

The Effect of Digital Marketing Dimensions on Brand Awareness and Purchase Decisions through Brand Awareness in MSMEs

The Effect of Digital Marketing Dimensions on Purchase Decision

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the influence of digital marketing dimensions, such as social media marketing, content marketing, email marketing, and online advertising, on purchase decisions, while also analyzing the mediating role of brand awareness in the context of the MSMEs digital economy. A quantitative approach using PLS-SEM with 5,000 bootstrap resamples was applied to analyze direct and indirect relationships among variables based on data from MSME consumers. The findings reveal that social media marketing has the strongest direct effect on purchase decisions and also significantly enhances brand awareness. Content marketing and online advertising significantly improve brand awareness but do not directly influence purchase decisions. Instead, their effects on purchasing behavior occur indirectly through brand awareness. Email marketing shows no significant impact on either brand awareness or purchase decisions. Furthermore, brand awareness significantly affects purchase decisions and mediates the effects of content marketing, online advertising, and social media marketing, but not email marketing. These results highlight the central role of brand awareness as a cognitive bridge between digital marketing strategies and consumer behavior. For MSMEs, engagement-driven and awareness-building strategies are more effective than direct promotional communication in driving purchasing decisions.

Keywords: Brand Awareness, Content Marketing, Digital Marketing, Email Marketing, Online Advertising, Purchase Decision, Social Media Marketing.

INTRODUCTION

The acceleration of digital transformation has reshaped global economies, competition, and consumer behavior, as the digital economy integrates internet technologies, mobile connectivity, data analytics, and digital platforms (Williams, 2021). Digitalization allows firms, including Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), to interact with consumers in real time, deliver personalized marketing, and transcend geographical limits at relatively low cost. MSMEs, which are vital for employment, economic growth, and innovation, often face constraints such as limited capital, restricted marketing budgets, and weaker brand recognition. By leveraging digital platforms such as social media, online marketplaces, and search engines, MSMEs can expand market reach, promote cost-effectively, and strengthen customer engagement (Loku & Havolli, 2024; Luz, 2025).

Digital marketing has become a key strategic tool in the digital economy, offering interactive, measurable, and targeted communication that goes beyond traditional marketing (Sinha, 2018). Through social media campaigns, content marketing, influencer collaborations, and online advertising, firms can directly shape consumer perceptions and preferences while enabling two-way engagement, which enhances the influence on decision-making (Kumari, 2012). However, exposure alone does not guarantee purchases, as consumer decisions involve cognitive evaluation, emotional response, and

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behavioral intention. The effectiveness of digital marketing thus depends on how consumers process and internalize messages, highlighting the need to understand the psychological mechanisms linking marketing activities to purchase behavior (Sudirjo et al., 2024).

Brand awareness is a critical construct in this mechanism. Arora and Kumar (2018) define it as the ability of consumers to recognize and recall a brand within a specific product category, while Liu et al. (2023) position it as the foundational dimension of customer-based brand equity, arguing that without awareness, consumers cannot form brand associations, evaluate brand quality, or develop brand loyalty. In competitive digital environments, brand awareness reduces information-processing complexity and perceived risk, thereby facilitating purchase decisions. This is consistent with the Hierarchy of Effects Model, which posits that consumers progress through cognitive (awareness), affective (preference), and conative (purchase) stages, wherein repeated digital interactions strengthen brand recall and familiarity over time. Accordingly, brand awareness may function as a mediating variable linking digital marketing efforts to consumer purchasing behavior (Hussin & Wahid, 2023; Zeng et al., 2023).

Empirical studies show that digital marketing boosts purchase intention and customer engagement, as demonstrated by Habib et al. (2022) and Duffett and Maraule (2024), while brand awareness strongly influences purchase decisions and brand preference, as shown by Navanti et al. (2024). However, few studies examine these relationships together through a mediation framework, especially in the MSMEs context, where most research focuses on large firms or general e-commerce. In emerging digital economies, MSMEs often lack strong brand equity, making digital marketing a crucial tool not only for promotion but also for building brand recognition. Investigating whether brand awareness mediates the effect of digital marketing on purchase decisions is therefore essential for guiding MSMEs in strategically allocating their digital marketing efforts.

