



**THE S-O-R APPROACH TO ANALYZING COMPARATIVE
EFFECTIVENESS OF INFLUENCER MARKETING AND SOCIAL MEDIA
ADS: THE MEDIATING ROLES OF BRAND AWARENESS AND
PERCEIVED VALUE ON CONSUMER PURCHASE INTENTION**

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Abstract

The exponential growth of social media has established influencer marketing and paid advertising as dominant promotional channels, yet a critical knowledge gap persists regarding their comparative effectiveness when brands deploy both strategies concurrently. Prior research predominantly examines these channels separately, failing to address the practical reality brands face in allocating resources across simultaneous campaigns. This study fills this void using the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) theoretical lens to assess comparative effectiveness of influencer marketing versus social media ads on purchase intention, mediated through brand awareness and perceived value. Analysis incorporated responses from 270 active social media users recently exposed to both promotional formats within 3-6 months. Employing PLS-SEM methodology, six hypotheses were examined: two testing direct relationships (H1-H2) and four assessing mediation mechanisms (H3-H6). Results provide empirical validation across all hypotheses. Influencer marketing exhibits superior direct impact on purchase intention, while social media advertising achieves greater effectiveness via indirect routes, especially through enhanced brand awareness and value perception formation. This research advances literature by delivering the inaugural comparative examination of concurrent marketing stimuli within an integrated analytical structure, revealing how consumers mentally process simultaneous promotional communications. For practitioners, findings inform strategic decisions regarding resource distribution and the construction of cohesive communication approaches capitalizing on each channel's distinct advantages.

Keywords: Purchase Intention, S-O-R, Influencer, Social Media Ads, Social Media Marketing



INTRODUCTION

Indonesia has experienced a massive surge in internet and social media use over the last five years, driven by rapid advances in digital technology. Data from Indonesia's Central Statistics Agency shows that by 2024, around 72.78% of the population was online, a figure that has been climbing steadily year after year (BPS-Statistics Indonesia, 2024). Even more striking, digital media reports reveal that over 190 million Indonesians actively use social media, making these platforms among the most vital spaces for connecting with today's society (We Are Social, 2022). These advancements confirm the fact that social media has gone beyond just a means of communication. It has become a core channel for marketers wishing to communicate with customers.

The rapid increase in social media has resulted in companies employing two primary marketing techniques: working with influencers and using social media platforms for ads. These strategies have become commonplace in digital marketing as they offer diverse means of accessing customers. Influencers are able to foster trust and establish real emotional bonds with their audiences, while social media ads are able to offer real-time feedback and target specific audiences with their advertising algorithms. However, as it stands, the existing scholarly literature on digital marketing has very few references on how these two channels work when used together. Existing studies typically examine only one channel as their primary focus, either influencer marketing or social media advertising in isolation. While some research has addressed social media marketing more broadly (Abdullah B et al., 2025; Huo & Filieri, 2025; Zeqiri et al., 2025), these studies tend to treat influencers and advertisements as a unified construct without distinguishing the unique contributions of each channel. Two fundamental questions remain unanswered in this situation. Initially, while both channels are present in a singular marketing campaign, it remains ambiguous which channel exerts a more dominant influence on consumer purchase intention. Additionally, it remains a mystery as to whether there are analogous psychological pathways in both channels, or if there are entirely disparate mechanisms which influence consumer decision-making.

From both a practical and theoretical standpoint, these gaps in knowledge are problematic. From a theoretical perspective, researchers are unable to comprehend how consumer behaviour should be understood in relation to stimuli responses digitally, if the individual contribution of each channel remains unknown in a collaborative marketing effort. On the practical side, Indonesian companies regularly use both channels in their campaigns, yet they struggle to



make informed decisions about budget distribution, which channel to prioritize, and how to design their communication strategies effectively. This study aims to fill that gap by examining influencer marketing and social media advertising simultaneously as two separate stimuli using the Stimulus-Organism-Response framework.

