

THE MEDIATING ROLE OF BRAND IMAGE IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING, BRAND AUTHENTICITY, AND PURCHASE INTENTION AMONG GEN Z CONSUMERS OF TEEFEES CLOTHING BRAND MANADO

By:

Septian Erjil Justicio Lontaan¹

Maria V. J. Tielung²

Fitty V. Arie³

^{1,2,3}International Business Administration, Management Department
Faculty of Economics and Business
Sam Ratulangi University Manado

Email:

¹septianejlontaan@gmail.com

²mariatielung@unsrat.ac.id

³fittyarie@unsrat.ac.id

Abstract: This study examines the mediating role of brand image in the relationship between social media marketing activities, brand authenticity, and purchase intention among Generation Z consumers of TeeFees Clothing Brand in Manado, North Sulawesi. A quantitative causal-associative design was deployed using a structured survey administered to a sample of 200 active social media users who are familiar with the brand. Data analysis was performed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 4. The empirical findings demonstrate that all seven hypotheses are statistically supported. Specifically, both social media marketing activities and brand authenticity exert direct positive influences on brand image and purchase intention. Furthermore, the structural model assessment confirms that brand image serves as a significant partial mediator, indicating that while digital marketing and authenticity directly motivate buying behavior, their commercial impacts are substantially optimized when they successfully cultivate a strong and unique brand image in consumers' memories. Practically, the findings suggest that local apparel brands must prioritize interactive video content on platforms like TikTok and Instagram while continuously integrating local cultural pride and identity-driven design concepts into their branding to sustain competitive advantages.

Keywords: Social Media Marketing, Brand Authenticity, Brand Image, Purchase Intention, Generation Z

INTRODUCTION

Research Background

Over the past two decades, digital technology has fundamentally transformed how commercial enterprises engage with consumers. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter) have evolved from basic networking channels into comprehensive commercial ecosystems where consumer preferences are shaped, brand meanings are co-created, and purchasing decisions are actively formulated.

Within this digital sphere, Social Media Marketing (SMM) has emerged as an indispensable discipline for contemporary brand managers. Unlike conventional mass media advertising, which relies on unidirectional message dissemination and intermittent promotional exposures, SMM facilitates dynamic, two-way interpersonal communication (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Through engaging visual storytelling and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) amplification, social media marketing serves as a powerful exogenous catalyst capable of shaping both cognitive evaluations and commercial behavior.

Simultaneously, the digital marketplace has given rise to heightened consumer skepticism toward manufactured promotional content, propelling brand authenticity into the forefront of marketing scholarship. Brand authenticity represents the extent to which consumers perceive a brand as genuine, continuous, credible, and value-aligned (Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014).

In the marketing literature, Brand image conceptualized as the totality of mental associations, beliefs, and attitudes held by consumers toward a brand (Keller, 1993; Aaker, 1996) functions as a central pillar of Customer-

Based Brand Equity (CBBE). A favorable, strong, and unique brand image simplifies consumer cognitive processing, lowers perceived purchase risk, and enhances brand preference (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012) represents a pivotal consumer demographic driving current market shifts. As true digital natives, Gen Z consumers exhibit distinctive consumption patterns: they rely heavily on social media for brand discovery, prioritize brand authenticity and cultural identity, and actively engage in peer-to-peer recommendation networks (McKinsey & Company, 2023). Young consumers increasingly wear domestically produced apparel as an explicit expression of local pride and personal identity.

In Manado, North Sulawesi, this national movement is mirrored in the rapid rise of homegrown fashion labels. Among these local enterprises, TeeFees Clothing Brand has established a notable presence within Manado's streetwear ecosystem. Operating primarily through digital channels—most notably TikTok and Instagram—TeeFees produces lifestyle apparel that integrates modern youth trends with local urban culture. The brand demonstrates vibrant digital interaction, boasting engagement metrics (likes, comments, reposts) that exceed many local peers. However, TeeFees operates as an independent creative enterprise without the formalized corporate research infrastructure of national apparel giants. Consequently, the empirical mechanisms through which its social media marketing activities and perceived authenticity translate into brand image and consumer purchase intentions have remained systematically unexamined.

