

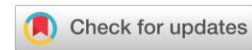
Strengthening Local Apparel Brand Business with a Digital Marketing Approach

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Electronic Word of Mouth; Social Media Marketing; Brand Image; Brand Equity; Purchase Intention;

This study aims to examine the impact of Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM), Social Media Marketing (SMM), Brand Engagement (BE), and Brand Image (BI) in forming Purchase Intention (PI), by placing Brand Equity (BEQ) as a mediator variable in the Generation Z consumer segment who consume local Indonesian fashion products in the Batam City area. This study adopted a causal-quantitative design in designing its study framework. The data collection process involved 246 respondents, selected through purposive sampling based on specific criteria. The data were then processed and statistically analyzed using the PLS-SEM (Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling) method, implemented in SmartPLS. The results of the analysis revealed that E-WOM, BE, and BI made significant positive contributions to the formation of BEQ, while E-WOM, BE, and BEQ demonstrated a real capacity to encourage the formation of PI. In addition, BEQ was confirmed to play a significant role as a mediator in bridging the relationship between E-WOM, BE, and BI with PI. On the other hand, SMM did not show a significant influence, either directly on BEQ or PI, or indirectly through the BEQ mediation channel. These findings indicate that brand equity plays a crucial role in enhancing the purchase intentions of Generation Z consumers through customer engagement, a positive brand image, and digital recommendations. This study enriches the literature on brand equity and offers implications for the local fashion industry in navigating the "Local Brand Winter" phenomenon, grounded in the Theory of Planned Behavior.

ABSTRAK

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Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menguji dampak Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM), Social Media Marketing (SMM), Brand Engagement (BE), dan Brand Image (BI) dalam membentuk Purchase Intention (PI), dengan menempatkan Brand Equity (BEQ) sebagai variabel mediator pada segmen konsumen Generasi Z yang mengonsumsi produk fashion lokal Indonesia di wilayah Kota Batam. Penelitian ini mengadopsi desain kausal-kuantitatif dalam merancang kerangka penelitiannya. Proses pengumpulan data melibatkan 246 responden, yang dipilih melalui purposive sampling berdasarkan kriteria tertentu. Data kemudian diproses dan dianalisis secara statistik menggunakan metode PLS-SEM (Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling), yang diimplementasikan dalam SmartPLS. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa E-WOM, BE, dan BI memberikan kontribusi positif yang signifikan terhadap pembentukan BEQ, sementara E-WOM,

BE, dan BEQ menunjukkan kapasitas nyata untuk mendorong pembentukan PI. Selain itu, BEQ dikonfirmasi memainkan peran signifikan sebagai mediator dalam menjembatani hubungan antara E-WOM, BE, dan BI dengan PI. Di sisi lain, SMM tidak menunjukkan pengaruh yang signifikan, baik secara langsung pada BEQ atau PI, maupun secara tidak langsung melalui saluran mediasi BEQ. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa ekuitas merek berperan penting dalam meningkatkan niat pembelian konsumen Generasi Z melalui keterlibatan pelanggan, citra merek yang positif, dan rekomendasi digital. Studi ini memperkaya literatur ekuitas merek serta memberikan implikasi bagi industri fesyen lokal dalam menghadapi fenomena Musim Dingin Merek Lokal berdasarkan Teori Perilaku Terencana.

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of social media has transformed how consumers—particularly Generation Z seek information and make product choices. In Indonesia, the number of internet users has surpassed 191.4 million, with a social media penetration rate of 68.9% of the population (DataReportal, 2024). This high level of social media usage is reflected in the consumption habits of Generation Z. An INSIG Indonesia survey (2025) reveals that 68% of Generation Z have purchased products based on online recommendations, while 76% follow at least one influencer they deem credible. These trends indicate that Social Media Marketing (SMM), Electronic Word-of-Mouth (E-WOM), and consumer-brand interactions play pivotal roles in shaping perceptions and purchase intentions. This is particularly relevant to the local apparel industry, where the local fashion category saw 38% growth between 2024 and 2025, with over 87% of buyers belonging to Generation Z and the Millennial demographic (Tokopedia Trend Report, 2024–2025). Consequently, the success of local brands hinges not only on the products themselves but also on the ability to establish communication and build relationships with consumers via digital channels.

Despite the growing importance of SMM, empirical findings regarding its impact on purchase intention remain inconsistent. Aziz (2025) found that SMM has a direct effect on purchase intention, whereas Fadhlillah Al-Hanaan et al. (2023) demonstrated that this influence is largely indirect, mediated by brand equity. Similarly, H et al. (2023) found that SMM influences brand equity, which in turn relates to purchase intention. These inconsistencies suggest that SMM does not necessarily generate purchase intention directly; rather, it may operate through psychological mechanisms, such as the perception of brand value. On the other hand, E-WOM and Brand Engagement play distinct roles in shaping Brand Equity and Purchase Intention, yet research concerning Brand Engagement and Brand Image among Generation Z within the context of local Indonesian apparel brands remains limited. The research gap addressed by this study lies in three aspects. First, prior studies have yielded inconsistent results regarding the impact of SMM on Purchase Intention, necessitating further examination that considers Brand Equity as

a mediating mechanism. Second, some previous studies have examined E-WOM and SMM in isolation, failing to integrate Brand Engagement and Brand Image into a unified model to explain the formation of Brand Equity. Third, research on the relationships between these variables remains relatively limited regarding Generation Z consumers and local Indonesian apparel brands, particularly in Batam. Therefore, this study develops a model to examine the effects of E-WOM, SMM, Brand Engagement, and Brand Image on Brand Equity and Purchase Intention, while also investigating the role of Brand Equity as a mediating variable.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theory of Planned Behavior as a Theoretical Foundation

This research is based on the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), formulated by Icek Ajzen in 1991 as a development of its predecessor, the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), initiated by Martin Fishbein in 1975. TPB was born of the need to explain human behavior that is not entirely within an individual's control. Ajzen argued that behavioral intention is the strongest predictor of actual behavior, and this intention is formed by three main constructs: attitude toward behavior, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control. In the context of this research, TPB provides a relevant conceptual framework to explain how Generation Z consumers form purchase intentions (Purchase Intention) towards local Indonesian apparel brands. Consumer attitudes towards a brand are formed through the accumulation of information and experiences, which in the digital era come from Electronic Word of Mouth and Social Media Marketing activities. When consumers are exposed to positive reviews from fellow users or relevant marketing content on social media, their attitudes towards the brand tend to shift in a more favorable direction.

Subjective norms are reflected in the influence of digital communities and social references formed through Brand Engagement, where active interactions between consumers and brands on digital platforms encourage positive social pressure that strengthens purchase intentions. Meanwhile, perceived behavioral control in this study is represented by Brand Image and Brand Equity, namely, the extent to which consumers feel confident and believe that the chosen brand can meet expectations and reflect their self-identity. Thus, TPB is not only relevant as a theoretical foundation but also functions as an integrative framework that connects all variables in this research model. E-WOM, Social Media Marketing, Brand Engagement, and Brand Image act as antecedents shaping consumer attitudes, norms, and perceptions, while Brand Equity serves as a mediating construct that aggregates these influences before ultimately translating them into concrete Purchase Intention. Although the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) has been widely applied to various consumer behavior contexts, its application to local apparel businesses remains limited. Accordingly, this study addresses this gap by examining TPB within the local apparel business context, which constitutes the novelty of the research.

The Influence of E-WOM on Purchase Intention (H1)

Several studies have found that E-WOM significantly influences Purchase Intention, especially among Generation Z, who have a strong habit of searching for information and product references across various digital platforms before deciding to buy. Within this framework, Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM) serves as a source of information considered trustworthy because it is based on the direct experiences of other consumers (Maringan et al., 2023). Reviews, recommendations, and testimonials across digital spaces have been shown to provide significant indications of a product or brand's quality and help consumers weigh the benefits and potential risks before making a decision. Furthermore, E-WOM also helps minimize the information uncertainty commonly encountered in online transactions, given that consumers lack the opportunity to see or try a product directly before making a purchase. Therefore, the better and more convincing the information received through E-WOM, the greater consumer trust in a brand will be (Rais et al., 2023). This, in turn, can strengthen the perception of brand value in consumers' minds while encouraging growth in purchase intentions, especially among Generation Z, who are highly dependent on digitally based information at every stage of their consumption decision-making process (Verma, 2021). When consumers find consistent positive reviews or recommendations, they'll be more confident in their purchasing decisions.