The primary contributions of this research are twofold. The first contribution involves comparing the relative strength of each channel's influence on consumer purchase intention under conditions where both are deployed simultaneously. The second contribution involves identifying the distinct psychological pathways, especially the role of brand awareness and perceived value, that demonstrate the unique way each channel impacts the purchase decision. Consequently, this study goes beyond simply determining which channel exerts more influence; it also accounts for the processes and mechanisms that drive these effects. Such insights ought to enhance our theoretical grasp of the functioning of multi-channel marketing and provide marketers who want to fine-tune their digital marketing spend with actionable insights.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) Theory

The S-O-R theory is about how an external stimulus impacts an organism internally which then results in a particular action or behaviour (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). This theory has been used by many scholars in the field of digital marketing to study the impact of various marketing stimuli on the buying behaviour of the consumers through the mental and emotional processes. In this case, the stimuli represent the outer signals consumers are exposed to, the organism refers to the inner mind/mental processes which include perception, evaluation and emotions, whereas the response means the action of the consumers or their intentions to act in a certain way.

This investigation adopts the S-O-R framework to examine the effects of two primary social media marketing stimuli, influencer marketing and social media advertisements, on consumer purchase intention. Within this research model, influencer marketing and social media advertisements function as stimuli (S) encountered by consumers in their digital environments. Brand awareness and perceived value serve as the organism (O), representing internal cognitive processes that mediate marketing stimulus effects. Purchase intention operates as the response (R), representing consumer behavioral intention toward making purchases. Employing the S-O-R framework enables in-depth analysis of the psychological mechanisms linking marketing stimuli to consumer decisions,

while simultaneously facilitating comparison of the distinct influence pathways from each stimulus in concurrent usage contexts.

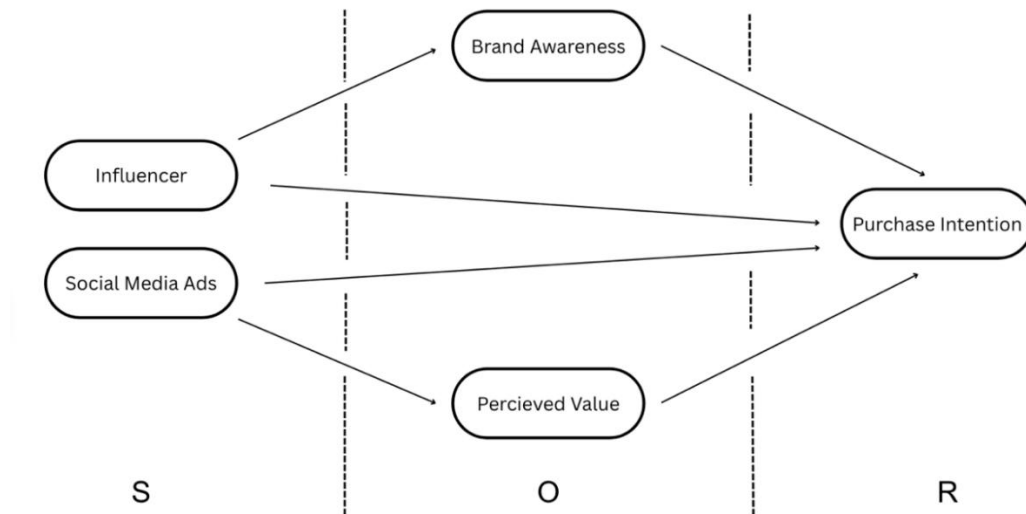


Figure 1.

The Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) theory offers a theoretical framework that elucidates how external stimuli shape internal individual processes (organism), subsequently producing particular behavioral responses (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). In digital marketing contexts, researchers have widely employed this theory to comprehend the ways in which various marketing stimuli impact consumer decisions through cognitive and affective mechanisms. Stimuli reflect external cues that consumers encounter, the organism encompasses internal psychological activities including perception, evaluation, and emotion, whereas response denotes consumer behavior or behavioral intentions.

Influencer And Purchase Intention

Influencer marketing represents a promotional strategy that leverages individuals possessing substantial social media influence to promote products or services, where its primary strength lies in the trust and personal connection established between influencers and their followers (Abhishek & Srivastava, 2021).