Research Objectives

To provide clear empirical answers to the articulated problem, this study pursues seven specific research objectives:

1. To examine and analyze the direct influence of Social Media Marketing on the Brand Image of TeeFees Clothing Brand among Gen Z consumers in Manado.
2. To examine and analyze the direct influence of Brand Authenticity on the Brand Image of TeeFees Clothing Brand among Gen Z consumers in Manado.
3. To examine and analyze the direct influence of Social Media Marketing on the Purchase Intention of Gen Z consumers toward TeeFees Clothing Brand in Manado.
4. To examine and analyze the direct influence of Brand Authenticity on the Purchase Intention of Gen Z consumers toward TeeFees Clothing Brand in Manado.
5. To examine and analyze the direct influence of Brand Image on the Purchase Intention of Gen Z consumers toward TeeFees Clothing Brand in Manado.
6. To examine and analyze the mediating role of Brand Image in the relationship between Social Media Marketing and Purchase Intention among Gen Z consumers of TeeFees Clothing Brand in Manado.
7. To examine and analyze the mediating role of Brand Image in the relationship between Brand Authenticity and Purchase Intention among Gen Z consumers of TeeFees Clothing Brand in Manado.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Purchase Intention

Purchase Intention represents a consumer's conscious plan, readiness, and subjective probability of purchasing a product or service in the future (Spears & Singh, 2004; Ferdinand, 2006). It serves as the single most dependable proxy and behavioral precursor for actual purchasing conduct in marketing scholarship. According to Ferdinand (2006), purchase intention encompasses four core dimensions: (1) transactional intention (the direct willingness to purchase), (2) referential intention (the willingness to recommend the brand to peers), (3) preferential intention (exhibiting primary brand preference over competitors), and (4) explorative intention (actively seeking information and following brand developments).

Social Media Marketing

Social Media Marketing (SMM) is defined as the strategic process of creating, communicating, and delivering value through collaborative digital platforms to foster customer relationships and build brand equity (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Yadav & Rahman, 2017). Yadav & Rahman (2017) established that effective SMM consists of five essential operational dimensions: (1) content quality (aesthetic appeal, creativity, and visual production excellence), (2) informativeness (delivering accurate, timely, and complete product information), (3) interactivity (facilitating responsive two-way engagement and dialogue), (4) personalization (tailoring content to

match audience tastes), and (5) electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) promotion (stimulating user sharing, tagging, and peer recommendations).

Brand Authenticity

Brand Authenticity captures the consumer's subjective perception that a brand is true to itself, honest, reliable, and deeply committed to its core values (Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014). In competitive lifestyle markets, authenticity serves as a powerful defense against consumer cynicism. Morhart et al. (2015) operationalize brand authenticity across four distinct dimensions: (1) continuity (historical consistency and stability in style and character over time), (2) credibility (transparency, truthfulness, and honesty in product claims), (3) integrity (moral responsibility and consistency between values and actions), and (4) symbolism (cultural resonance, local pride, and personal identity alignment).

Brand Image

Brand Image refers to the collective set of perceptual impressions, beliefs, and emotional associations linked to a brand in consumer memory (Keller, 1993; Kotler & Keller, 2016). Keller (1993) emphasizes that brand image is structured along three primary dimensions: (1) brand strength (confidence in functional quality, durability, and reliability), (2) brand favorability (positive affective evaluations and belief that brand attributes satisfy consumer needs), and (3) brand uniqueness (distinctive competitive attributes that clearly differentiate the brand from alternative choices). In this investigation, brand image is hypothesized to mediate the transmission of marketing stimuli to transactional outcomes.

Empirical Studies

An & Ngo (2025) examined the influence of Social Media Marketing Activities (SMMAs) on Generation Z's purchase intentions and eWOM, with perceived quality and perceived value as mediating factors. Using a quantitative approach, data were collected from 315 Generation Z participants in Vietnam through a structured questionnaire. The study explored various dimensions of SMMAs interaction, customization, trendiness, and entertainment and their effects on perceived quality, perceived value, eWOM, and purchase intention. Results show that SMMAs have a stronger impact on perceived quality than on perceived value suggesting that social media marketing strategies are particularly effective in shaping how Generation Z evaluates product quality. Additionally, perceived quality significantly influences perceived value, eWOM, and purchase intention. Similarly, perceived value positively impacts eWOM and purchase intention while eWOM itself plays a direct role in driving purchase intention. These findings highlight the interconnected role of social media marketing in influencing consumer behavior through both direct and mediated effects.

Atrisia, Syafawi, & Sari (2023) set out to look at how social media marketing in the fashion business in Indonesia, a developing nation, affects consumers' propensity to make a purchase. This study surveyed 118 people in Indonesia using an online survey instrument. The bootstrapping method was used to test the hypotheses and the mediating roles of brand awareness and customer satisfaction. Despite the direct influence of social media marketing on purchase intention, brand awareness and customer satisfaction do not mediate the relationship between the two.