Kintan Oktadinna & Rachmat Fauzan (2024) emphasized that the credibility of digital messages from other consumers is a major factor influencing PI. E-WOM helps consumers assess a product's risk, quality, benefits, and reputation. On e-commerce platforms like Shopee or TikTok Shop, consumers often pay more attention to reviews and star ratings than to promotional content provided by the company.

International research by Tafolli et al. (2025) also interpreted that the intensity of positive E-WOM exposure on social media can increase consumers' positive attitudes towards brands, thus forming strong purchase intentions. Gen Z consumers, who are highly active in seeking information online, trust other users' experiences more than company claims, making E-WOM one of the most important determinants of Purchase Intention.

The Influence of Social Media Marketing on Purchase Intention (H2)

SMM has been shown to significantly influence purchase intentions, especially among digital-native consumers such as Generation Z. SMM operates through mechanisms such as increasing Brand Engagement, creating emotional experiences, and fostering two-way relationships between brands and users. Ellitan et al. (2022) interpret that attractive visual content, a communication style that is close to consumers, and high interactivity contribute to increasing Purchase Intention.

Study Thamrin (2021) also interprets influencer marketing as an element of SMM that can significantly influence purchasing decisions. Gen Z consumers are more likely

to trust recommendations from influencers perceived as credible and emotionally connected. When influencers demonstrate product usage in everyday contexts, consumers perceive the product as more relevant and worth purchasing.

In addition, international research by Sağtaş (2022) interpreted that SMM creates positive attitudes toward brands through perceptions of enjoyment, informativeness, and credibility. The higher the content quality, the greater consumers' interest in purchasing the product. Consumers exposed to creative content such as video tutorials, unboxing videos, reviews, challenges, or storytelling tend to show higher purchase intention. However, not all SMMs have a positive impact. A study by Rajalakshmi & Thabassum (2024) found that overly promotional content, without providing informative value, actually decreases purchase interest because consumers perceive it as inauthentic. This suggests that content quality and relevance are key factors in SMM effectiveness.

The Influence of Brand Engagement on Purchase Intention (H3)

Brand Engagement significantly influences Purchase Intention because the interaction between consumers and brands creates strong emotional, cognitive, and social connections. Consumers who feel involved with a brand tend to show high interest in the product, feel a personal closeness, and consider the brand relevant to their identity. A study by Emini & Zeqiri (2021) found that engagement in the form of likes, comments, and participation in interactive content, such as challenges or giveaways, had a positive impact on Gen Z consumers' purchase intentions.

Similar results were obtained by Wijaya & Susilawaty (2023), who interpret engagement strategies as strengthening positive attitudes toward a brand because digital interactions create deeper emotional experiences. Consumers who actively engage in brand activities are more likely to believe in the product's quality and reduce their perceived risk of purchasing.

In the context of digital marketing, brand engagement is also closely related to hedonic experiences, namely feelings of pleasure, satisfaction, and excitement when interacting with a brand. Research by Emini & Zeqiri (2021) has shown that the higher a consumer's psychological and emotional involvement, the greater their likelihood of making a purchase. Thus, engagement is a crucial variable that facilitates the relationship between consumers and brands and helps shape purchase intention.

The Influence of Brand Image on Purchase Intention (H4)

Brand Image has been shown to have a substantial influence on Purchase Intention, as positive consumer perceptions of a brand directly shape beliefs and attitudinal orientations that support purchasing decisions. A strong brand image can elevate consumer trust, reduce the perceived risks inherent in the purchasing process, and solidify the belief that the product is appropriate and offers value commensurate with the

sacrifices made. Syifa and Ahmadi (2024) find that consumers are more interested in buying products with a professional, consistent brand image and a positive reputation.

Research by Sari and Wahjoedi (2022) found that a positive brand image increases purchase intention because consumers associate the brand with high quality, strong emotional value, and clear functional benefits. Brand image also helps consumers differentiate one brand from another in a competitive market environment.

For Gen Z consumers, brand image plays a more dominant role because this generation pays close attention to lifestyle, visual identity, and symbolic value. Research by Mubarak et al. (2024) explains that Gen Z tends to purchase products from brands that are not only high-quality but also reflect their identity, aesthetics, and personal preferences. Visual branding, color, packaging design, and the quality of storytelling on social media are all influential factors that significantly influence Gen Z's purchase intention.

In addition, research by Azzahro (2025) emphasized that brand image is also influenced by UGC (user-generated content), such as reviews, unboxing videos, and consumer experience videos. When this content creates a positive image, consumers are more likely to make a purchase. Therefore, brand image is a crucial predictor of purchase intention in the context of modern digital marketing.

The Influence of E-WOM on Brand Equity (H5)

E-WOM not only influences purchase intentions but also plays a crucial role in shaping brand equity. Positive information shared repeatedly and consistently by consumers through digital platforms can increase brand awareness, strengthen brand associations, and build better perceptions of quality. Verma (2021) explains that consistent digital reviews create a higher perceived quality because consumers consider other users' experiences as tangible evidence of a product's or brand's quality and credibility.

Maringan et al. (2023) argued that E-WOM can improve perceived quality and build a strong brand reputation by spreading positive consumer opinions. Conversely, negative E-WOM can significantly reduce brand equity because negative information tends to spread faster and have a longer-lasting impact than positive information. Therefore, the quality of consumer interactions and conversations in the digital space is a crucial factor in building brand value.

These findings are supported by research by Tahir et al. (2024), which states that E-WOM is one of the most trusted sources of information for consumers in evaluating a brand. Information obtained from fellow consumers is considered more objective than marketing communications originating directly from the company. When consumers receive positive and credible reviews, they will form a better perception of the brand's quality and reputation, thereby increasing brand equity.

In the context of Generation Z, strengthening Brand Equity through E-WOM occurs more quickly than in previous generations because this group is very active in seeking social validation through comments, ratings, reviews, and testimonials on various digital platforms. Generation Z tends to rely on other consumers' experiences as a primary reference when evaluating a brand. They trust brands more when they have many positive reviews, high levels of engagement, and recommendations from digital communities. Thus, the more positive and credible E-WOM consumers receive, the higher the Brand Equity formed in their minds, thus strengthening the brand's position in an increasingly competitive market.

The Influence of Social Media Marketing on Brand Equity (H6)

SMM significantly increases BE by providing a space for ongoing interaction between consumers and brands. Consistent SMM content can build brand awareness, strengthen brand associations, and enhance perceived quality. Rais et al. (2023) explain that repeated exposure to visual content strengthens brand memory and creates positive associations in consumers' minds.

Study Koay et al. (2021) interprets SMM as building BE through interactive digital experiences. When consumers experience high-quality interactions, such as responsive comments or relatable content, they develop a better perception of brand quality. Continuous interaction also creates emotional bonds, thus increasing loyalty.

In the context of Gen Z, SMM strengthens BE because this group assesses brand reputation based on digital presence, content consistency, and social validation through likes, comments, and follower counts. Research by Maringan et al. (2023) finds that brands that are active and consistent in creating personalized content on social media can increase the BE dimension, especially perceived quality and associations.

The Influence of Brand Engagement on Brand Equity (H7)

Brand Engagement plays a crucial role in strengthening BE, as high engagement fosters a deeper understanding of the brand. Actively engaged consumers have higher levels of brand awareness, demonstrate better perceptions of quality, and have stronger emotional associations with the brand. He et al. (2022) interpret that engagement increases perceived quality because repeated interactions allow consumers to become more familiar with product characteristics.

Study Tarabieh (2022) interpreted that engagement strengthens brand associations because consumers gain direct experiences that increase emotional closeness. Consumers who frequently participate in digital activities such as voting, live streaming, or commenting also develop brand loyalty because they feel part of the brand's community. In the context of Gen Z, engagement plays a much more important role because they are highly responsive to interactive digital experiences. Maringan et al. (2023) explain that Gen Z consumers judge a brand's quality and relevance based on its level of engagement

and community interaction on social media. Therefore, brand engagement is a key factor in strengthening brand equity in the highly dynamic social media era.

The Influence of Brand Image on Brand Equity (H8)

Brand Image is a fundamental component in shaping brand awareness because positive brand perceptions increase awareness, perceived quality, and brand associations. When consumers have a positive image, they tend to rate products as higher quality and more valuable. This aligns with research. Aquinia et al. (2021) argue that a strong brand image strengthens perceptions of quality and consumer loyalty.