The effectiveness of influencer marketing in shaping purchase intention has been demonstrated through various empirical investigations. Prior research (Munir & Watts, 2025) revealed that influencer endorsements exert significantly positive effects on purchase intention. Additional studies indicate that influencer



credibility and product congruence serve as critical factors strengthening such influence (Soomro et al., 2025). Organic influencer content proves more effective in stimulating purchase intent compared to overtly promotional hard-selling material (Cho et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2025). The persuasive power of influencers stems from parasocial relationships with audiences, which cause their recommendations to be perceived as advice from close acquaintances.

Although these studies have established influencer marketing effectiveness, testing typically occurs with influencers as the sole stimulus in research designs. This condition fails to fully reflect current digital marketing practice realities, where consumers simultaneously encounter various marketing content types, including combinations of influencer content and paid advertisements from identical brands. When two stimuli appear concurrently, potential effect interactions may emerge that could strengthen, weaken, or alter the influence patterns of each stimulus. Therefore, reassessing the direct influence of influencer marketing on purchase intention within the context of concurrent presence with social media advertising becomes essential to understand whether its effectiveness remains consistent in multi-stimulus scenarios. Based on this rationale, this study proposes the hypothesis:

H1: Influencer marketing significantly influences consumer purchase intention development.

Social Media Ads and Purchase Intention

Social media ads refer to paid promotional content displayed on social media platforms that utilize algorithms and user data for specific and measurable audience targeting (Pelet & Ettis, 2022).

The effectiveness of social media ads in influencing purchase intention has been demonstrated through various research approaches, albeit with varying levels of specificity. Several studies examine social media ads not as a standalone primary variable but rather as one dimension within the broader construct of social media marketing. These investigations indicate that marketing activities on social media, including paid advertisements, exert positive influences on purchase intention. While this approach provides general insights into digital marketing effectiveness, it tends not to isolate the unique contribution of paid advertisements compared to other social media marketing elements such as organic content, partnerships, and similar components (Abdullah B et al., 2025; Sagairan et al., 2025).

More targeted research offers clearer evidence regarding social media advertising influence. Studies specifically investigating social media advertisements as the primary variable identify significantly positive effects on



purchase intention, although testing occurred without direct comparison to other marketing stimuli in concurrent usage contexts (Pelet & Ettis, 2022; Tang et al., 2025).

Current digital marketing practices reveal that companies tend to combine various marketing channels rather than relying on a single approach. The concurrent use of social media advertisements alongside influencer content has become a common strategy to expand reach and enhance persuasive power (Jarrar et al., 2020). This situation places consumers in more complex communication environments, as they must process marketing information from two different sources simultaneously. The contrasting nature between brand-controlled advertisements and influencer content functioning as third-party recommendations may create different influence patterns compared to situations where each channel operates independently. Since this research aims to compare the effectiveness of each channel when both are employed together, measuring the direct influence of social media ads on purchase intention under multiple stimulus conditions becomes critically important. Through this measurement, it becomes possible to identify which channel exerts greater influence on consumer purchasing decisions. Based on this reasoning, this study proposes the hypothesis:

H2: Social media advertising significantly influences consumer purchase intention development.

Influencer Marketing Mediation Pathways: Brand Awareness And Perceived Value

Exposure to digital marketing activities delivered through figures or personal representations not only affects purchase intention directly but also through the formation of brand awareness as an initial cognitive process within consumers (Munir & Watts, 2025). Brand awareness functions as a mediating variable bridging the influence of digital marketing stimuli on purchase intention, where the level of consumer recognition and recall of brands becomes foundational in shaping purchase intent (Cao & Nguyen, 2025a; Kamarullah et al., 2024; Zeqiri et al., 2025).

Beyond brand awareness, digital marketing stimuli conveyed personally are also processed through evaluative mechanisms that shape perceived value. Perceived value reflects consumer assessments of product benefits and relevance as perceived from delivered experiences or recommendations, ultimately driving purchase intention formation (Gücal & Gürbüz, 2025; Monfort et al., 2025; Munir & Watts, 2025; Tri Atmojo et al., 2024).