Fakriyah & Abdurrahman (2024) aimed to test and analyze the influence of social media marketing on intention to purchase Avoskin products with brand trust and brand image as mediating roles. The population of this research is Avoskin product users in Generation Z who live in the Special Region of Yogyakarta. This research used a purposive sampling method. Testing in this research used SPSS software, and SEM analysis used the SmartPLS application. The results obtained from testing in this research indicate that brand trust has a positive influence in mediating the relationship between social media marketing and purchase intentions. In addition, brand image has a positive influence in mediating the relationship between social media marketing and purchase intention. However, social media marketing hurts purchase intentions

Research Hypothesis

- H1: Social Media Marketing has a positive and significant direct influence on Brand Image among Gen Z consumers of TeeFees Clothing Brand Manado.
- H2: Brand Authenticity has a positive and significant direct influence on Brand Image among Gen Z consumers of TeeFees Clothing Brand Manado.
- H3: Social Media Marketing has a positive and significant direct influence on Purchase Intention among Gen Z consumers of TeeFees Clothing Brand Manado.

H4: Brand Authenticity has a positive and significant direct influence on Purchase Intention among Gen Z consumers of TeeFees Clothing Brand Manado.

H5: Brand Image has a positive and significant direct influence on Purchase Intention among Gen Z consumers of TeeFees Clothing Brand Manado.

H6: Brand Image significantly mediates the relationship between Social Media Marketing and Purchase Intention among Gen Z consumers of TeeFees Clothing Brand Manado.

H7: Brand Image significantly mediates the relationship between Brand Authenticity and Purchase Intention among Gen Z consumers of TeeFees Clothing Brand Manado.

Conceptual Framework

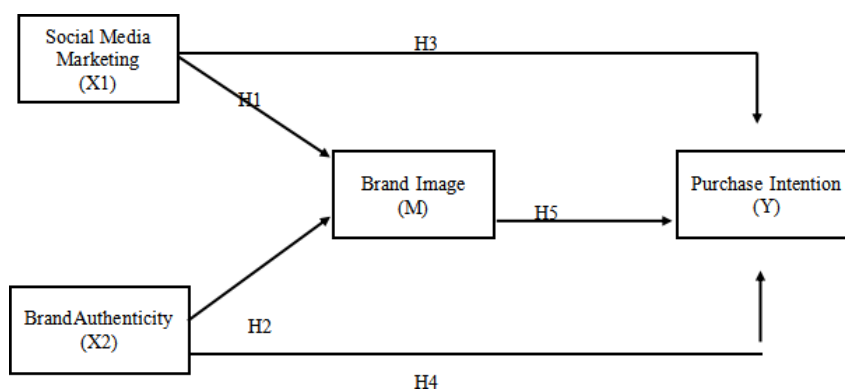


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Source: Literature Review & Conceptualization (2026)

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Approach

This study employs a quantitative causal-associative research design. Causal-associative research investigates cause-and-effect relationships and tests theoretical propositions by analyzing statistical associations and mediating mechanisms among measured constructs (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Population, Sample Size, and Sampling Techniques

The target population comprises Generation Z consumers residing in Manado who are active social media users and familiar with TeeFees Clothing Brand. Because the exact size of this consumer population cannot be determined definitively, non-probability purposive sampling was deployed. Specific purposive inclusion criteria required respondents to: (1) belong to Generation Z (aged 14 to 29 years old during data collection), (2) reside or study in Manado, North Sulawesi, (3) actively use social media (Instagram or TikTok), and (4) follow or be actively familiar with TeeFees Clothing Brand. A sample of 200 qualified respondents was successfully recruited.

Data Type, Source, and Collection Method

Primary data was collected directly through a self-administered structured online questionnaire hosted on Google Forms and distributed across social media channels (Instagram and TikTok). Secondary data was acquired from academic journals, textbooks, industry statistics (DataReportal, BAPAREKRAF), and brand social media archives. All questionnaire items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ('Strongly Disagree') to 5 ('Strongly Agree').

Operational Definition and Indicators of Research Variables

Table 1. Operational Definition and Indicators of Research Variables

Variable	Definition	Indicators
Social Media Marketing (X1)	The aggregate of strategic marketing activities conducted by TeeFees on Instagram and TikTok to influence Gen Z consumers' perceptions and purchase behavior.	1. Content Quality 2. Informativeness 3. Interactivity 4. Personalization

Brand Authenticity (X2)	The degree to which Gen Z consumers perceive TeeFees as genuine, consistent, credible, and value-aligned based on its communications and presence.	5. eWOM Promotion
		1. Continuity
		2. Credibility
		3. Integrity
		4. Symbolism
Brand Image (M)	The overall perception held by Gen Z consumers regarding TeeFees, encompassing cognitive assessments of quality and affective associations with its values.	1. Brand Strength
		2. Brand Favorability
		3. Brand Uniqueness
Purchase Intention (Y)	The willingness and readiness of Gen Z consumers in Manado to purchase from TeeFees, as shaped by SMM, authenticity, and brand image.	1. Transactional Intention
		2. Referential Intention
		3. Preferential Intention