Study Maringan et al. (2023) finds that the consistency of digital imagery, such as visual branding, communication tone, and storytelling, significantly strengthens brand awareness and associations, two key components in building brand awareness. A strong brand image helps consumers recognize the brand easily, triggers positive memories, and creates deep emotional preferences. Furthermore, international research by Tahir et al. (2024) explains that a strong brand image with high visual appeal and the ability to represent consumer values and lifestyles play a significant role in establishing a sustainable relationship between a brand and its customers.

When consumers begin to perceive a brand as an embodiment of their identity, hopes, or principles, a stronger, deeper emotional bond with the brand naturally forms. This bond not only increases positive perceptions of the brand but also encourages a more consistent preference over competing brands. Over time, repeated positive experiences and the alignment of the brand image with consumer expectations will strengthen satisfaction and trust, ultimately leading to customer loyalty. Thus, a relevant brand image that aligns with the target market's characteristics is a strategic factor in fostering sustainable loyalty, especially among Generation Z, who tend to choose brands that align with their personal identity and values. Consumers with a positive image perception feel more connected to the brand, thereby forming a strong BE. Thus, brand image is one of the most important variables in increasing BE in the digital marketing era.

The Mediating Role of Brand Equity in the Influence of E-WOM on Purchase Intention (H9)

Research on mediation interprets that Brand Equity functions as a bridge between E-WOM and Purchase Intention. Tardin and Pelissari (2021) explain that consumers don't immediately form purchase intentions based solely on positive reviews. Still, the perception of brand value formed from that information is the primary mechanism driving purchase intentions. E-WOM first increases brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand associations before ultimately influencing purchase intentions.

Similar findings were reported by Lin et al. (2023), confirming that brand equity strengthens consumers' interpretation of digital information, thereby increasing the

impact of E-WOM on purchase intentions. Thus, brand equity plays a crucial psychological role in transforming digital information into purchasing beliefs.

Additionally, Verma (2021) explained that consistently receiving positive recommendations and reviews will increase brand credibility and strengthen perceptions of product quality. When consumers perceive a brand as having superior quality and a strong reputation, they are more confident about making a purchase. Maringan et al. (2023) also found that positive E-WOM can increase consumer trust in a brand, thereby strengthening brand equity and ultimately driving purchase intention. Therefore, brand equity can be seen as a mechanism that explains how the influence of digital information translates into stronger purchase intentions, especially among Generation Z consumers who rely heavily on online reviews and recommendations.

The Mediating Role of Brand Equity in the Influence of Social Media Marketing on Purchase Intention (H10)

Several studies have interpreted the influence of social media marketing on purchase intention as often mediated by brand equity. Setiawan et al. (2024) explain that marketing activities on social media do not always directly drive purchase intention; rather, they first build positive perceptions of brand value. Social media marketing increases awareness and associations by distributing engaging content, fostering brand equity and driving consumers toward purchase intention.

A study by Dwivedi et al. (2021) also found that brand equity plays a crucial psychological role, as consumers assess brand quality based on the digital experiences they gain from social media activities. The stronger the brand equity, the greater the influence of social media marketing on purchase intention.

Koay et al. (2021) added that consistent interaction on social media can increase emotional closeness between consumers and brands, thereby strengthening loyalty and perceived quality. Rais et al. (2023) found that brand equity is the primary pathway explaining how digital marketing activities translate into purchase intention. For Generation Z, who are highly active on social media, informative, authentic, and interactive content is more effective in building brand equity than simply promoting products. Therefore, brand equity plays a crucial role in linking social media marketing activities to the formation of purchase intention.

The Mediating Role of Brand Equity in the Influence of Brand Engagement on Purchase Intention (H11)

Several studies have interpreted the influence of brand engagement on purchase intention as not entirely direct but rather mediated by brand equity. High engagement creates positive brand experiences, enhances perceived quality, fosters loyalty, and strengthens brand associations. All of these factors are key components of brand equity, which in turn drives purchase intention.

Wijaya and Susilawaty (2023) interpreted that brand equity has a significant mediating role because consumer involvement influences brand perceptions before ultimately forming purchase intentions. Actively involved consumers tend to perceive brands as more valuable, higher quality, and more trustworthy, thus increasing purchase intentions.

International research by Perera et al. (2023) also shows that Brand Equity functions as a psychological bridge between consumer interactive experiences and purchasing tendencies. This finding is reinforced by He et al. (2022) which explains that high engagement allows consumers to gain a deeper brand experience, thereby increasing the perception of quality and loyalty to the brand. Tarabieh (2022) also found that consumer engagement through digital activities can strengthen brand associations and build long-term emotional relationships. Among Generation Z consumers, these relationships are even stronger because they tend to use digital interactions as a basis for evaluating a brand's quality and relevance. Therefore, brand equity is a key explanatory factor that translates consumer engagement into purchase intention.

The Mediating Role of Brand Equity in the Influence of Brand Image on Purchase Intention (H12)

Brand equity acts as a mediator between brand image and purchase intention, as positive brand perceptions increase brand equity before purchase intention. Sunaryanto and Noviyanti (2025) argue that brand image does not directly increase purchase intention but rather does so through increases in perceived quality, brand association, and loyalty, which are the main components of brand equity.

Research by Achmad and Jatmiko (2025) also confirms that brand equity is a crucial psychological mechanism that bridges the relationship between brand image and purchase intention. Consumers with a positive brand image but not yet perceive strong brand value tend to lack sufficient motivation to purchase. Conversely, when brand image successfully enhances brand equity, purchase intention will significantly increase.

Aquinia et al. (2021) explain that a strong brand image can strengthen perceived quality and increase customer loyalty, which in turn creates higher brand equity. Furthermore, Tahir et al. (2024) found that brands that represent consumers' identities, lifestyles, and values build stronger emotional connections with their customers. For Generation Z, symbolic aspects and identity expression are important considerations in purchasing decisions. Therefore, when a brand image creates high perceptions of quality, emotional relevance, and alignment with a consumer's identity, brand equity will be stronger and ultimately increase purchase intention.

The Influence of Brand Equity on Purchase Intention (H13)

As explained in the previous subchapter, brand equity has a positive and significant influence on purchase intention. Consumers with a high perception of brand value tend

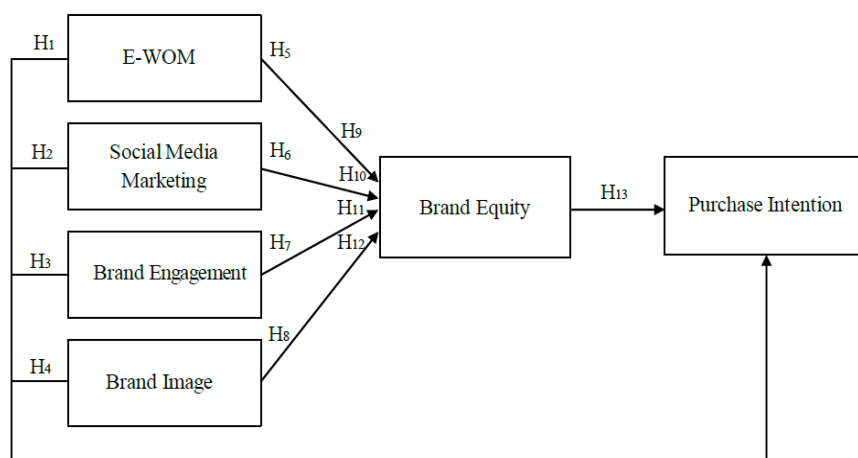
to have greater confidence in the product's quality, credibility, and benefits, increasing their likelihood of making a purchase Verma (2021) emphasized that perceived quality, brand associations, and brand loyalty are the main determinants in forming purchase intentions in various product categories.

These findings are supported by Aaker, who explains that brand equity is a strategic asset that creates added value for consumers by increasing trust and brand differentiation. When consumers perceive a brand as having a good reputation, they are more confident in making purchasing decisions because the perceived risk is lower.

Vo Minh et al. (2022) emphasized that Generation Z is more likely to purchase brands with strong symbolic value that reflect their identity. Furthermore, Aquinia et al. (2021) found that high brand equity increases consumer preference for a brand over competing brands. In the context of local Indonesian apparel, consumers purchase products not only for their utilitarian function but also for the emotional value, image, and reputation attached to the brand. Therefore, the stronger a brand's brand equity, the higher the likelihood that consumers will form purchase intentions and make future purchases.

