




INCREASING SALES THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING: THE ROLE OF CUSTOMER BRAND ATTACHMENT, BRAND TRUST, AND BRAND EQUITY

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Abstract: *This study examined the impact of social media marketing on online purchase intention, with brand attachment, brand trust, and brand equity acting as mediating factors. The problem addressed in this research is the lack of understanding regarding the reasons for low adoption of online shopping in Iran despite the increasing popularity of the internet, and the originality lies in exploring the factors and proposing and testing a conceptual model that influence Iranian customers' decision to buy online. To conduct an empirical case study, we selected Digikala, the largest online two-sided marketplace platform in Iran. To gather data from a representative sample of Digikala customers, a simple random sampling method was utilized. An online survey questionnaire was administered to 363 participants, ensuring a diverse range of respondents were included in the study. A partial least squares method was used to analyze the data using the structural equation modelling (SEM) method by SmartPLS software. The results of the research study demonstrated that social media marketing creates positive changes in brand equity, customer attachment to the brand, brand trust, and online purchase intent over time. Online purchase intention, brand trust, and customer brand attachment were positively influenced by brand equity. The level of customer brand attachment affected brand trust and online purchase intent in a positive way. An increase in brand trust led to a significant increase in online purchase intentions. An online purchase intention, customer brand attachment, and brand trust of a brand were influenced positively by brand equity during social media marketing. Social media marketing impacted online purchase intentions positively and significantly through customer brand attachment. Social media marketing improved online purchase intentions when brand trust is positive and significant. Several factors contributed to the effect of social media marketing on online purchase intentions, including brand trust. This leads us to conclude that social media marketing enhances online purchase intent through the creation of brand attachments, brand trust, and brand equity among customers.*

Keywords: social media marketing, customer brand attachment, brand trust, brand equity, online purchase intention.

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Introduction. In the competitive era, purchase intention as well as direct and indirect outcomes of decision makings for companies have been highlighted, because the number of companies is increasing; to attract as many customers as possible to buy their services, it is necessary to identify effective factors. Therefore, it is vital to address effective variables on the purchase intention of customers (Ha & Stoel, 2009). One of the new ways of shopping that have wide benefits is electronic shopping. Currently, a large amount of purchase is done in this way around the world; according to the findings, more than half of the revenues of the leading companies are through electronic sales of their products (Liu et al., 2022). The rapid development of the Internet has been followed by the promotion of online shopping in modern life. In Iran, despite impressive global growth, internet sales statistics are insignificant and Iranian internet markets have not reached sufficient maturity (Silva et al., 2019). It has been shown in numerous academic studies that the cognitive, attitudinal, and value aspects of online purchase intention are effective factors that impact online purchase intention. As a result of these findings, it has been demonstrated that the cognitions, attitudes, and positive values of consumers towards online shopping can sustain and enable online vendors to remain profitable on the market despite the widespread competition (Hsiao et al., 2010). Despite the increase in this series of studies, the questions that focus on the reasons for increasing the decision of customers to buy online have not been fully answered. Iranians have not embraced online shopping and e-commerce despite the growing popularity of the Internet in recent years, and institutions and organizations that provide these services are not yet well known in the country (Qalati et al., 2021). The aim of research is therefore to examine the impact of social media marketing on online purchase intention with the mediating role of customer brand attachment, brand trust, and brand equity.

Recently, technological advancements and increased use of social networking websites have changed the interactions of companies with their customers globally (Mahmoud et al., 2020). Since internet users are increasing rapidly, businesses use social media as their primary channel for communicating with customers (D'Arienzo et al., 2019). Blogs, social blogs, podcasts, video images, photos, ratings, cookies, and websites are among the forms of media. A growing number of individuals, commercial companies, and state-owned organizations are using social media as a means of communication both within not only on a personal level but also on a business level (Prasad & Saigal, 2019). A successful branding strategy can be developed through social media as long as it is possible to collect information, disseminate it through different channels and distribute it to a wider audience in order for it to be successful (Kim & Ko, 2012; Rapp et al., 2013; Hsu & Lawrence, 2016; Miles, 2014). Evidence suggests that companies can directly communicate with customers, increase their views, identify new business opportunities, form connections, distribute information, support their brand by receiving customer feedback by using social media, including social networking websites (Mahmoud et al., 2020). The conducted studies also imply that social media marketing is effective on customer purchase intention (Wijayaa et al., 2021; Moslehpour et al., 2020; Laksamana, 2018; Alalwan, 2018; Godey et al., 2016).