Data Analysis Methods

Partial Least Squares (PLS-SEM)

PLS-SEM is especially suited for complex causal models incorporating mediating constructs, formative/reflective indicators, and exploratory extensions of theory (Hair et al., 2019). The analytical procedure involves two systematic stages:

1. Measurement Model (Outer Model) Evaluation: Evaluates construct reliability and validity. Indicator reliability requires outer factor loadings ≥ 0.708 . Internal consistency reliability is confirmed when Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (ρ_c) exceed 0.70. Convergent validity requires an Average Variance Extracted (AVE) ≥ 0.50 . Discriminant validity is appraised via the Fornell-Larcker criterion where the square root of AVE for each construct must exceed its bivariate correlations with all other constructs and cross-loading inspection
2. Structural Model (Inner Model) Evaluation: Evaluates predictive power and hypothesis significance. Multicollinearity is assessed via Variance Inflation Factor ($VIF < 5.0$, ideally < 3.0). Explanatory power is measured by the Coefficient of Determination (R^2 values of 0.75, 0.50, and 0.25 indicate substantial, moderate, and weak power, respectively). Effect sizes are evaluated using Cohen's f^2 (0.02 small, 0.15 medium, 0.35 large). Out-of-sample predictive relevance is verified using PLSpredict ($Q^2 \text{ predict} > 0$). Path coefficients (β) and statistical significance are evaluated through non-parametric bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples at a two-tailed significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$ (critical $t \geq 1.96$, $p < 0.05$). Finally, mediation effects are tested by calculating the Variance Accounted For ($VAF = \text{Indirect Effect} / \text{Total Effect}$); $VAF > 80\%$ denotes full mediation, 20%–80% denotes partial mediation, and $< 20\%$ indicates no mediation

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Measurement Model Assessment (Outer Model)

Table 2. Measurement Model Assessment: Outer Loadings and Convergent Validity (AVE)

Latent Variable	Indicator	Outer Loading	AVE	Status
Social Media Marketing (X1)	X1.1	0.912	0.832	Valid
	X1.2	0.909		Valid
	X1.3	0.913		Valid
	X1.4	0.923		Valid
	X1.5	0.896		Valid
	X1.6	0.904		Valid
	X1.7	0.917		Valid
	X1.8	0.923		Valid
	X1.9	0.898		Valid
	X1.10	0.928		Valid
	X1.11	0.909		Valid
Brand Authenticity (X2)	X2.1	0.905	0.836	Valid
	X2.2	0.908		Valid
	X2.3	0.904		Valid
	X2.4	0.931		Valid
	X2.5	0.899		Valid

	X2.6	0.938		Valid
	X2.7	0.911		Valid
	X2.8	0.919		Valid
Brand Image (M)	M.1	0.858	0.741	Valid
	M.2	0.876		Valid
	M.3	0.842		Valid
	M.4	0.852		Valid
	M.5	0.870		Valid
	M.6	0.874		Valid
	M.7	0.844		Valid
	M.8	0.872		Valid
Purchase Intention (Y)	Y.1	0.868	0.784	Valid
	Y.2	0.889		Valid
	Y.3	0.903		Valid
	Y.4	0.879		Valid
	Y.5	0.886		Valid

Source: Data Processed

As demonstrated in Table 2, all 32 indicator outer loadings range between 0.842 and 0.938, vastly exceeding the conservative threshold of 0.708 (Hair et al., 2019). Furthermore, Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values range from 0.741 to 0.836, well above the 0.50 benchmark. This demonstrates that each latent construct explains more than 74% of the variance in its respective indicator set, confirming robust convergent validity.

Table 3. Discriminant Validity: Fornell-Larcker Criterion

Construct	Brand Authenticity	Brand Image	Purchase Intention	Social Media Marketing
Brand Authenticity (X2)	0.914			
Brand Image (M)	0.552	0.861		
Purchase Intention (Y)	0.619	0.835	0.885	
Social Media Marketing (X1)	0.104	0.664	0.636	0.912

Source: Data Processed

In Table 3, the square root of AVE for each construct (displayed along the bold diagonal) exceeds its correlation with any other latent variable in the model (e.g., $0.914 > 0.552$, $0.861 > 0.835$, $0.912 > 0.664$). This satisfies the Fornell-Larcker criterion, affirming distinct construct empirical separation.