Conceptual Model and Research Gap

The relationship between variables in this study can be described as follows:



Source: Verma (2021); Maringan et al. (2023); Rais et al. (2023)

Figure 1. Conceptual Model

This model explains that E-WOM, SMM, brand engagement, and brand image are digital marketing stimulus that shape brand equity perceptions. Furthermore, brand equity, as a psychological entity, mediates this relationship, leading to purchase intention (response).

Research Hypothesis

- H1: E-WOM has a positive and significant influence on Purchase Intention.
- H2: Social Media Marketing has a positive and significant influence on Purchase Intention.
- H3: Brand Engagement has a positive and significant influence on Purchase Intention.
- H4: Brand Image has a positive and significant influence on Purchase Intention.
- H5: E-WOM has a positive and significant influence on Brand Equity.
- H6: Social Media Marketing has a positive and significant influence on Brand Equity.
- H7: Brand Engagement has a positive and significant influence on Brand Equity.
- H8: Brand Image has a positive and significant influence on Brand Equity.
- H9: Brand Equity mediates the influence of Electronic Word of Mouth on Purchase Intention.
- H10: Brand Equity mediates the influence of Social Media Marketing on Purchase Intention.
- H11: Brand Equity mediates the influence of Brand Engagement on Purchase Intention.
- H12: Brand Equity mediates the influence of Brand Image on Purchase Intention.
- H13: Brand Equity has a positive and significant influence on Purchase Intention.

METHOD

Research is a systematic process used to understand, explain, and predict a phenomenon through structured scientific steps. (Maringan et al., 2023) In quantitative research, preparing a research design is an important step to ensure the research is on the right track, from problem identification and variable selection to analysis methods and conclusions (Siyoto & Sodik, 2015). The research design provides guidelines regarding how relationships between variables are tested, how data are collected, and how results are interpreted.

The research design used is *ex post facto* causal research, meaning data are collected after the phenomenon, without the researcher's intervention in the variables under study. This approach is used to systematically analyze causal relationships among variables based on a theoretical framework and relevant empirical evidence (Kartika & Pandjaitan, 2023).

This study was designed to examine the influence of E-WOM, Social Media Marketing, Brand Engagement, and Brand Image on Purchase Intention, with Brand Equity as a mediating variable explaining the mechanism underlying the relationship. The overall relationship between variables is formulated in hypotheses H1–H13, which are based on a theoretical framework that includes the Customer-Based Brand Equity Model. (Verma, 2021), Theory of Planned Behavior (Noviyanti, 2025), as well as the latest research related to digital consumer behavior.

The use of a causal design in this study is very relevant considering the rapidly growing digital marketing phenomenon among Generation Z. This group is very active in using social media, is frequently exposed to digital marketing content, and is highly influenced by user reviews (E-WOM), influencer credibility, brand visual imagery, and interactive experiences offered by brands. Therefore, a causal research design allows researchers to test the extent to which these factors contribute to the formation of Purchase Intention, with Brand Equity serving as the psychological mechanism.

Visually, the relationship between variables in this study is depicted in a structural model comprising four independent variables (E-WOM, SMM, Brand Engagement, Brand Image), one mediating variable (Brand Equity), and one dependent variable (Purchase Intention). This research model aligns with recent research, including H et al. (2023), Sari & Wahjoedi (2022), and Kartika & Pandjaitan (2023), which suggests that digital marketing and consumer psychology variables are mutually influential in shaping value perceptions and purchasing decisions among young consumers.

Thus, this *ex post facto* causal research design becomes the basic framework for evaluating the influence of each variable and testing whether Brand Equity plays a significant role as a mediator in explaining Purchase Intention.

The development of the local Indonesian fashion industry and the high level of social media use among Generation Z in Batam City form the basis for determining the research focus. As explained in Chapter I, Gen Z is the most active digital consumer group and the most responsive to social media-based marketing content, consumer reviews (E-WOM), influencers, and brand-related digital interactions. Gen Z in Batam utilizes platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and marketplaces to seek lifestyle inspiration, fashion trends, and recommendations for local apparel products before making a purchase.

According to DataReportal (2024), Gen Z is the largest group of social media users in Indonesia, and this trend is also evident in Batam, the center of creative economic growth in the Riau Islands. Gen Z in Batam follows many local fashion brands, including Erigo, Roughneck, Bloods, Screamous, Thanksinsomnia, Smith Berlin, Heyho, and others. They build brand perceptions based on digital content, social media engagement, and the user reviews they see every day.

Purchase Intention Gen Z is heavily influenced by E-WOM, social media marketing, brand engagement, and brand image, which further shape brand equity as a primary psychological mechanism. Therefore, the most relevant research objects to test this research model are: Generation Z consumers in Batam City who buy local Indonesian apparel and actively use social media.

Operational Definition of Variables

The operational definitions of the variables are presented in Table 1. Each variable is measured using indicators relevant to the research context of Generation Z consumers of local Indonesian apparel in Batam City. All indicators are measured using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Table 1. Operational Definition and Indicators of Research Variables

Variable	Operational Definition	Indicators
Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM)	Digital communication in the form of reviews, recommendations, testimonials, and opinions from other consumers regarding local apparel brands.	EWOM1: Consumers consider online reviews when evaluating a brand. EWOM2: Consumers consider recommendations from other users. EWOM3: Consumers seek information about brands through online reviews. EWOM4: Online reviews provide useful information about the brand. EWOM5: Consumers trust information obtained from other consumers online.
Social Media Marketing (SMM)	Marketing activities conducted through social media to provide information, create interaction, and present content related to local apparel brands.	SMM1: Social media content is informative. SMM2: Social media content is relevant to consumers. SMM3: Social media content is entertaining. SMM4: The brand provides attractive content on social media. SMM5: The brand actively interacts with consumers through social media. SMM6: Social media makes it easy for consumers to obtain information about the brand. SMM7: The brand consistently presents content through social media.
Brand Engagement	The level of consumers' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral involvement in interactions with a local apparel brand.	BE1: Consumers are interested in interacting with the brand. BE2: Consumers feel emotionally connected to the brand. BE3: Consumers actively engage with the brand through digital platforms.
Brand Image	Consumers' overall perception and association with a local apparel brand based on information, experiences, and interactions with the brand.	BI1: The brand has a positive image. BI2: The brand has a distinctive image compared with competitors. BI3: The brand has a favorable reputation in consumers' perceptions.
Brand Equity	The added value associated with a brand as perceived by consumers, reflected in perceived quality, brand associations, and loyalty.	BEQ1: Consumers perceive the brand as having good quality. BEQ2: Consumers have positive associations with the brand. BEQ3: Consumers recognize the brand as a strong brand. BEQ4: Consumers prefer the brand over competing brands. BEQ5: Consumers are willing to remain loyal to the brand.
Purchase Intention	Consumers' willingness or tendency to purchase products from local apparel brands in the future.	PI1: Consumers intend to purchase products from the brand. PI2: Consumers are likely to purchase the brand in the future. PI3: Consumers would consider the brand when making a purchase. PI4: Consumers are willing to recommend or choose the brand when purchasing apparel.

Source: Adapted from the measurement constructs used in previous studies and adjusted to the context of local Indonesian apparel brands.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Respondent Demographic Test

Based on the data obtained through the questionnaire, a demographic description of the data can be presented as follows:

Table 2. Gender

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Man	146	59.3	59.3	59.3
	Woman	100	40.7	40.7	100.0
	Total	246	100.0	100.0	

Source: Processed Data (2026).

The table above shows the gender distribution of respondents. Of the 246 respondents, 146 (59.3%) were male, and 100 (40.7%) were female. The predominance of male respondents indicates that male Gen Z consumers participated more frequently in this study. However, the distribution was relatively balanced and reflects the gender diversity of local apparel users in Batam City.

Table 3. Age

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	< 18 Years	58	23.6	23.6	23.6
	> 35 Years	16	6.5	6.5	30.1
	19-24 Years	139	56.5	56.5	86.6
	25-30 Years	33	13.4	13.4	100.0
	Total	246	100.0	100.0	

Source: Processed Data (2026).

Based on the age distribution table, the 19-24 age group constitutes the majority of respondents with 139 people (56.5%), followed by the under-18 age group with 58 people (23.6%), the 25-30 age group with 33 people (13.4%), and the over-35 age group with 16 people (6.5%). The dominance of the 19-24 age group aligns with the characteristics of Generation Z, a group of students and young workers who actively use social media and have purchasing power for local apparel products.