Furthermore, from a theoretical standpoint, integrating digital marketing theory by Busca and Bertrandias (2020) with the brand equity theory by Kalampokis et al. (2016) provides a more comprehensive explanation of consumer behavior in digital contexts. While digital marketing emphasizes communication channels and engagement strategies, brand equity theory highlights cognitive brand structures that influence consumer decisions. A fuller comprehension of the cognitive processes via which digital marketing affects consumer behavior is made possible by combining different viewpoints.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the direct effect of digital marketing on consumer purchase decisions, the effect of digital marketing on brand awareness, the effect of brand awareness on consumer purchase decisions, and the mediating role of brand awareness in the relationship between digital marketing and purchase decisions among MSME consumers. This study contributes to the literature by empirically testing the mediating role of brand awareness in digital marketing, extending brand equity theory by positioning digital marketing as an antecedent of brand awareness in MSMEs, and offering practical guidance for optimizing digital strategies to drive consumer purchase behavior. In an era of intensified digital competition and fragmented consumer attention, MSMEs that effectively use digital marketing to strengthen brand awareness are better positioned to influence purchasing decisions and maintain long-term competitiveness.

LITERATURE REVIEW & HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

The Effect of Brand Awareness on Purchase Decisions

With digital marketing offering real-time contact, personalized communication, and long-term relationship building through digital platforms, the quick development of the digital economy has completely changed how businesses deal with their customers (Marcin et al., 2024). Digital marketing is more data-driven, quantifiable, and interactive than traditional methods, which enables businesses to maximize engagement tactics. Due to the limited financial and promotional resources available to MSMEs, digital marketing plays a critical strategic role because digital platforms offer affordable solutions to improve exposure and fortify client connections. Four major aspects of social media marketing,

content marketing, email marketing, and online advertising are used in this study to define digital marketing. Each of these dimensions represents a unique technique in influencing customer behavior and thought processes.

According to this paradigm, brand awareness, which corresponds to the first cognitive stage in the hierarchy of effects model, is the consumer's capacity to identify and remember a brand within a certain product category. Customers typically favor and choose well-known businesses because familiarity lowers perceived risk and makes decision-making easier, particularly in digital contexts where there is an abundance of information. Therefore, stronger brand awareness increases the likelihood of consumer purchase decisions. This argument is supported by recent studies showing that brand awareness significantly influences consumer purchase behavior and decision-making processes (Chi et al., 2009; Bilgin, 2018).

H1: Brand awareness has a positive effect on purchase decisions.

The Effect on Brand Awareness

The effectiveness of content marketing in raising brand awareness has long been acknowledged. By delivering valuable and relevant information to target audiences, content marketing increases brand visibility and strengthens consumer familiarity over time, positioning brands as thought leaders and amplifying their presence across digital platforms (Warghane & Savariapitchai, 2025). Similarly, email marketing contributes significantly to brand awareness by maintaining direct and personalized communication with consumers. Well-crafted email campaigns keep brands consistently present in consumers' minds, reinforcing both recognition and recall, particularly when messages are tailored to individual preferences and delivered at optimal frequency (Thomas et al., 2022).

Beyond these channels, online advertising encompassing display ads, search engine advertising, and video content has demonstrated a strong positive effect on brand awareness by enabling brands to reach broader audiences with high frequency, which accelerates the cognitive processing of brand information and strengthens consumer recognition (Lee & Cho, 2020). In the digital age, social media marketing has become one of the most effective ways to raise brand exposure. Through engagement mechanisms such as interaction, trendiness, and informativeness, social media platforms organically amplify brand reach and deepen consumer familiarity, as evidenced by empirical findings confirming that social media marketing significantly and positively influences brand awareness (Zeqiri et al., 2025).

H2: Content marketing has a positive effect on brand awareness.

H3: Email marketing has a positive effect on brand awareness.

H4: Online advertising has a positive effect on brand awareness.

H5: Social media marketing has a positive effect on brand awareness.

The Effect on Purchase Decisions

Content marketing plays a significant role in influencing consumer purchase decisions. By delivering entertaining, functional, and interactive content, brands can stimulate consumer interest, build trust, and reduce uncertainty, all of which contribute to higher perceived value and, ultimately, a greater likelihood of purchase (Li et al., 2022). Email marketing similarly exerts a positive effect on purchase decisions by serving as a direct and persuasive communication channel. Through personalized messaging, exclusive offers, and timely outreach, email marketing effectively drives consumer engagement and prompts quicker purchasing responses, as demonstrated by Ambuli et al. (2024), who find that email-based promotions can influence consumer purchase decisions, and supported by Thakkar (2024), who highlights that personalized and targeted digital communications enhance consumer responses and buying behavior.