Table 4. Construct Reliability Evaluation

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (rho_c)	Threshold	Status
Social Media Marketing (X1)	0.980	0.982	0.70	Highly Reliable
Brand Authenticity (X2)	0.972	0.976	0.70	Highly Reliable
Brand Image (M)	0.950	0.958	0.70	Highly Reliable
Purchase Intention (Y)	0.931	0.948	0.70	Highly Reliable

Source: Data Processed

Table 4 confirms exemplary internal consistency reliability: Cronbach's Alpha values range from 0.931 to 0.980 and Composite Reliability coefficients range from 0.948 to 0.982, vastly exceeding the required 0.70 threshold.

Structural Model Assessment (Inner Model)

Table 5. Structural Model Explanatory Power (R²), Effect Size (f²), and Predictive Relevance (Q²)

Metric Category	Endogenous Construct / Structural Path	Value	Classification / Power
Coefficient of Determination	Brand Image (M) - R ² (R ² Adj: 0.673)	0.676	Moderate to Substantial
	Purchase Intention (Y) - R ² (R ² Adj: 0.773)	0.777	Substantial Explanatory Power

Effect Size (f^2)	Social Media Marketing (X1) → Brand Image (M)	1.147	Large Effect Size
	Brand Authenticity (X2) → Brand Image (M)	0.728	Large Effect Size
	Brand Authenticity (X2) → Purchase Intention (Y)	0.301	Medium Effect Size
	Brand Image (M) → Purchase Intention (Y)	0.284	Medium Effect Size
	Social Media Marketing (X1) → Purchase Intention (Y)	0.194	Medium Effect Size
Predictive Relevance (Q^2)	Brand Image (M) (RMSE: 0.583, MAE: 0.463)	0.669	Large Out-of-Sample Relevance
	Purchase Intention (Y) (RMSE: 0.546, MAE: 0.439)	0.708	Large Out-of-Sample Relevance

Source: Data Processed

Table 5 demonstrates substantial explanatory power: R^2 is 0.676 for Brand Image (meaning 67.6% of variance is explained by SMM and Brand Authenticity) and 0.777 for Purchase Intention (77.7% of variance is explained by SMM, Brand Authenticity, and Brand Image). The effect sizes (f^2) indicate that SMM ($f^2 = 1.147$) and Brand Authenticity ($f^2 = 0.728$) exert exceptionally large structural impacts in cultivating Brand Image. Moreover, PLSpredict Q^2 values of 0.669 and 0.708 affirm high predictive relevance.

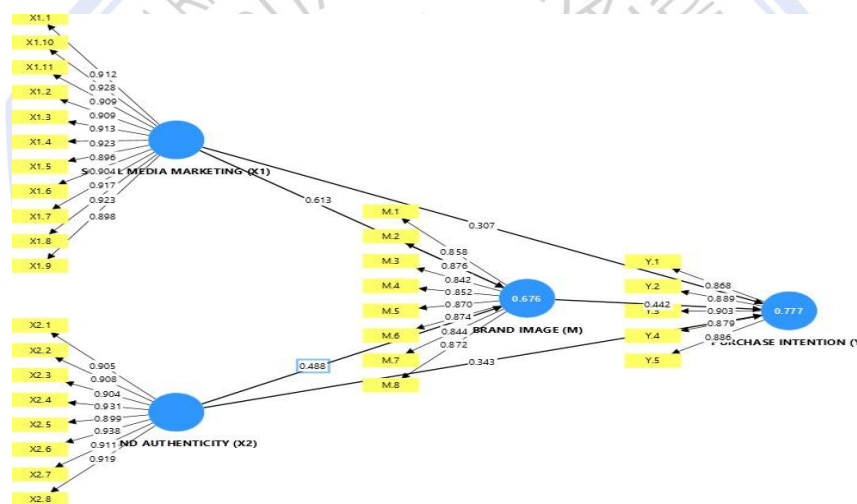


Figure 2. Structural Model of the Study (SmartPLS 4 Graphical Output)

Source: SmartPLS 4 Analysis Output (2026)

Hypothesis Testing

Direct and Indirect Effects

Table 6. Direct Effects Result

Hypothesis	Structural Relationship Path	Path Coeff. (β)	Std. Dev. (STDEV)	T-Statistics	P-Values	Status
H1	Social Media Marketing (X1) → Brand Image (M)	0.613	0.041	14.941	<0.001	Supported
H2	Brand Authenticity (X2) → Brand Image (M)	0.488	0.044	10.997	<0.001	Supported
H3	Social Media Marketing (X1) → Purchase Intention (Y)	0.307	0.046	6.612	<0.001	Supported
H4	Brand Authenticity (X2) → Purchase Intention (Y)	0.343	0.040	8.635	<0.001	Supported
H5	Brand Image (M) → Purchase Intention (Y)	0.442	0.054	8.119	<0.001	Supported