Table 4. Occupation

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Employee	48	19.5	19.5	19.5
	Students	165	67.1	67.1	86.6
	Household	8	3.3	3.3	89.8
	Businessman	25	10.2	10.2	100.0
	Total	246	100.0	100.0	

Source: Processed Data (2026).

The distribution of respondents' occupations indicates that the majority of respondents are students (165 people) (67.1%), followed by employees (48 people) (19.5%), entrepreneurs (25 people) (10.2%), and households (8 people) (3.3%). The dominance of students reflects the main profile of Gen Z consumers targeted by this study, where this group is the most active social media users and the main consumers of the local Indonesian apparel industry.

Table 5. Outer Loading Test

	Brand Engagement	Brand Equity	Brand Image	E-WOM	Purchase Intention	Social Media Marketing
BE1	0.890					
BE2	0.898					
BE3	0.914					
BEQ1		0.874				
BEQ2		0.834				
BEQ3		0.833				
BEQ4		0.815				
BEQ5		0.740				
BI1			0.892			
BI2			0.918			
BI3			0.859			
EWOM1				0.862		
EWOM2				0.842		
EWOM3				0.817		
EWOM4				0.841		
EWOM5				0.858		
PI1					0.864	
PI2					0.873	
PI3					0.886	
PI4					0.862	
SMM1						0.777
SMM2						0.832
SMM3						0.826
SMM4						0.808
SMM5						0.834
SMM6						0.800
SMM7						0.810

Source: Processed Data (2026).

The Outer Loading table above displays the loading factor score for each indicator relative to its respective construct. Outer loading reflects the strength of the relationship between the indicator and the latent construct it represents. Therefore, the higher the loading factor value, the greater the indicator's contribution to measuring the intended construct. All indicators in this study had loading scores above 0.70, the minimum threshold recommended by Hair et al. (2017) for meeting convergent validity at the

indicator level. A loading factor value above 0.70 indicates that the latent construct can explain more than 49% of the indicator's variance, and the indicator is considered sufficiently representative of the construct in question.

The highest score was obtained by the BE3 indicator on the Brand Engagement construct, with a value of 0.914, indicating that the indicator has a very strong relationship with the construct and predominantly represents the Brand Engagement dimension. Conversely, the lowest score was obtained by the BEQ5 indicator on the Brand Equity construct with a value of 0.740, which although in the lowest position, still meets the required threshold. Hence, it is still worth maintaining in the model. The relatively narrow range of loading factor values between the lowest and highest values also indicates that all indicators have a uniform level of measurement consistency and that none are significantly weak in representing their constructs.

Table 6. Construct Reliability and Validity Test

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Brand Engagement	0.884	0.892	0.928	0.812
Brand Equity	0.878	0.881	0.911	0.673
Brand Image	0.868	0.870	0.919	0.792
E-WOM	0.899	0.902	0.925	0.713
Purchase Intention	0.895	0.900	0.926	0.759
Social Media Marketing	0.914	0.918	0.932	0.661

Source: Processed Data (2026).

The Construct Reliability and Validity table confirms that all constructs meet the required reliability and validity standards. The Construct Reliability and Validity table confirms that all constructs meet the required reliability and validity standards. Cronbach's Alpha for all variables ranges from 0.868 to 0.914, exceeding the minimum threshold of 0.70, while Composite Reliability (rho_c) consistently exceeds 0.90. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values range from 0.661 to 0.812, meeting the convergent validity criteria proposed by Hair et al. (2021). Based on these results, all constructs in the research model are proven to be reliable and statistically valid.

Table 7. Discriminant Validity Test (Fornell Larcker)

	Brand Engagement	Brand Equity	Brand Image	E-WOM	Purchase Intention	Social Media Marketing
Brand Engagement	0.901					
Brand Equity	0.750	0.820				
Brand Image	0.690	0.700	0.890			
E-WOM	0.667	0.609	0.593	0.844		
Purchase Intention	0.634	0.692	0.621	0.619	0.871	
Social Media Marketing	0.595	0.550	0.672	0.677	0.609	0.813

Source: Processed Data (2026).

Discriminant validity testing using the Fornell-Larcker criteria proved that all constructs in the model met the requirements of discriminant validity. The square root of the AVE value of each construct—Brand Engagement (0.901), Brand Equity (0.820), Brand Image (0.890), E-WOM (0.844), Purchase Intention (0.871), and Social Media Marketing (0.813)—consistently exceeded all correlation values with other constructs, indicating that each construct is more capable of explaining the variance of its own indicators than the variance shared between constructs. Thus, all latent variables are shown to be conceptually distinct and free of overlap, ensuring that the research model has sufficient discriminant validity for further structural testing.

Table 8. Discriminant Validity Test (HTMT)

	Brand Engagement	Brand Equity	Brand Image	E-WOM	Purchase Intention	Social Media Marketing
Brand Engagement						
Brand Equity	0.843					
Brand Image	0.783	0.798				
E-WOM	0.742	0.679	0.668			
Purchase Intention	0.704	0.773	0.695	0.682		
Social Media Marketing	0.655	0.606	0.750	0.744	0.662	

Source: Processed Data (2026).

Discriminant validity testing using the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) method proved that all pairs of constructs produced HTMT values below the 0.90 threshold recommended by Henseler et al. (2015). The highest HTMT value was found in the relationship between Brand Engagement and Brand Equity at 0.843, which is still within the tolerance limit. This finding confirms that each construct represents a distinct empirical concept and is free from measurement overlap. Thus, the measurement model demonstrates adequate discriminant validity, and all research instruments are suitable for use in structural testing and subsequent hypothesis testing.

Hypothesis Testing

Table 9. Results of the Direct Effect Hypothesis Test

Hypot hesis	Track	Original Sample	T-Statistics	P-Values	Information
H1	E-WOM → Purchase Intention	0.207	2,818	0.005	Accepted
H2	Social Media Marketing → Purchase Intention	0.091	1,253	0.210	Rejected
H3	Brand Engagement → Purchase Intention	0.148	2,036	0.042	Accepted
H4	Brand Image → Purchase Intention	0.059	0.726	0.468	Rejected
H5	E-WOM → Brand Equity	0.154	2,253	0.025	Accepted
H6	Social Media Marketing → Brand Equity	0.059	0.835	0.404	Rejected

Hypothesis	Track	Original Sample	T-Statistics	P-Values	Information
H7	Brand Engagement → Brand Equity	0.534	7,208	0,000	Accepted
H8	Brand Image → Brand Equity	0.198	2,782	0.006	Accepted
H13	Brand Equity → Purchase Intention	0.395	4,850	0,000	Accepted

Source: Processed Data (2026).

The results of the direct influence test in the PLS-SEM structural model were evaluated based on the criteria of t-statistics > 1.96 and P-values < 0.05 (Hair et al., 2017). The results show that six hypotheses were statistically supported. E-WOM and Brand Engagement significantly influenced Purchase Intention, while E-WOM, Brand Engagement, and Brand Image significantly influenced Brand Equity. In addition, Brand Equity had a significant influence on Purchase Intention. Meanwhile, Social Media Marketing did not have a significant influence on either Purchase Intention or Brand Equity, and Brand Image did not have a significant influence on Purchase Intention. Therefore, H1, H3, H5, H7, H8, and H13 were supported, whereas H2, H4, and H6 were not supported.

Table 10. Results of the Mediation Effect Test (Indirect Effects)

Hypothesis	Mediation Path	Original Sample	t-Statistics	P-Values	Information
H9	E-WOM → Brand Equity → PI	0.061	2,162	0.031	Accepted
H10	SMM → Brand Equity → PI	0.023	0.820	0.412	Rejected
H11	Brand Engagement → Brand Equity → PI	0.211	4,254	0,000	Accepted
H12	Brand Image → Brand Equity → PI	0.078	2,648	0.008	Accepted

Source: Processed Data (2026).