In parallel, online advertising has been widely demonstrated to influence consumer buying behavior by exposing audiences to targeted and credible brand messages across digital platforms. The interactivity, quality, and platform-specific attributes of online advertisements shape consumer attitudes and accelerate their movement toward a purchase decision (Hanaysha, 2022). Social media marketing has emerged as a particularly powerful driver of purchase decisions, as its dimensions, including content influence, brand engagement, and influencer endorsements, directly shape how consumers evaluate and ultimately decide to purchase products (Ismael et al., 2025).

H6: Content marketing has a positive effect on purchase decisions.

H7: Email marketing has a positive effect on purchase decisions.

H8: Online advertising has a positive effect on purchase decisions.

H9: Social media marketing has a positive effect on purchase decisions.

Brand Awareness as a Mediating Variable

The mediating role of brand awareness in the relationship between digital marketing and purchase decisions is well-supported in the literature. A recent study by Erislan (2025) showed that both content attributes, content frequency, and content quality influence purchase decisions through increased brand awareness, and that the indirect effect through brand awareness is stronger than the direct effect of content on purchase decisions, confirming the important mediating role of brand awareness in this relationship. A similar mediation mechanism is evident in email marketing, where the effectiveness of email-based communication in prompting purchase decisions is amplified when consumers have first developed sufficient brand recognition and recall, confirming that awareness functions as a necessary cognitive bridge between exposure and behavioral response (Edwin, 2023).

Regarding online advertising, empirical evidence indicates that while digital advertising may not always directly drive purchasing behavior, its effect becomes significant when routed through brand awareness, as repeated ad exposure builds the cognitive familiarity needed to support purchase decisions (Ismael et al., 2025). The mediation of brand awareness is similarly observed in social media marketing, where studies consistently find that social media activities first strengthen brand awareness, which in turn significantly influences consumers' purchase decisions, confirming brand awareness as a key intervening mechanism in this relationship (Rachman et al., 2024).

H10: Brand awareness mediates the relationship between content marketing and purchase decision.

H11: Brand awareness mediates the relationship between email marketing and purchase decision.

H12: Brand awareness mediates the relationship between online advertising and purchase decision.

H13: Brand awareness mediates the relationship between social media marketing and purchase decision.

The conceptual model that shows the connections between brand awareness, buying decisions, and digital marketing dimensions in the context of MSMEs is shown in Figure 1. Digital marketing elements serve as exogenous variables that have a direct and indirect impact on brand awareness and buying decisions. Brand awareness is positioned as a mediating variable that links digital marketing activities to consumer purchase decisions, indicating that certain digital strategies primarily shape purchasing behavior through cognitive processes such as recognition and recall, while others may also exert a more immediate, direct effect on purchase decisions.

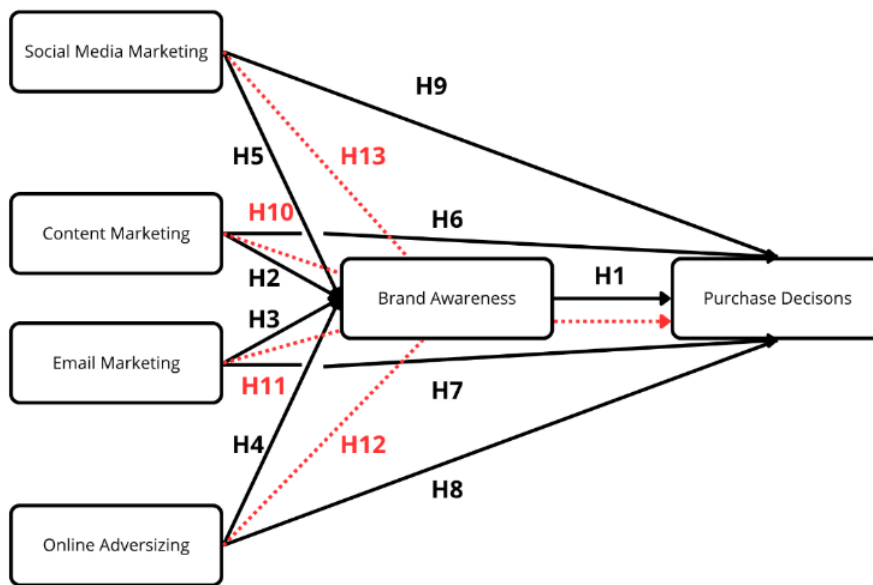


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

RESEARCH METHODS

The links between digital marketing, brand awareness, and consumer purchase decisions among MSME consumers are examined in this study using a quantitative cross-sectional survey design. Because it facilitates the analysis of causal links between latent constructs and aids the confirmation of theoretical models, a quantitative approach is deemed appropriate. Structural Equation Modeling based on Partial Least Squares (PLS-SEM), which is especially suitable for mediation testing, prediction-oriented research, and the study of complicated behavioral models without requiring rigorous assumptions of multivariate normality, is used for the analysis.