Source: Data Processed

1. The first hypothesis examines whether Social Media Marketing (X1) positively influences the Brand Image (M) of TeeFees Clothing Brand among Gen Z consumers. The bootstrapping analysis reveals a path coefficient of 0.613, with a T-statistic of 14.941 and a P-value of 0.000. Since the T-statistic is far greater than the critical value of 1.96 and the P-value is well below the 0.05 threshold, H1 is supported. This result confirms that SMM activities on Instagram and TikTok are critical drivers of brand image, indicating that visually engaging, interactive, and informative content directly translates into a stronger and more favorable brand image in the minds of Gen Z consumers.
2. The second hypothesis proposes that Brand Authenticity (X2) has a significant positive influence on Brand Image (M). The analysis yields a path coefficient of 0.488, with a T-statistic of 10.997 and a P-value of 0.000. These values indicate a highly significant relationship, supporting H2. This finding demonstrates that when consumers perceive TeeFees as an authentic brand, they are more likely to form favorable, consistent, and distinctive associations with it, which in turn strengthens the overall brand image held in the consumer's memory.
3. The third hypothesis suggests that Social Media Marketing (X1) directly and positively impacts Purchase Intention (Y). The bootstrapping output shows a path coefficient of 0.307, a T-statistic of 6.612, and a P-value of 0.000. Because the T-statistic exceeds the critical value of 1.96 and the P-value is significant, H3 is supported. This indicates that TeeFees' social media marketing activities directly stimulate the willingness of Gen Z consumers to buy its products, highlighting the direct transactional value of digital content strategies.
4. The fourth hypothesis states that Brand Authenticity (X2) directly and positively influences Purchase Intention (Y). The statistical analysis indicates a path coefficient of 0.343, a T-statistic of 8.635, and a P-value of 0.000. These results confirm a statistically significant positive relationship, supporting H4. This implies that brand authenticity is a powerful purchase motivator, showing that Gen Z fashion consumers in Manado are directly inclined to buy from TeeFees when they perceive the label as genuine, transparent, and aligned with cultural symbolism.
5. The fifth hypothesis evaluates the influence of Brand Image (M) on Purchase Intention (Y). The analysis yields a path coefficient of 0.442, a T-statistic of 8.119, and a P-value of 0.000. These values demonstrate a highly significant direct effect, supporting H5. This finding highlights the crucial role of brand image, showing that positive brand evaluations (reliability, favorability, and design uniqueness) serve as key cognitive heuristics that guide Gen Z consumers' purchasing decisions and boost their buying intentions.

Table 7. Hypothesized Indirect Effects Result

Hypothesis	Indirect Path	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect	VAF Value	Mediation Classification	Status
H6	$X1 \rightarrow M \rightarrow Y$	0.307	0.271	0.578	46.89%	Partial Mediation	Supported
H7	$X2 \rightarrow M \rightarrow Y$	0.343	0.216	0.559	38.64%	Partial Mediation	Supported

Source: Data Processed

1. The H6 hypothesis examines whether Brand Image (M) mediates the relationship between Social Media Marketing (X1) and Purchase Intention (Y). The indirect effect coefficient is 0.271 (0.613×0.442), and the total effect is 0.578. The calculated VAF is 46.89%, which falls within the 20% to 80% range, indicating partial mediation. Since the indirect pathway is significant, H6 is supported. This means that while SMM directly influences purchase intention, it also works indirectly by building a strong brand image first, which then drives purchase decisions. Thus, brand image acts as a key psychological mediator.
2. The final hypothesis, H7, proposes that Brand Image (M) mediates the relationship between Brand Authenticity (X2) and Purchase Intention (Y). The indirect effect is 0.216 (0.488×0.442), and the total effect is 0.559. The VAF is 38.64%, indicating partial mediation, supporting H7. This confirms that perceptions of brand authenticity enhance the brand's image in the consumer's memory, which subsequently leads to a higher willingness to purchase. This indirect path highlights the dual-route influence of brand authenticity on consumer behavior.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of how contemporary fashion brands can leverage digital channels and strategic positioning to drive consumer engagement and purchase decisions among younger cohorts. By integrating social media marketing activities and brand authenticity into a unified framework, the results shed light on the cognitive and affective pathways that shape consumer behavior in a regional market. This study validates the strategic importance of building strong brand perceptions rather than relying solely on direct

sales promotions, demonstrating that long-term commercial success in the streetwear segment is deeply anchored in consumer brand knowledge and trust.