The results of the mediation test using bootstrapping indicate that Brand Equity significantly mediates the influence of E-WOM (H9), Brand Engagement (H11), and Brand Image (H12) on Purchase Intention, with t-statistics > 1.96 and P-Values < 0.05 . On the other hand, the mediation of Brand Equity on the relationship between Social Media Marketing and Purchase Intention (H10) is not statistically supported, consistent with the insignificant direct effect of SMM on Brand Equity (H6). Based on the pattern of direct and indirect effects, Brand Equity functions as a partial mediator in H9 and H12, and a full mediator in H11.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide an integrated explanation of how digital consumer interactions and brand-related perceptions contribute to purchase intention among Generation Z consumers of Indonesian local apparel brands in Batam City. Rather

than interpreting each relationship only from a statistical perspective, the findings can be understood through the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), which explains purchase intention through attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. In this study, E-WOM and Social Media Marketing represent digital stimuli that contribute to consumer attitudes, Brand Engagement reflects the social and relational dimension of subjective norms, while Brand Image and Brand Equity represent consumers' perceptions of the value and capability of a brand. The findings further demonstrate that these mechanisms do not operate equally. In particular, Brand Engagement and Brand Equity emerge as important mechanisms through which digital interactions are converted into purchase intention.

H1: E-WOM has a positive and significant influence on Purchase Intention

The finding that E-WOM contributes to Purchase Intention indicates that information generated by other consumers remains an important source of influence for Generation Z in evaluating local apparel brands. Reviews, recommendations, testimonials, and consumer experiences provide information that is perceived as more experience-based than brand-controlled promotional communication. This is particularly relevant for Generation Z consumers, who frequently use digital platforms to compare alternatives and obtain references before making purchasing decisions. The finding is consistent with Maringan et al. (2023), who explain that E-WOM can increase consumer trust and perceived quality, as well as H et al. (2023), who identify E-WOM as an important mechanism for reducing uncertainty in purchasing decisions.

From the perspective of TPB, this finding supports the role of attitude in the formation of behavioral intention. Information obtained from other consumers can shape how consumers evaluate a local apparel brand before they decide whether the brand is worth considering. Positive consumer experiences therefore function not merely as promotional messages but as social information that contributes to the formation of favorable attitudes toward the brand. This interpretation is also consistent with Tafolli et al. (2025), who found that positive E-WOM in the fashion context can strengthen consumer attitudes and purchase intentions.

The empirical implication is that E-WOM provides local apparel brands with a form of consumer-generated credibility that cannot be created solely through brand-controlled communication. In an environment where consumers are exposed to a large amount of commercial content, experiences shared by fellow consumers may provide a more credible basis for evaluating a brand. Thus, the finding extends the application of TPB by showing how consumer-generated digital information can operate as an important antecedent of purchase intention in the local apparel context.

H2: Social Media Marketing has a positive and significant influence on Purchase Intention

In contrast to E-WOM, Social Media Marketing does not directly contribute to Purchase Intention in this study. This finding is important because social media is widely used as a marketing channel by local apparel brands, yet the presence of marketing content itself does not necessarily translate into stronger purchase intention. The finding is consistent with H et al. (2023), who found that Social Media Marketing does not always produce a direct effect on purchase intention. Sağtaş (2022) further explains that the effectiveness of social media marketing depends on the informativeness, enjoyment, relevance, and credibility of the content presented to consumers.

The finding can be interpreted through the attitude component of TPB. Social Media Marketing represents communication controlled by the brand, meaning that consumers may encounter the content frequently without necessarily developing a sufficiently favorable evaluation of the brand. This is particularly relevant in an environment characterized by information overload and digital clutter. As discussed in the introduction, the increasing volume of commercial content on social media makes consumers more selective

H3: Brand Engagement has a positive and significant influence on Purchase Intention

Brand Engagement is found to contribute to Purchase Intention, indicating that active consumer involvement with a brand is more consequential than passive exposure to brand communication. Engagement includes consumers' willingness to interact, participate, respond, and develop emotional connections with brands through digital platforms. Emini and Zeqiri (2021) found that digital participation, including interaction and participation in brand activities, can strengthen purchase intention among younger consumers. Wijaya and Susilawaty (2023) similarly explain that engagement creates deeper emotional experiences that strengthen consumers' attitudes toward brands.

Within TPB, Brand Engagement can be understood primarily through the subjective norm component. Digital interaction does not occur in isolation; consumers participate in communities, respond to content, observe the behavior of other users, and receive social cues from their digital environment. These interactions can make the brand more socially relevant and strengthen consumers' willingness to consider the brand. Therefore, engagement represents a relational process through which consumers become socially and psychologically connected to a brand.

The finding is particularly relevant to local apparel brands because apparel consumption often involves identity, lifestyle, and community affiliation. Activities such as user-generated content, interactive campaigns, challenges, and community-based communication can create opportunities for consumers to participate rather than merely receive promotional information. The empirical finding therefore suggests that the

strength of a local brand is not determined only by how much content it produces, but also by how effectively it creates opportunities for consumers to become participants in the brand experience.

H4: Brand Image has a positive and significant influence on Purchase Intention

Brand Image does not directly contribute to Purchase Intention in this study. This finding does not mean that Brand Image is unimportant. Rather, it suggests that a favorable perception of a local apparel brand may need to be translated into broader perceptions of brand value before it becomes a purchase intention. This interpretation is consistent with Sunaryanto and Noviyanti (2025), who argue that Brand Image may influence purchase intention through Brand Equity rather than directly. It also differs from studies such as Fadya Al Yasha Syifa and Mirzam Arqy Ahmadi (2024) and Sari and Wahjoedi (2022), which reported direct effects of Brand Image on Purchase Intention.

The finding can be explained through TPB, particularly the role of perceived behavioral control. A positive image can make consumers perceive a brand favorably, but this perception alone does not necessarily provide sufficient confidence to purchase. Consumers may still evaluate whether the brand offers consistent quality, meaningful associations, credibility, and sufficient value compared with competing brands. In the highly competitive local apparel market, visual appeal and brand popularity may therefore be insufficient to convert perception into intention.

This finding becomes particularly meaningful when viewed together with the significant relationship between Brand Image and Brand Equity. It indicates that Brand Image contributes to the formation of a broader perception of brand value, while Brand Equity provides the psychological basis through which that perception becomes relevant to purchase intention. Thus, the role of Brand Image in this study is more accurately understood as a foundation for brand value formation rather than as an immediate trigger of purchase intention.

H5: E-WOM has a positive and significant influence on Brand Equity

The positive contribution of E-WOM to Brand Equity demonstrates that consumer-generated communication does not only influence short-term purchase considerations but also contributes to the accumulation of long-term brand value. Verma (2021) explains that consistent digital reviews can strengthen perceived quality because consumers use other consumers' experiences as evidence when evaluating a brand. Tardin and Pelissari (2021) similarly associate E-WOM with increased brand awareness and perceived quality, both of which are important components of Brand Equity.

This finding strengthens the TPB framework by showing that information originating from other consumers can have a broader role than simply shaping immediate attitudes toward purchase. Repeated positive experiences communicated through digital platforms can accumulate into perceptions of quality, credibility, reputation, and value.

These perceptions form a stronger psychological foundation for consumers' subsequent behavioral intentions.

For local apparel brands, this finding highlights the importance of maintaining the quality of the actual consumer experience. E-WOM cannot be sustainably generated only through promotional efforts because its credibility depends on consumers' genuine experiences. Consequently, encouraging satisfied customers to share authentic experiences can contribute simultaneously to immediate purchase consideration and longer-term brand equity.

H6: Social Media Marketing has a positive and significant influence on Brand Equity

The absence of a significant contribution of Social Media Marketing to Brand Equity provides one of the important findings of this study. This result differs from Koay et al. (2021) and Verma (2021), who reported that social media marketing can strengthen brand equity. The difference suggests that the effectiveness of Social Media Marketing is highly dependent on the context in which the communication occurs and on the quality and relevance of the content.

One possible explanation is the digital clutter experienced by consumers. The introduction of the study highlights the rapid increase in commercial content on social media, which makes it increasingly difficult for consumers to distinguish meaningful information from promotional messages. In such an environment, frequent exposure to brand content does not automatically create stronger brand associations or perceived value. Sari and Wahjoedi (2022) similarly emphasize the importance of content consistency and relevance in converting social media activity into brand value.

From the TPB perspective, this finding indicates that brand-controlled communication does not automatically produce the psychological conditions required for behavioral intention. Social Media Marketing may create opportunities for consumers to encounter a brand, but communication must subsequently generate favorable attitudes, social interaction, or stronger perceptions of brand value. The finding therefore demonstrates that digital presence should not be equated with digital effectiveness.