Consistent with the research objective to measure the influence of various digital marketing stimuli, particularly influencers and social media ads, on purchase intention, these relationships are analyzed not only directly but also through the role of mediating variables.

Thus, it follows that brand awareness and perceived value act as significant mediating variables in the influencers and purchase intention relationship, which leads to the establishment of the following hypotheses:

H3: Brand awareness acts as a mediator in the relationship between influencer marketing & purchase intention.

H4: Perceived value acts as a mediator in the relationship between influencer marketing & purchase intention.

Social Media Ads Mediation Pathways: Brand Awareness And Perceived Value

Exposure to social media advertising as a digital marketing stimulus potentially influences purchase intention not solely through direct pathways but also via brand awareness formation. The intensity, frequency, and visual presentation of advertising messages on social media contribute to enhancing consumer brand recognition and recall levels, positioning brand awareness as a mediating variable that bridges the influence of social media advertising on purchase intention (Cao & Nguyen, 2025b; Kamarullah et al., 2024; Suardana et al., 2024; Zeqiri et al., 2025).

Beyond brand awareness pathways, social media advertising also affects purchase intention through perceived value formation. Information conveyed through advertisements, such as product benefits, pricing, and promotional offers, enables consumers to conduct evaluations before forming purchase intentions. Within this context, perceived value functions as a mediating variable in the relationship between social media ads and purchase intention (Chi et al., n.d.; Gücal & Gürbüz, 2025; Monfort et al., 2025; Tri Atmojo et al., 2024).

Consistent with the research objective examining the influence of influencers and social media ads on purchase intention, these relationships are tested not only directly but also through mediating variables. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H5: Brand awareness acts as a mediator in the relationship between social media ads & purchase intention

H6: Perceived value acts as a mediator in the relationship between social media ads & purchase intention.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design and Sample



This investigation adopts a quantitative methodology utilizing a cross-sectional survey framework to assess relationships between influencer marketing, social media ads, and purchase intention through the mediating functions of brand awareness and perceived value. Purposive sampling procedures were implemented to identify respondents satisfying specific criteria: (1) active engagement with social media platforms, (2) understanding of influencer marketing and social media ads frameworks, and (3) recent exposure to both promotional content categories within the preceding 3-6 month timeframe.

Sample size specifications were established following PLS-SEM protocols recommending a minimum of ten times either the maximum structural path count or the greatest indicator quantity (Hair et al., 2019). Given that the purchase intention construct encompasses six structural pathways while social media advertising comprises 14 measurement items, the minimal required sample was determined as 140 participants. Data collection efforts yielded 270 validated responses, thereby surpassing the stipulated minimum threshold.

Data Collection

Between the 25th of November and the 18th of December 2025, data was obtained using self-administered questionnaires that were made available both digitally (through Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp) and physically. Initially, respondents were required to complete some screening questions to ascertain whether they qualified to take part in the study. Every participant was assured of their anonymity and confidentiality, and consent was recorded. Respondents were informed that the process of completing the questionnaire would take approximately 10 to 15 minutes. In order to ensure the quality of the data, response cleaning procedures were applied.

Variable Measurement

All constructs were measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) adapted from previously validated studies. Influencer marketing was assessed using 4 items (Munir & Watts, 2025), social media ads with 14 items (Tang et al., 2025), brand awareness with 5 items (Zeqiri et al., 2025), perceived value with 3 items (Monfort et al., 2025), and purchase intention with 4 items (Zeqiri et al., 2025). Detailed measurement items are provided in the appendix.

Reliability And Validity Testing



Instrument reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha (α) to evaluate the internal consistency of items measuring each construct. The acceptable threshold value is 0.70 (Hair et al., 2019).

Convergent validity was evaluated through factor loadings. Factor loading values exceeding 0.70 indicate that items within a construct adequately measure the same underlying concept (Hair et al., 2019).

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with Smart PLS 4.0 software (Becker et al., 2023). The PLS-SEM approach was selected due to its suitability for complex research models involving multiple latent constructs and indicators (Hair et al., 2019).