The significant influence of social media marketing on brand image confirms that digital platforms serve as primary spaces where brand identities are built and contested in real time. Grounded in the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) theory established by Keller (1993), this relationship explains how interactive, high-quality, and informative digital content acts as a critical marketing stimulus that establishes positive, strong, and unique brand associations in the consumer's memory. These memory-based associations form the vital foundation of brand equity, ensuring that consistent social media interactions translate into a durable, favorable corporate reputation.

The findings also reveal that brand authenticity represents a vital resource for local fashion brands trying to establish a distinctive position in competitive markets. By applying Self-Congruity Theory and Identity Theory, the analysis explains how Generation Z fashion consumers in regional cities like Manado actively seek compatibility between their personal values, local pride, and the brands they support. Perceived brand authenticity therefore functions as a signal of value congruence, strengthening the emotional and identity-based bond between Gen Z consumers and the brand.

A particularly important finding is that brand image acts as a key psychological mediator that links marketing inputs to purchase intentions. Within the theoretical framework of the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) paradigm proposed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974), social media marketing activities and brand authenticity signals function as environmental stimuli (Stimulus) that act upon the consumer's internal cognitive and emotional states. The resulting brand image represents the organismic processing (Organism) that registers, evaluates, and consolidates these marketing inputs, which subsequently drives purchase intention as the final behavioral output (Response).

Furthermore, the results demonstrate that both social media marketing and brand authenticity exert direct influences on purchase intentions, highlighting the multiple pathways through which consumer decisions are formed. Viewed through the lens of Consumer Behavior Theories, purchase intentions are shaped not only by mediated brand perceptions but also by immediate digital touchpoints and direct evaluations of brand integrity. While a positive brand image is a critical long-term asset, immediate consumer actions can also be stimulated by direct value congruence and highly relevant social media content that simplifies the consumer decision-making journey.

These findings are particularly relevant considering the unique psychological and behavioral characteristics of Generation Z consumers, who operate as digitally native individuals with high media literacy and a strong preference for authentic brand relationships. Drawing from contemporary Consumer Behavior Theories, this cohort is characterized by a deep skepticism toward traditional, corporate advertising, relying instead on transparent communications, peer recommendations, and community-driven consumption. The study shows that to successfully engage Gen Z, local brands must align their promotional activities with genuine social values and community stories. Overall, this study highlights that the commercial viability of regional clothing brands in the digital age depends on a balanced approach that combines digital marketing with authentic brand building. By showing that brand image mediates the effects of social media marketing and brand authenticity on purchase intentions, this research offers a valuable framework for local businesses. Grounded in Consumer Behavior Theories and generational characteristics, the study indicates that fashion brand managers must invest in high-quality digital content and cultivate a transparent, culturally resonant brand identity to build sustainable competitive advantages.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion

Based on the empirical findings obtained, this study draws the following comprehensive conclusions:

1. Social Media Marketing exerts a positive and significant direct influence on the Brand Image of TeeFees Clothing Brand ($\beta = 0.613$, $t = 14.941$, $p < 0.001$). This confirms that creative, aesthetic, and informative digital communications on TikTok and Instagram represent the primary foundation for establishing strong, favorable, and unique brand associations in young consumers' memories.
2. Brand Authenticity has a positive and significant direct influence on Brand Image ($\beta = 0.488$, $t = 10.997$, $p < 0.001$). The consistency, credibility, integrity, and cultural symbolism embedded in TeeFees' brand identity significantly reinforce consumer trust and elevate its competitive differentiation against mass-market alternatives.

3. Social Media Marketing has a positive and significant direct influence on Purchase Intention ($\beta = 0.307$, $t = 6.612$, $p < 0.001$). Dynamic promotional displays, interactive styling videos, and peer electronic word-of-mouth directly stimulate transactional curiosity and buying readiness among digital natives.
4. Brand Authenticity has a positive and significant direct influence on Purchase Intention ($\beta = 0.343$, $t = 8.635$, $p < 0.001$). Generation Z consumers actively support brands that demonstrate genuine local values, viewing authentic local apparel consumption as an expression of personal identity and cultural pride.
5. Brand Image exerts a positive and significant direct influence on Purchase Intention ($\beta = 0.442$, $t = 8.119$, $p < 0.001$). Favorable evaluations regarding product reliability, design uniqueness, and brand credibility serve as vital cognitive heuristics that guide purchasing commitments.
6. Brand Image serves as a significant partial mediator in the relationship between Social Media Marketing and Purchase Intention (indirect effect = 0.271, total effect = 0.578, VAF = 46.89%, $p < 0.001$). This empirical result validates the S-O-R framework: while SMM directly influences buying readiness, its commercial effectiveness is substantially amplified when it successfully builds a compelling brand image in the consumer's mind.
7. Brand Image serves as a significant partial mediator in the relationship between Brand Authenticity and Purchase Intention (indirect effect = 0.216, total effect = 0.559, VAF = 38.64%, $p < 0.001$). Projecting genuine brand authenticity enriches long-term brand equity structures, which subsequently sustains robust, repeat purchasing intentions.