H7: Brand Engagement has a positive and significant influence on Brand Equity

One of the most important findings of this study is the strong contribution of Brand Engagement to Brand Equity. Compared with the other antecedent variables, Brand Engagement demonstrates the most substantial role in the formation of Brand Equity. This finding is consistent with He et al. (2022), who explain that repeated engagement allows consumers to understand product characteristics more deeply, while Tarabieh (2022) shows that engagement strengthens brand associations through direct and emotional experiences. Vo Minh et al. (2022) also identify social brand engagement as an important factor in building brand equity in the fashion industry.

This finding provides a stronger interpretation of the subjective norm component of TPB. Subjective norms are not limited to direct social pressure from other people; in a digital environment, they can emerge through repeated interaction, participation, community experiences, and social identification with a brand. When consumers actively engage with a brand, the relationship moves beyond simple exposure to marketing content. The brand becomes part of consumers' social and experiential environment.

The findings are particularly important for local apparel brands because apparel consumption can involve self-expression and community identification. Engagement activities allow consumers to participate in constructing the meaning of the brand rather than simply receiving that meaning from the company. Consequently, Brand Engagement becomes an important mechanism through which digital interaction is transformed into perceived brand quality, stronger associations, and greater loyalty. This explains why engagement becomes particularly relevant to the formation of Brand Equity among Generation Z consumers.

H8: Brand Image has a positive and significant influence on Brand Equity

The significant contribution of Brand Image to Brand Equity demonstrates that consumers' overall perceptions of a local apparel brand are important in constructing long-term brand value. Purwianti et al. (2024) explain that a strong brand image can strengthen perceived quality and consumer loyalty, while Verma (2021) emphasizes the importance of consistency in building brand awareness and associations. Tahir et al. (2024) further show that brand images aligned with consumers' identities and lifestyles can strengthen emotional connections.

This finding supports the perceived behavioral control dimension of TPB. Consumers need to perceive that a brand is credible, relevant, and capable of fulfilling their expectations before a favorable perception can contribute to stronger behavioral intention. Brand Image therefore provides an initial perception of what the brand represents, while Brand Equity reflects the more comprehensive value consumers attach to that brand.

For Generation Z, this relationship is particularly relevant because brand meaning can be connected to lifestyle, identity, and self-expression. A local apparel brand that communicates a consistent and authentic identity can therefore accumulate stronger associations in consumers' minds. However, as demonstrated by the non-significant direct relationship between Brand Image and Purchase Intention, the image must be translated into broader brand value before it can effectively influence purchase intention.

H9: Brand Equity mediates the influence of Electronic Word of Mouth on Purchase Intention

The finding of H9 shows that Brand Equity mediates the relationship between E-WOM and Purchase Intention. This finding indicates that consumer-generated information does not only influence consumers' immediate consideration of local apparel

brands, but also contributes to the formation of broader perceptions of brand value. When consumers receive reviews, recommendations, and experiences from other consumers, the information can strengthen their perceptions of the quality, credibility, and reputation of the brand. These perceptions subsequently contribute to stronger Brand Equity, which encourages consumers to develop greater purchase intention.

This finding is consistent with Lin et al. (2023), who explain that E-WOM can strengthen consumer evaluations of a brand through the formation of brand-related value. Purwianti (2023) also explains that E-WOM can increase consumer awareness and perceived quality, which are important components in the development of Brand Equity. Thus, the present finding extends these studies by demonstrating that the influence of E-WOM on purchase intention among Generation Z consumers of local apparel brands operates not only as a direct informational influence but also through the development of Brand Equity.

From the perspective of TPB, this mediation can be related primarily to the formation of favorable attitudes toward the behavior. E-WOM provides consumers with information that helps them evaluate whether a brand is credible and worth purchasing. When repeated consumer experiences strengthen the perceived value of the brand, these evaluations become more favorable and are subsequently reflected in purchase intention. Therefore, Brand Equity functions as a psychological mechanism that converts consumer-generated information into a stronger behavioral intention.

The finding provides an important empirical contribution because it shows that E-WOM has a dual role in the model. It can influence Purchase Intention directly, while at the same time strengthening Brand Equity as an intermediate mechanism. This suggests that the value of E-WOM for local apparel brands is not limited to generating short-term consumer attention but also extends to the development of long-term consumer-based brand value.

H10: Brand Equity mediates the influence of Social Media Marketing on Purchase Intention

The finding of H10 shows that Brand Equity does not mediate the relationship between Social Media Marketing and Purchase Intention. This finding indicates that the presence of brand-generated content on social media is not sufficient to develop the level of Brand Equity required to influence consumers' purchase intention. Although social media provides local apparel brands with opportunities to communicate with Generation Z, exposure to promotional content does not automatically result in stronger brand associations, perceived quality, or loyalty.

This finding differs from Setiawan et al. (2024) and Dwivedi et al. (2021), who identified Brand Equity as an important mechanism connecting social media marketing with consumer responses. The difference may be related to the characteristics of Generation Z consumers, who are exposed to large amounts of commercial content and

may therefore become more selective in evaluating brand-generated information. Social Media Marketing needs to provide meaningful, relevant, credible, and interactive experiences before it can contribute to stronger Brand Equity.

The finding can also be interpreted through TPB. Social Media Marketing may provide information that creates opportunities for consumers to form attitudes toward a brand, but communication controlled by the brand does not necessarily create sufficient social or psychological reinforcement to produce behavioral intention. In other words, social media exposure represents an initial communication process rather than a guarantee of behavioral response. The absence of mediation therefore suggests that Brand Equity cannot function as a bridge when social media communication has not first generated sufficiently meaningful consumer perceptions.

This finding represents an important empirical qualification of previous research. It demonstrates that Brand Equity does not automatically mediate every digital marketing activity. The effectiveness of the mediation depends on whether the digital activity is capable of generating genuine consumer value. For local apparel brands, this suggests that social media strategies need to move beyond content distribution and focus more strongly on interaction, relevance, credibility, and consumer participation.

H11: Brand Equity mediates the influence of Brand Engagement on Purchase Intention

The finding of H11 demonstrates that Brand Equity mediates the relationship between Brand Engagement and Purchase Intention. This indicates that consumer engagement with a local apparel brand contributes to purchase intention partly because repeated interaction strengthens the value consumers attach to the brand. When consumers actively participate in brand-related activities, communicate with the brand, and develop emotional connections, these experiences can strengthen brand associations, perceived quality, and loyalty. The accumulated perceptions then form Brand Equity, which contributes to purchase intention.

This finding is consistent with Cuandra et al. (2026) and Febriani and Cuandra (2023), who explain that Brand Equity can function as a psychological bridge between consumer engagement and purchase intention. Tarabieh (2022) similarly demonstrates that digital engagement strengthens brand associations and emotional relationships between consumers and brands. The present study extends these findings to Generation Z consumers of Indonesian local apparel brands by demonstrating that engagement is not merely an interaction outcome but an important mechanism in the formation of consumer-based brand value.

The mediation can be explained through the subjective norm component of TPB. Brand Engagement involves interaction with other consumers, brand communities, and the brand itself. Through these interactions, consumers receive social cues and develop a sense of connection with the brand. Repeated engagement can therefore strengthen the

social relevance of the brand and contribute to stronger brand perceptions. Brand Equity subsequently translates these relational experiences into a stronger basis for purchase intention.

This finding represents one of the important contributions of the study because it demonstrates that the influence of Brand Engagement extends beyond direct behavioral intention. Engagement becomes more meaningful when it creates accumulated brand value. Therefore, for local apparel brands, encouraging consumers to participate in conversations, user-generated content, interactive campaigns, and brand communities may be more valuable than simply increasing the frequency of promotional posts.

H12: Brand Equity mediates the influence of Brand Image on Purchase Intention

The finding of H12 demonstrates that Brand Equity mediates the relationship between Brand Image and Purchase Intention. This finding indicates that a favorable perception of a local apparel brand does not necessarily translate immediately into purchase intention. Instead, Brand Image first contributes to broader perceptions of brand value, including perceived quality, brand associations, and loyalty, which subsequently strengthen consumers' willingness to purchase.

This finding is consistent with Sunaryanto and Noviyanti (2025), who explain that Brand Image may influence Purchase Intention through Brand Equity rather than directly. Aquinia et al. (2021) also demonstrate that perceived quality and loyalty are important components in strengthening Brand Equity. The present study therefore reinforces the argument that Brand Image should not be viewed only as an external perception of a brand, but as an important foundation for the development of consumer-based brand value.