Analysis proceeded through two stages: measurement model evaluation and structural model evaluation. Measurement model assessment encompassed reliability testing using Cronbach's Alpha and convergent validity examination through factor loadings (Hair et al., 2019).

Structural model evaluation involved analyzing path coefficients (estimates) to examine relationships among variables. Hypothesis testing employed bootstrapping procedures with 5,000 resamples at a significance level of $p < 0.05$. Hypothesis testing results were reported using estimate values (path coefficients), t-statistics, and p-values (Hair et al., 2019).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Characteristics

This study involved 270 respondents meeting all inclusion criteria. The majority of respondents were male and within the 25–32 age range, reflecting a productive age group actively engaged in social media usage. Occupationally, respondents were predominantly private sector employees, followed by civil servants/state-owned enterprise employees and students.

As far as the use of social media is concerned, Instagram and TikTok were the platforms that the respondents used most frequently. The respondents showed a considerable understanding of the concepts of social media advertising and influencer marketing. Furthermore, almost all respondents stated that they were in contact with influencer content and social media advertisements in the last 3 to 6 months. This, along with other respondent characteristics, closely aligns with the research context.

Table 1.



Respondent Characteristics

Description	Category	Total	Percent
Gender	Male	142	52,59%
	Female	128	47,41%
Age	18-24	66	24,44%
	25-32	151	55,93%
	33-39	39	14,44%
	≥ 40	14	5,19%
Occupation	Student	41	15,19%
	Government Employee	50	18,52%
	Employee	127	47,04%
	Entrepreneur	36	13,33%
	Others	16	5,93%
Most used social media platform	Facebook	10	3,70%
	Instagram	124	45,93%
	Threads	6	2,22%
	TikTok	95	35,19%
	Twitter	19	7,04%
	YouTube	16	5,93%
Understanding influencers & social media ads	Only know influencers	23	8,52%
	Only know social media ads	10	3,70%
	Know both	236	87,41%
	Know neither	1	0,37%
Exposure to influencers in the last 3–6 months	Yes	264	97,78%
	No	6	2,22%



Description	Category	Total	Percent
Exposure to paid social media ads in the last 3–6 months	Yes	266	98,52%
	No	4	1,48%

Source: Data processed using SmartPLS

Validity And Reliability Test Results

Validity testing assessed each indicator's ability to represent its respective construct using a factor loading threshold of ≥ 0.70 . Results demonstrate all indicators achieved factor loadings ranging from 0.714 to 0.847, confirming convergent validity across all constructs. Influencer Marketing indicators ranged from 0.723–0.821, Social Media Ads from 0.714–0.787, Brand Awareness from 0.736–0.816, Perceived Value from 0.789–0.847, and Purchase Intention from 0.732–0.819.

Reliability testing evaluated internal consistency using Cronbach's Alpha with a minimum threshold of 0.70. All constructs exceeded this criterion: Influencer Marketing ($\alpha = 0.790$), Social Media Ads ($\alpha = 0.942$), Brand Awareness ($\alpha = 0.849$), Perceived Value ($\alpha = 0.773$), and Purchase Intention ($\alpha = 0.765$). These results confirm that all measurement instruments demonstrate adequate reliability and validity for hypothesis testing.

Table 2.
Validity and Reliability Test Results

Variable	Factor Loading	Result	Cronbach's Alpha	Result
Influencer			0.790	Reliable
IF 1	0.816	Valid		
IF 2	0.771	Valid		
IF 3	0.821	Valid		
IF 4	0.723	Valid		
Social Media Ads			0.942	Reliable
SMA 1	0.772	Valid		
SMA 2	0.775	Valid		
SMA 3	0.759	Valid		
SMA 4	0.769	Valid		
SMA 5	0.722	Valid		
SMA 6	0.714	Valid		