Customers who have bought MSME goods online or through social media platforms are included in the study's population. Respondents must have made a purchase within the previous six months and have been exposed to MSMEs' digital marketing initiatives, according to a purposive sample technique. To ensure adequate statistical power in PLS-SEM analysis, the study targets a sample size of 200–300 respondents, exceeding the minimum threshold suggested by Hair and Alamer (2022). Additionally, a five-point Likert scale, spanning from strongly disagree to strongly agree, is used to measure all research constructs. To ensure content validity, measuring items are modified from earlier research in digital marketing, brand equity, and consumer behavior.

The measurement of variables in this study is adapted from established literature. Content marketing is assessed through indicators reflecting the extent to which MSMEs provide informative, relevant, engaging, and interesting digital content that enhances consumer understanding of products and encourages further exploration of the brand (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). Email marketing is measured based on the regularity of promotional emails, as well as the informativeness, attractiveness, relevance, and influence of email messages on consumers' brand perceptions (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Online advertising is evaluated through the visual appeal, frequency of appearance across digital platforms, ability to provide useful product information, and capacity to attract consumer attention (Tiago & Verissimo, 2014). Social media marketing focuses on the level of MSMEs' engagement with customers, interaction with followers, the ability of social media content to increase interest, foster emotional connection, and influence purchasing decisions (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). Brand awareness is measured by consumers' ability to recognize, recall, and quickly identify the brand, as well as their familiarity with it and ability to distinguish it from competitors (Aaker, 1991; Keller,

2013). Purchase decisions are reflected in consumers' confidence in purchasing, intention to repurchase, and willingness to recommend the MSMEs to others.

A two-step Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) method is used for data analysis. Indicator loadings (≥ 0.70), composite reliability (≥ 0.70), average variance extracted ($AVE \geq 0.50$), and discriminant validity using HTMT (< 0.90) are used to evaluate the measurement model. Collinearity ($VIF < 5$), path coefficients using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples ($p < 0.05$), coefficient of determination (R^2), effect size (f^2), and predictive relevance (Q^2) are used to evaluate the structural model. Variance Accounted For (VAF) evaluation and bootstrapping of indirect effects are used in a mediation study.

RESULTS

All indicators in this investigation show outer loading levels above the suggested threshold of 0.70, according to the measurement model evaluation shown in Figure 2. This suggests that each indication has sufficient reliability when it comes to expressing the corresponding latent concept.