Recommendation

1. TeeFees must concentrate marketing investments on dynamic short-form videos (Reels and TikToks). Content should emphasize behind-the-scenes craftsmanship, styling tutorials, and interactive consumer challenges rather than static promotional photography.
2. Brand authenticity proved to be a decisive driver of both brand image and purchase intention. Management should actively incorporate Manado's vibrant youth culture and regional narratives into apparel designs and storytelling campaigns, reinforcing TeeFees' identity as an authentic cultural voice.
3. To optimize SMM effectiveness, TeeFees should maintain rapid response times in social direct messages and comments, actively engaging followers in collaborative design polls and community discussions to cultivate brand co-creation.
4. To safeguard brand image, TeeFees must strictly control fabric quality, stitching standards, and packaging aesthetics across all product drops, ensuring physical deliverables consistently exceed digital expectations.
5. Future researchers should replicate this empirical model across diverse urban centers in eastern Indonesia (e.g., Makassar, Gorontalo, Ambon) to evaluate cultural generalizability, integrate complementary constructs such as Brand Trust, Perceived Price Fairness, Customer Engagement, or Brand Love as additional mediators or moderators, and utilize longitudinal panel designs or mixed-method qualitative inquiries (e.g., ethnographic brand community analysis) could capture evolving Gen Z micro-trends in the rapid-turnover streetwear industry.

REFERENCES

- Aaker, D. A. (1996). *Building Strong Brands*. Free Press.
- An, G. K., & Ngo, T. T. A. (2025). Uncovering The Influence Of Social Media Marketing Activities On Generation Z's Purchase Intentions And Ewom For Organic Cosmetics. *Plos One*, 20(6), e0325953. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0325953>
- Atrisia, M. I., Syafawi, L., & Sari, N. (2023). Social Media Marketing And Fashion Purchase Intention In Indonesia's Transitional Economy. *Image: Jurnal Riset Manajemen*, 11(1), 28–38. <https://doi.org/10.17509/image.v11i1.51637>
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, And Mixed Methods Approaches* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Fakriyah, I. P., & Abdurrahman, A. (2024). The Influence Of Social Media Marketing On Purchase Intentions With Brand Trust And Brand Image As A Mediating Role In Avoskin Products. *International Journal of Applied and Advanced Multidisciplinary Research*, 2(3), 173–184. <https://doi.org/10.59890/ijaamr.v2i3.1506>

Ferdinand, A. (2006). *Metode Penelitian Manajemen: Pedoman Penelitian Untuk Skripsi, Tesis Dan Disertasi Ilmu Manajemen* (2nd ed.). Badan Penerbit Universitas Diponegoro.

Kaplan, A. M., & Haenlein, M. (2010). Users Of The World, Unite! The Challenges And Opportunities Of Social Media. *Business Horizons*, 53(1), 59–68. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2009.09.003>

Keller, K. L. (1993). Conceptualizing, Measuring, And Managing Customer-Based Brand Equity. *Journal of Marketing*, 57(1), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002224299305700101>

Kotler, P., & Keller, K. L. (2016). *Marketing Management* (15th ed.). Pearson Education.

McKinsey & Company. (2023). What Is Gen Z? Understanding The Next Generation Of Consumers. McKinsey & Company.

Morhart, F., Malär, L., Guèvremont, A., Girardin, F., & Grohmann, B. (2015). Brand Authenticity: An Integrative Framework And Measurement Scale. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 25(2), 200–218. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcps.2014.11.006>

Napoli, J., Dickinson, S. J., Beverland, M. B., & Farrelly, F. (2014). Measuring Consumer-Based Brand Authenticity. *Journal of Business Research*, 67(6), 1090–1098. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2013.06.001>

Spears, N., & Singh, S. N. (2004). Measuring Attitude Toward The Brand And Purchase Intentions. *Journal of Current Issues and Research in Advertising*, 26(2), 53–66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10641734.2004.10505164>

Yadav, M., & Rahman, Z. (2017). Measuring Consumer Perception Of Social Media Marketing Activities In E-Commerce Industry: Scale Development And Validation. *Telematics and Informatics*, 34(7), 1294–1307. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2017.06.001>