Variable	Factor Loading	Result	Cronbach's Alpha	Result
SMA 7	0.787	Valid	0.849	Reliable
SMA 8	0.755	Valid		
SMA 9	0.721	Valid		
SMA 10	0.734	Valid		
SMA 11	0.781	Valid		
SMA 12	0.755	Valid		
SMA 13	0.776	Valid		
SMA 14	0.761	Valid		
Brand Awareness				
BA 1	0.816	Valid	0.773	Reliable
BA 2	0.802	Valid		
BA 3	0.792	Valid		
BA 4	0.797	Valid		
BA 5	0.736	Valid		
Perceived Value				
PV 1	0.847	Valid	0.765	Reliable
PV 2	0.845	Valid		
PV 3	0.795	Valid		
Purchase Intention				
PI 1	0.819	Valid	0.746	Reliable
PI 2	0.765	Valid		
PI 3	0.732	Valid		
PI 4	0.746	Valid		

Source: Data processed using SmartPLS

Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis testing results indicate that both Influencer Marketing and Social Media Ads exert significant influences on Purchase Intention, both directly and indirectly through the mediating variables of Brand Awareness and Perceived Value. All proposed hypotheses (H1–H6) received empirical support.

Directly, both digital marketing channels proved effective in stimulating consumer purchase intent. However, when analyzed through mediation pathways, Social Media Ads demonstrates relatively larger total indirect effects

compared to Influencer Marketing. This finding suggests that Social Media Advertising exhibits stronger capacity in shaping consumer cognitive processes, particularly in enhancing brand awareness and value perceptions, which subsequently contribute to increased purchase intentions.

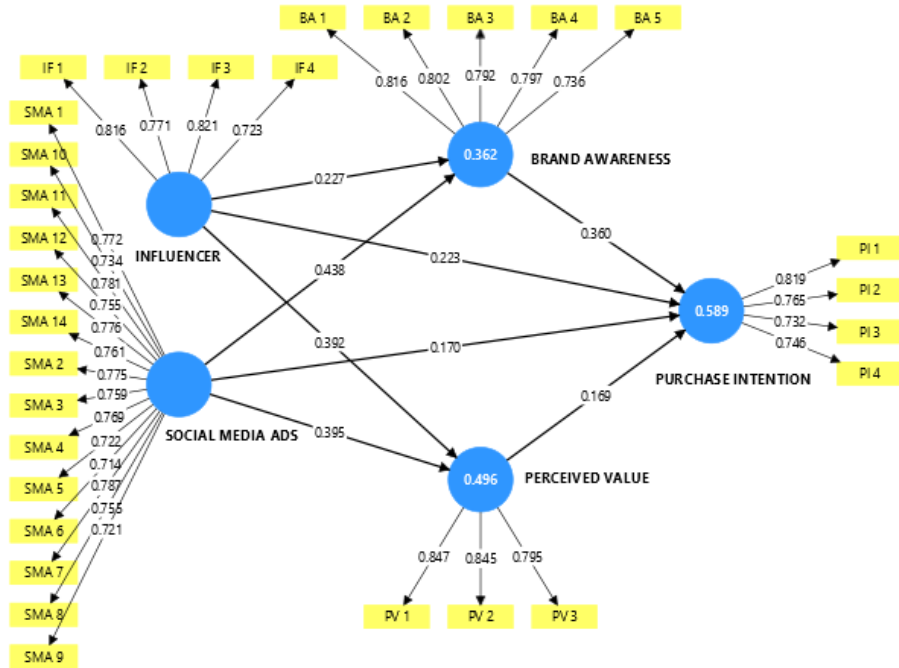


Figure 2.

Consequently, study findings confirm that digital marketing channel effectiveness is determined not solely by direct influences but also by the channel's ability to activate consumer psychological mechanisms through mediating variables.

