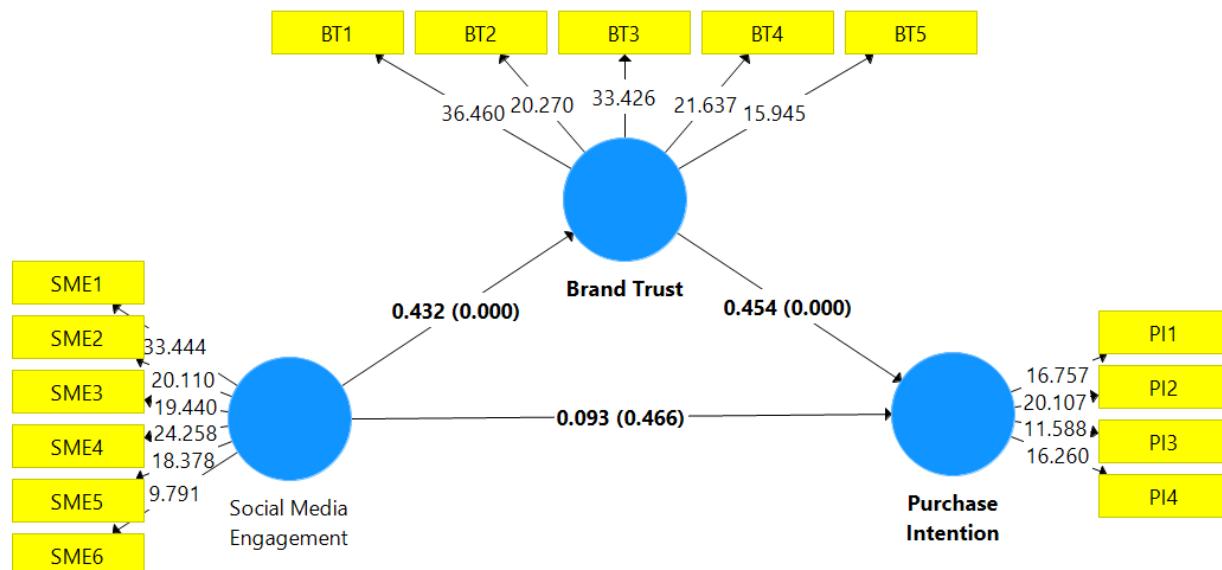


Figure 2. Research hypothesis testing

Testing the mediation model of brand trust proved to play a significant role in mediating the influence of social media engagement on purchase intention. These results indicate that when social media engagement effectively builds brand trust, it becomes a crucial bridge connecting digital interactions with consumer purchase intention. These results are consistent with previous research that found that brand trust often acts as a partial or full mediator in the

relationship between digital marketing activities and purchase intention (Brown et al., 2019; Lee, 2025). These results confirm that social media engagement and brand trust are strategic elements in building purchase intention, with brand trust acting as a crucial link between digital interactions and consumer behavior (N. Chen & Yang, 2023). These findings not only strengthen theory and previous research but also provide an empirical contribution by demonstrating that the effectiveness of social media in driving purchase intention is highly dependent on its ability to build trust. Therefore, the theoretical and practical implications of this study emphasize the importance of a social media strategy that is oriented not only towards increasing interaction but also consistently building brand credibility, transparency, and reliability.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis and discussion, this study provides strong empirical evidence regarding the strategic role of social media engagement and brand trust in shaping purchase intention. The results indicate that social media engagement has a positive and significant effect on brand trust, confirming that consumer engagement through interaction, participation, and two-way communication on social media can build trust in a brand. Furthermore, brand trust also proved to have a positive and significant effect on purchase intention, indicating that trust is a key factor in driving consumer purchase intention, particularly in the context of digital marketing characterized by uncertainty and perceived risk. Furthermore, the mediation findings indicate that brand trust can act as a significant intervening variable in the relationship between social media engagement and purchase intention under certain conditions, although not all mediation pathways are significant. While this study provides significant theoretical and empirical contributions, several limitations warrant critical consideration. First, the relatively limited sample size of 116 respondents, although meeting the requirements for SEM-PLS analysis, may limit the generalizability of the results to a broader population. Second, this study used a cross-sectional design, thus failing to capture the dynamics of changes in consumer perceptions and behavior over time. Third, the variables studied are still limited to social media engagement, brand trust, and purchase intention, thus not fully representing the complexity of other factors that potentially influence purchase intention, such as perceived value, service quality, price, brand image, and other psychological and situational factors. Fourth, the use of perception-based data through questionnaires has the potential to introduce common method bias, which can affect respondents' objectivity in providing answers.

Future research is recommended to expand the direction of future research with several strategic approaches. Future research could increase the sample size and diversity, both in terms of demographics and industry context, to provide stronger generalizability of the results. Furthermore, the use of longitudinal or experimental designs could provide a deeper understanding of changes in consumer behavior and the causal relationships between variables over time. Future research is also recommended to include additional variables, such as brand image, perceived value, customer satisfaction, or perceived risk, either as mediating or moderating variables, to enrich the conceptual model and increase its clarity. Furthermore, a mixed methods approach could be considered to gain a deeper qualitative understanding of consumers' motives and perceptions when interacting with brands on social media.

Research Implications

These findings provide theoretical contributions by strengthening relationship marketing theory and trust theory in a digital context, particularly regarding the mechanisms by which social media engagement can translate into purchase intention through the formation

of brand trust. Practically, this research offers important implications for marketing practitioners and decision-makers: social media strategies should not solely focus on increasing the quantity of interactions or engagement, but also on the quality of interactions that can build trust, credibility, and brand transparency. Companies need to manage content that is informative, authentic, and responsive to consumers, and maintain consistent brand messaging to sustainably build trust. Therefore, strategically managed social media engagement oriented toward building trust is expected to sustainably increase purchase intention and provide companies with a competitive advantage in the digital era.

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