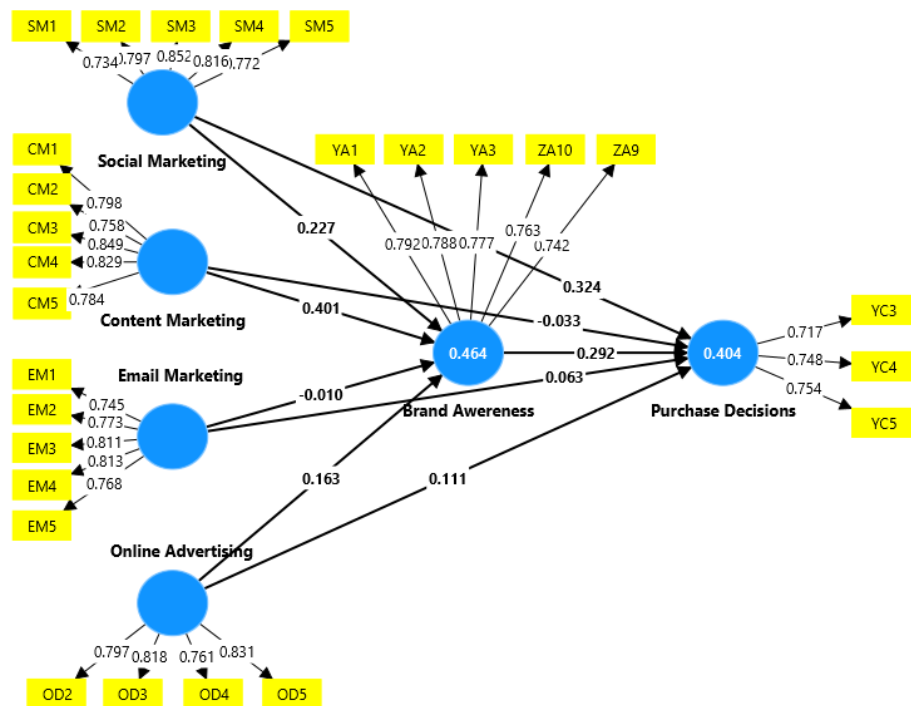


Figure 2. Measurement Model Evaluation

Figure 2 illustrates that all indicators have outer loading values more than 0.70, meaning that each indicator accounts for over 49% of the variation in its corresponding latent construct ($0.70^2 = 0.49$). Strong indicator dependability throughout the model is demonstrated by the fact that none of the indicators fall under the marginal range of 0.40–0.70, which would require reevaluation or removal.

Table 1. Construct Reliability and Convergent Validity

| Construct | Cronbach's Alpha | Composite Reliability (ρ_c) | AVE | Conclusion |
|------------------------|------------------|------------------------------------|-------|------------|
| Brand Awareness | 0.831 | 0.881 | 0.597 | Valid |
| Content Marketing | 0.863 | 0.901 | 0.647 | |
| Email Marketing | 0.844 | 0.887 | 0.612 | |
| Online Advertising | 0.816 | 0.878 | 0.644 | |
| Purchase Decisions | 0.587 | 0.784 | 0.548 | |
| Social Media Marketing | 0.854 | 0.896 | 0.633 | |

As seen in Table 1, every construct exhibits adequate internal consistency. The suggested criterion of 0.70 is exceeded by composite reliability (ρ_c) values, which vary from 0.784 to 0.901. Content marketing exhibits the highest reliability (0.901), followed by social media marketing (0.896) and email marketing (0.887), indicating strong consistency among their indicators. brand awareness (0.881) and online advertising (0.878) also show robust reliability levels. Although the Cronbach's alpha value for purchase decisions (0.587) is relatively lower than that of other constructs, its composite reliability (0.784) remains above the acceptable threshold. Since composite reliability does not presuppose equal indicator loadings, all constructs can be treated as reliable, making it a more suitable measure of internal consistency in the context of PLS-SEM than Cronbach's alpha.

Additionally, as shown in Table 1, convergent validity was assessed using the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). Every build reports AVE values between 0.548 and 0.647, which are higher than the required minimum of 0.50. Content marketing shows the highest AVE (0.647), followed by online advertising (0.644) and social media marketing (0.633), indicating strong explanatory power of their respective indicators. brand awareness (0.597), email marketing (0.612), and purchase decisions (0.548) also meet the recommended threshold. These results confirm that each construct is able to explain more than 50% of the variance in its indicators, thereby establishing adequate convergent validity.

Table 2. Discriminant Validity (HTMT Matrix)

| Construct Pair | HTMT | Conclusion |
|---|-------------|-------------------|
| Brand Awareness – Content Marketing | 0.749 | Valid |
| Brand Awareness – Email Marketing | 0.539 | |
| Brand Awareness – Online Advertising | 0.592 | |
| Brand Awareness – Purchase Decisions | 0.776 | |
| Brand Awareness – Social Media Marketing | 0.683 | |
| Content Marketing – Email Marketing | 0.728 | |
| Content Marketing – Online Advertising | 0.638 | |
| Content Marketing – Purchase Decisions | 0.670 | |
| Content Marketing – Social Media Marketing | 0.797 | |
| Email Marketing – Online Advertising | 0.642 | |
| Email Marketing – Purchase Decisions | 0.604 | |
| Email Marketing – Social Media Marketing | 0.707 | |
| Online Advertising – Purchase Decisions | 0.627 | |
| Online Advertising – Social Media Marketing | 0.616 | |
| Purchase Decisions – Social Media Marketing | 0.798 | |

As indicated in Table 2, the Heterotrait–Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) was used to evaluate discriminant validity. Each construct is empirically different from the others because all HTMT values are below the conservative cutoff of 0.90. The highest HTMT value is observed between purchase decisions and social media marketing (0.798), followed by content marketing and social media marketing (0.797), as well as brand awareness and purchase decisions (0.776). Despite these relatively higher correlations, the values remain well within the acceptable limit, suggesting no issues with discriminant validity. In contrast, lower HTMT values, such as brand awareness and email marketing (0.539) and email marketing and purchase decisions (0.604), further confirm a clear conceptual distinction among the constructs. These findings provide strong evidence that each variable captures a unique aspect of the model, thereby satisfying the criteria for discriminant validity.