Table 3.
Hypothesis Testing

Hypotheses	Estimate	T Statistics	P Values	Result
Influencer → Purchase Intention	0.223	3887	0.000	H1 Supported
Social Media Ads → Purchase Intention	0.170	2102	0.036	H2 Supported
Influencer → Brand Awareness → Purchase Intention	0.082	2542	0.011	H3 Supported
Influencer → Perceived Value → Purchase Intention	0.066	1998	0.046	H4 Supported



Social Media Ads → Brand Awareness → Purchase Intention	0.157	3597	0.000	H5 Supported
Social Media Ads → Perceived Value → Purchase Intention	0.067	2083	0.037	H6 Supported

Discussion

Testing results demonstrate that all constructs in this investigation satisfy validity and reliability criteria, enabling further interpretation of structural testing outcomes. All indicators possess factor loading values exceeding recommended thresholds, and all variables exhibit Cronbach's Alpha values above 0.70, indicating that research instruments demonstrate adequate internal consistency and are suitable for hypothesis testing. Based on direct effect testing results, both Influencer Marketing and Social Media Ads significantly influence Purchase Intention. However, path coefficient comparison reveals that Influencer Marketing's direct influence on Purchase Intention is stronger compared to Social Media Ads. This finding suggests that Influencer Marketing proves more effective in stimulating consumer purchase intent directly without mediation variables.

Beyond direct influences, research findings also indicate that Brand Awareness and Perceived Value function as partial mediating variables in relationships between both digital marketing channels and Purchase Intention. The significance of these mediation pathways demonstrates that digital marketing influence also operates through consumer cognitive processes before purchase intention formation. Examining indirect influence pathways, Social Media Ads exhibits stronger mediation effects compared to Influencer Marketing, particularly through Brand Awareness. The estimate value on the Social Media Ads → Brand Awareness → Purchase Intention pathway exceeds mediation pathways involving Influencer Marketing, suggesting that Social Media Ads more effectively enhances brand awareness which subsequently drives consumer purchase intent. Mediation pathways through Perceived Value display similar patterns, although with relatively weaker influence strength compared to Brand Awareness.

Overall, study findings reveal that digital marketing channel effectiveness depends on the influence pathways employed. While Social Media Ads impacts Purchase Intention through Brand Awareness and Perceived Value, both of which act as mediating variables, Influencer Marketing impacts Purchase Intention more directly.



CONCLUSION

The effectiveness of influencer marketing and social media advertising was studied in relation to purchase intention both directly and in relation to brand awareness and perceived value. All hypotheses presented in the study are supported by the data in the PLS-SEM model. The results of the study indicate that both of the channels of digital marketing have a positive direct effect on purchase intention. At the same time, the channels have a positive indirect effect on purchase intention by way of brand awareness and perceived value. The results of the study validate that the effectiveness of influencer marketing and social media advertising should not be evaluated solely based on their direct effect on purchase intention, but rather on their impact to create brand awareness and value in the eyes of the customers. The results have validated the study's hypotheses and provided a strong basis to identify and create new data-focused digital marketing campaigns.

Recommendation

This research had a defined context and scope which must be considered when interpreting the findings within the constraints of the research design employed. Despite the data collection covering the most extensive areas of Indonesia, from Jakarta, Depok, Bekasi, Bogor, Batam, Jambi, and Bandung, the scope of the research remains within Indonesian territory as the questionnaires were disseminated online and physically. It is recommended that future research broaden the contextual scope to multiple territories, especially in cross-border and cross-cultural contexts, which would provide better generalisability of findings and variations in consumer behaviour across cultures.

This study examined only social media advertising as a type of digital marketing stimulus alongside influencer marketing, and brand awareness and perceived value as the only mediating variables. Future studies may include brand trust, electronic word of mouth, customer engagement, and user experience, among other variables, to better understand the predictors of purchase intention. Future studies may also examine the moderating differences of influencer types, such as micro-influencers and macro-influencers, on consumer purchasing decisions. Researchers may also examine the extent to which social media platforms, such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and X (Twitter), influence purchase intention as each of these platforms is different in terms of users and content.

From the standpoint of research design, the use of a cross-sectional approach hinders the ability to understand the evolution of consumer attitudes



and behaviours over time. Future studies may apply longitudinal design methodologies to provide a more in-depth understanding of changes in the impact of digital marketing, especially in relation to the evolution of the effectiveness of digital marketing strategies, social media trends, and consumer behaviours. Thus, the anticipated refinement of the research model and broadening of the study context will advance the empirical and theoretical contributions of the digital marketing discipline.

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