The mediation is particularly relevant when interpreted through TPB. Brand Image can shape consumers' initial evaluation of a brand and influence their perception of whether the brand is relevant, credible, and capable of fulfilling their expectations. However, these perceptions need to be consolidated into stronger brand value before they can contribute to behavioral intention. Brand Equity performs this function by integrating consumers' perceptions and experiences into a more comprehensive evaluation of the brand.

The finding also explains why Brand Image does not directly contribute to Purchase Intention in the present study while its mediated relationship through Brand Equity is supported. This indicates that Generation Z consumers may not purchase a local apparel brand merely because they perceive its image positively. Instead, the positive image needs to be supported by perceived quality, meaningful associations, and loyalty before it becomes sufficiently strong to influence purchase intention. Thus, the mediation finding provides a more nuanced explanation of how Brand Image contributes to consumer behavior.

H13: Brand Equity has a positive and significant influence on Purchase Intention

The results show that Brand Equity has a positive and significant contribution to Purchase Intention, supporting H13. This finding indicates that the higher the brand value perceived by Generation Z consumers, the stronger their intention to purchase products from Indonesian local apparel brands. Brand Equity reflects consumers' overall evaluation of a brand, including perceived quality, positive brand associations, brand strength, preference over competing brands, and willingness to remain loyal. When consumers perceive that a local apparel brand provides meaningful value and has a strong position in their minds, they are more likely to consider the brand when making future purchasing decisions.

This finding is consistent with Verma (2021), who explains that brand equity dimensions such as perceived quality, brand associations, and loyalty contribute to consumer purchase-related responses. Similarly, Vo Minh et al. (2022) demonstrate the importance of Brand Equity in the fashion context, particularly because strong brand value can strengthen consumers' perceptions and behavioral responses toward fashion brands. These findings support the argument that purchase intention is not determined solely by consumers' exposure to promotional information, but also by the accumulated value that consumers associate with a brand.

From the perspective of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), Brand Equity can strengthen the psychological conditions underlying behavioral intention. Consumers who perceive a brand as having good quality, strong associations, credibility, and distinctive value may develop greater confidence in choosing that brand. This perception can contribute to a more favorable evaluation of the behavioral choice and reduce uncertainty when consumers compare the brand with alternatives. Therefore, Brand Equity can function as an important psychological foundation that supports the formation of Purchase Intention.

The finding is particularly relevant in the context of Generation Z consumers of Indonesian local apparel brands. Apparel products are not only evaluated based on functional characteristics but can also represent lifestyle, identity, and self-expression. Consequently, consumers may be more willing to consider purchasing a local apparel brand when the brand has developed a strong and meaningful identity in their minds. A strong Brand Equity can make consumers perceive the brand as more valuable and differentiated from competing apparel brands, thereby increasing their willingness to purchase.

Furthermore, the significant relationship between Brand Equity and Purchase Intention provides an important explanation for the mediation findings in this study. Brand Equity mediates the relationships between E-WOM, Brand Engagement, and Brand Image and Purchase Intention. This means that these antecedent variables can contribute to purchase intention partly because they help build consumers' perceptions of

brand value. The significant H13 therefore confirms the role of Brand Equity as the central mechanism connecting consumers' digital experiences and brand perceptions with purchase intention.

This result also helps explain why some variables in the model do not have significant direct effects on Purchase Intention. For example, Brand Image does not significantly influence Purchase Intention directly, but it significantly contributes to Brand Equity. Brand Equity subsequently contributes significantly to Purchase Intention. This pattern suggests that consumers' favorable perceptions of a local apparel brand may need to be transformed into broader perceptions of brand value before they become sufficiently strong to influence purchasing intentions.

Therefore, H13 demonstrates that Brand Equity is an important determinant of Purchase Intention in the local apparel context. The finding suggests that strengthening local apparel brands should not focus exclusively on increasing digital exposure or promotional communication. Instead, digital activities need to generate perceived quality, positive associations, brand preference, and loyalty that accumulate into stronger Brand Equity. Once these elements are established, they can provide a stronger basis for consumers' intention to purchase local apparel products.

CONCLUSION

This study investigates the contribution of Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM), Social Media Marketing (SMM), Brand Engagement, and Brand Image to Purchase Intention, with Brand Equity as a mediating variable, among Generation Z consumers of Indonesian local apparel in Batam City. The research model is grounded in the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), in which E-WOM and SMM are positioned as antecedents shaping consumer attitude toward the brand. Brand Engagement reflects the influence of subjective norms formed through digital community interaction, and Brand Image, together with Brand Equity, represents perceived behavioral control, namely the extent to which consumers believe the brand can fulfill their expectations. PLS-SEM analysis of data from 246 respondents tested 13 hypotheses, yielding the following findings.

E-WOM has been shown to have a positive and significant influence on Purchase Intention (H1 is accepted), confirming that recommendations and reviews on digital platforms are crucial determinants of Gen Z's purchase intention for local apparel products. This finding is consistent with TPB's attitude construct, in which exposure to positive peer-generated information shifts consumer attitude toward the brand in a favorable direction. In contrast, SMM does not show a significant direct influence on Purchase Intention (H2 is rejected), suggesting that brand-controlled marketing content alone is insufficient to shape attitude unless reinforced by other sources, and that its impact on purchase intention is indirect and dependent on intermediary variables. Brand Engagement positively and significantly influences Purchase Intention (H3 is accepted),

indicating that consumers' active participation in digital interactions with brands serves as a subjective norm that strengthens social pressure to purchase. Meanwhile, Brand Image is not shown to have a direct influence on Purchase Intention (H4 is rejected), indicating that perceived behavioral control built through brand image alone is not yet sufficient to drive intention directly, and that its influence is mediated by brand equity.

E-WOM has a positive and significant influence on Brand Equity (H5 accepted), strengthening the argument that digital communication among consumers contributes substantively to the accumulation of brand equity as a form of perceived behavioral control. SMM does not have a significant influence on Brand Equity (H6 rejected), a condition suspected to be driven by digital information saturation and a lack of content consistency among local brands. Brand Engagement recorded the highest path coefficient in the model. It exerted a very significant influence on Brand Equity (H7 accepted), confirming engagement-driven subjective norms as the most determinant consumer structure in the formation of brand equity. Brand Image has been shown to have a positive and significant influence on Brand Equity (H8 accepted), indicating that the perception of a consistently built brand image contributes to the progressive strengthening of equity and, in turn, to consumers' confidence that the brand can meet their expectations.

Mediation testing revealed that Brand Equity partially mediates the influence of E-WOM on Purchase Intention (H9 accepted) but does not mediate the influence of SMM (H10 rejected), consistent with the insignificant direct path of SMM on Brand Equity. Brand Equity mediates the influence of Brand Engagement on Purchase Intention, with the largest indirect effect in the model (H11 accepted), and fully mediates the influence of Brand Image on Purchase Intention (H12 accepted). Brand Equity itself has a positive and highly significant influence on Purchase Intention (H13 accepted), confirming its position as a central predictor of purchase intention in the tested model. Within the TPB framework, these mediation results confirm that Brand Equity functions as the point of convergence where consumer attitude (E-WOM), subjective norm (Brand Engagement), and perceived behavioral control (Brand Image) are accumulated before being translated into actual purchase intention.

Holistically, viewed through the lens of the Theory of Planned Behavior, this study reveals that in the landscape of the Indonesian local apparel industry, as a novel, with the Generation Z segment in Batam City, purchase intention is formed through the accumulation of attitude shaped by E-WOM, subjective norms reflected in Brand Engagement, and perceived behavioral control represented by Brand Image and Brand Equity. Brand Engagement and Brand Equity emerge as the main pillars driving this process, with Brand Equity not merely an output of marketing activities but rather the psychological mechanism through which these TPB constructs translate into concrete purchasing decisions. These findings have strategic implications for industry players, urging a shift from short-term virality to sustainable investment in consumer engagement

and brand equity as an anticipatory response to the threat of the Local Brand Winter phenomenon.

The sample size, focused on Gen Z consumers in Batam City, limits the generalizability of the findings to a broader geographic context. The cross-sectional design employed does not allow for temporal monitoring of changes in consumer behavior. Furthermore, an R-squared value evaluation is necessary to assess the model's predictive capacity more comprehensively. Future research is recommended to expand the regional scope, incorporate moderating variables such as brand loyalty and consumer involvement, and adopt a longitudinal approach to deepen understanding of the dynamics of brand equity and consumer purchase intentions.

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