Every suggested PLS-SEM criterion is met by the measurement model. All HTMT ratios are less than 0.90, AVE values exceed 0.50, and Composite Reliability values exceed 0.70. These results corroborate the constructs' strong internal consistency, appropriate convergent validity, and sufficient discriminant validity. Path coefficients, indirect effects, explanatory power (R^2), and predictive relevance (Q^2) were all examined

in order to assess the structural model. All direct and indirect correlations were evaluated for statistical significance using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples.

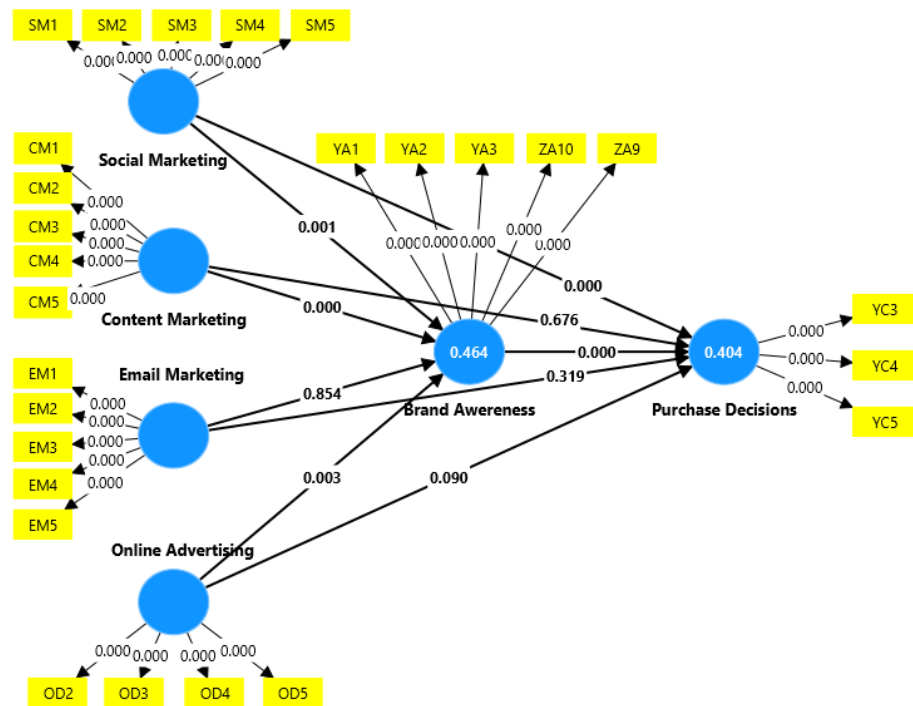


Figure 3. Structural Model Evaluation

Table 3. Path Coefficients

| Construct | Original Sample | Mean | Standard Deviation | t-statistics | p-values |
|---|-----------------|--------|--------------------|--------------|----------|
| Brand Awareness -> Purchase Decisions | 0.292 | 0.292 | 0.062 | 4.706 | 0.000 |
| Content Marketing -> Brand Awareness | 0.401 | 0.402 | 0.072 | 5.580 | 0.000 |
| Email Marketing -> Brand Awareness | -0.010 | -0.007 | 0.053 | 0.184 | 0.854 |
| Online Advertising -> Brand Awareness | 0.163 | 0.162 | 0.055 | 2.935 | 0.003 |
| Social Media Marketing -> Brand Awareness | 0.227 | 0.226 | 0.071 | 3.180 | 0.001 |
| Content Marketing -> Purchase Decisions | -0.033 | -0.038 | 0.078 | 0.419 | 0.676 |
| Email Marketing -> Purchase Decisions | 0.063 | 0.064 | 0.063 | 0.996 | 0.319 |
| Online Advertising -> Purchase Decisions | 0.111 | 0.113 | 0.066 | 1.694 | 0.090 |
| Social Media Marketing-> Purchase Decisions | 0.324 | 0.329 | 0.066 | 4.885 | 0.000 |

Purchase decisions are positively and statistically significantly impacted by brand awareness ($\beta = 0.292$, $t = 4.706$, $p = 0.000$), as seen in Figure 3 and Table 3. This result demonstrates that consumers are more likely to make purchases when they have higher levels of brand familiarity and recall. Brand awareness is strongly impacted by content marketing ($\beta = 0.401$, $t = 5.580$, $p = 0.000$), suggesting that interesting and educational content enhances cognitive brand structures. However, content marketing does not directly influence purchase decisions ($\beta = -0.033$, $t = 0.419$, $p = 0.676$). The negative and non-significant coefficient suggests that content marketing alone does not immediately translate into purchasing behavior.

Email marketing does not significantly influence brand awareness ($\beta = -0.010$, $t = 0.184$, $p = 0.854$) nor purchase decisions ($\beta = 0.063$, $t = 0.996$, $p = 0.319$). These results indicate that email-based communication does not meaningfully shape either consumer cognition or behavioral intention within this sample. Online advertising has a significant positive effect on brand awareness ($\beta = 0.163$, $t = 2.935$, $p = 0.003$). However, its direct effect on purchase decisions is not statistically significant at the 5% level ($\beta = 0.111$, $t = 1.694$, $p = 0.090$). This suggests that online advertising primarily contributes to awareness

formation rather than directly stimulating purchase decisions. Social media marketing significantly influences both brand awareness ($\beta = 0.227, t = 3.180, p = 0.001$) and purchase decisions ($\beta = 0.324, t = 4.885, p = 0.000$). Social media marketing has the biggest direct impact on purchase decisions of all the predictors, underscoring the significance of interactive and engagement-based digital strategies.

Table 4. Total Indirect Effects

| Contract | Original Sample | Mean | Standard Deviation | t-statistics | p-values |
|--|-----------------|--------|--------------------|--------------|----------|
| Content Marketing -> Brand Awareness -> Purchase Decisions | 0.117 | 0.118 | 0.036 | 3.266 | 0.001 |
| Email Marketing -> Brand Awareness -> Purchase Decisions | -0.003 | -0.002 | 0.016 | 0.178 | 0.858 |
| Online Advertising -> Brand Awareness -> Purchase Decisions | 0.048 | 0.048 | 0.020 | 2.394 | 0.017 |
| Social Media Marketing-> Brand Awareness -> Purchase Decisions | 0.066 | 0.065 | 0.024 | 2.808 | 0.005 |

As presented in Table 4, content marketing has a significant indirect effect on purchase decisions ($\beta = 0.117, t = 3.266, p = 0.001$), indicating full mediation through brand awareness. Email marketing shows no significant indirect effect ($\beta = -0.003, t = 0.178, p = 0.858$), confirming the absence of both direct and mediated influence. Online advertising demonstrates a significant indirect effect ($\beta = 0.048, t = 2.394, p = 0.017$), suggesting that brand awareness mediates its relationship with purchase decisions. Social media marketing also has a significant indirect effect ($\beta = 0.066, t = 2.808, p = 0.005$), indicating partial mediation since its direct effect on purchase decisions remains significant.

Table 5. Coefficient of Determination (R^2) & Predictive Relevance (Q^2 – Blindfolding)

| Endogenous Construct | R^2 | Q^2 |
|----------------------|-------|-------|
| Brand Awareness | 0.472 | 0.314 |
| Purchase Decisions | 0.563 | 0.377 |

As shown in Table 5, the model explains 47.2% of the variance in brand awareness ($R^2 = 0.472$) and 56.3% of the variance in purchase decisions ($R^2 = 0.563$), indicating moderate explanatory power for brand awareness and moderate-to-substantial explanatory power for purchase decisions. The predictive relevance of the model is supported by Q^2 values of 0.314 for brand awareness and 0.377 for purchase decisions, both exceeding zero, which confirms that the model has adequate predictive accuracy for both endogenous constructs in the MSME digital marketing context.

The results imply that brand awareness is a key mediating factor in the conversion of digital marketing initiatives into consumer purchasing decisions. Purchase decisions are mostly indirectly influenced by content marketing and online advertising through brand awareness. However, social media marketing is the most powerful factor influencing consumer behavior since it has both direct and indirect effects. Email marketing has no discernible effect through direct or mediated channels. Therefore, the structural model supports the idea that, in the context of MSMEs, cognitive brand-building mechanisms are crucial for converting digital marketing tactics into real customer decisions.

DISCUSSION

The study's conclusions show a distinct pattern in the ways that various digital marketing platforms affect MSMEs' brand awareness and purchasing decisions. Consumers are more likely to purchase from brands they are familiar with and can recall, as seen by the continual emergence of brand awareness as a primary driver of purchasing decisions. This result aligns with brand equity theory and the hierarchy-of-effects framework, which emphasize that cognitive awareness precedes behavioral responses

(Pranata, 2022). In highly competitive digital markets, awareness functions as a cognitive shortcut, reducing perceived risk and simplifying decision-making, making recognized brands more likely to be chosen over unfamiliar alternatives. These findings are consistent with prior research by Aaker (1991) and Keller (2013) showing that cognitive recognition is a key determinant of consumer choice.

Content marketing shows a strong positive effect on brand awareness but does not directly influence purchase decisions, indicating that its primary role lies in shaping consumer cognition rather than immediately driving transactional behavior. This finding is consistent with earlier studies. Sukmayadi and Effendi (2020), Rosardi et al. (2021), Takhim et al. (2023), and Jannah and Yaqin (2025) suggest that informative, relevant, and engaging content strengthens brand recall and mental associations without directly translating into immediate purchases. Mediation analysis further confirms that brand awareness fully mediates the effect of content marketing on purchase decisions, reinforcing the idea that cognitive engagement is a prerequisite for consumer action. This pattern is consistent with findings from Muhamat et al. (2021) and Pranata and Sinaga (2023), who emphasize that content builds familiarity first, which later guides behavior.

In contrast, email marketing does not significantly affect either brand awareness or purchase decisions, and no mediation effect is observed. These results suggest that email communication fails to generate sufficient cognitive or behavioral impact in this SME context. This outcome aligns with prior studies by Pranata and Sinaga (2023), Pranata et al. (2024), and Cuevas et al. (2025), indicating that promotional emails often suffer from low engagement, message overload, or digital fatigue, limiting their effectiveness as awareness-building and conversion tools.

Online advertising significantly enhances brand awareness but does not directly drive purchase decisions. Mediation analysis shows that brand awareness fully mediates its effect on purchasing behavior, suggesting that online advertising primarily functions to increase visibility and cognitive salience rather than to immediately trigger purchases. These results support earlier research by Kroeze (2012), Jones (2019), and Sharabati et al. (2024), highlighting that repetitive, targeted digital advertisements increase brand recall and recognition, which subsequently influence consumer choices. In other words, online advertising builds recognition first, and recognition then guides action.

Social media marketing emerges as the most influential channel, significantly affecting both brand awareness and purchase decisions. Its influence operates through dual pathways: it directly drives behavior while also indirectly strengthening decisions through enhanced awareness, reflecting partial mediation. This finding aligns with research by Nyurenberger et al. (2021), Dean (2022), Rahman et al. (2023), and Bhandari et al. (2025), highlighting the importance of interactive and engagement-driven digital strategies, which reduce uncertainty, foster consumer confidence, and actively shape behavioral outcomes. Compared to other channels, social media marketing demonstrates the strongest direct effect on purchase behavior, consistent with Feizollah et al. (2021), who emphasize its role as a conversion-oriented tool rather than merely a cognitive enhancer.

The study confirms a hierarchy in digital marketing effectiveness for MSMEs. Content marketing and online advertising primarily operate through cognitive pathways, building brand awareness that subsequently drives purchase decisions, while social media marketing combines awareness-building with direct behavioral influence. Email marketing, in contrast, shows minimal impact in both cognitive and behavioral domains. These results are largely consistent with the extant literature and provide practical implications for SMEs. Investing in informative content and interactive social strategies is critical for strengthening brand cognition and stimulating consumer purchases, whereas reliance on email alone may yield limited returns.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that not all digital marketing dimensions directly influence purchase decisions. Social media marketing has the strongest and most significant direct effect, making it the primary behavioral driver. Content marketing and online advertising do not

directly stimulate purchase decisions, while email marketing has no significant direct effect. Brand awareness plays a crucial role, significantly affecting purchase decisions and acting as a mediating mechanism. It fully mediates the effects of content marketing and online advertising, partially mediates the effect of social media marketing, and shows no mediation effect for email marketing. These findings suggest that cognitive awareness plays an important role in enhancing digital marketing effectiveness in MSMEs. MSMEs should prioritize social media engagement to directly influence purchase decisions, while using content marketing and online advertising to strengthen brand awareness, which indirectly drives purchase behavior. Email marketing should focus on personalization and value-added content to enhance its indirect impact.

This study has limitations, including a cross-sectional design and focus on selected digital marketing channels, which may limit generalizability. Self-reported measures and a specific MSMEs context may also reduce applicability to other industries or regions. Future research could adopt longitudinal or experimental designs to examine causal effects over time, explore additional digital channels such as influencer marketing or mobile apps, and investigate contextual factors like consumer demographics, product type, or market maturity to better understand how digital marketing strategies affect purchase decisions in MSMEs.

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