Customer trust refers to the customer's tendency to trust the abilities and capabilities of the brand to perform the assigned tasks (Yoon et al., 2016). Jaramillo and Valenzuela (2016) define trust as perceived confidence in one's exchange, reliability and rightfulness; in fact, relational commitment is based on trust. According to them, trust is achieved when one ensures that the other is right. Trust is the foundation of relationship marketing, according to Parasuraman et al. (1991). Creating and improving the quality of a relationship can also be directly related to the ability to trust one another. This can be achieved through the process of making promises and fulfilling promises and obligations related to the relationship (Hewett and Bearden, 2001). It is particularly important to consider the trust structure when trying to develop a relationship marketing strategy. Several scholars have expressed trust as the primary factor that creates and develops successful customer relationships and customer attachment (Issock et al., 2020). As a customer, you should feel confident that your relationship with the service provider is secure, and that you can trust the service provider with your information, so that you can be sure that your relationship with the service provider is reliable and secure (Sallam, 2016). The conducted studies have also shown that trust is effective on customer purchase intention (Ha & Nguyen, 2019; Lu et al., 2016).

One of the variables influenced by social media and influencing customer purchase intention is customer brand attachment. Recent findings show that people who are attached to others tend to be more loyal to their friends and partners and make sacrifices to guarantee and support this relationship. In marketing literature, attachment and belonging strongly affect customer behaviours (Gilal et al., 2021). Many experts agree that brand attachment refers to customer-brand emotional connections. Hwang et al. (2021) compared brand attachment to a chain that connects the brand with people. They emphasize that this connection connects the brand attachment with customer imagination. When brands please and satisfy their customers, brand

attachment and belonging also increase (Seo & Park, 2018; Nazari-Shirkouhi et al., 2020). In addition, customer brand attachment affects the behavioral consequences of customers, including customer purchase intention (Lin and Ku, 2018; Hudson et al., 2015; Dolbec & Chebat, 2013).

A crucial concept in marketing, brand equity, was introduced in the 1980s (Keller, 2016; Cheung et al., 2020). According to Aker (1996), brand equity is an asset (or liability) associated with a brand and linked to its trademark. As a result of this increase or decrease in the value of goods and services, a brand management process involves brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and a variety of other assets associated with a brand. Brand equity results from customer tendency to spend more for the same quality of attractiveness of the brand and strong attachment to the brand. It is one of the benefits of a strong brand equity, which is a high level of recognition from the target consumers, which leads to a positive attitude towards the brand, leading to increased spending on the product, repeated purchases, and word-of-mouth advertising for the product among target consumers (Mishra, 2016; Machado et al., 2019). As a consequence, brand equity affects customer perception and subsequently customer purchasing behavior in a positive way. To boost this positive contribution and manage brand equity, therefore, strategies are required to increase brand equity (Keller, 2016; Slaton et al., 2020). The conducted studies also show how brand equity affects the purchase intention of customers (Majeed et al., 2021; Azzari & Pelissari, 2021; Poturak & Softic, 2019).

Conceptual Model. An illustration of the study's conceptual model can be found in Figure 1, which has been developed after a review of the literature has been conducted. As shown in Figure 1, social media marketing is an independent variable, customer brand attachment, brand trust, and brand equity are mediating variables and online purchase intention is a dependent variable. Therefore, the hypotheses are developed as follows:

- H1: Social media marketing is effective on customer brand attachment.
- H2: Social media marketing is effective on brand equity.
- H3: Social media marketing is effective on brand trust.
- H4: Social media marketing is effective on online purchase intention.
- H5: Brand equity is effective on customer brand attachment.
- H6: Brand equity is effective on brand trust.
- H7: Customer brand attachment is effective on online purchase intention.
- H8: Brand equity is effective on online purchase intention.
- H9: Brand trust is effective on online purchase intention.
- H10: The effects of social media marketing on online purchase intention are mediated by customer brand attachment, equity, and trust.
- H11: A brand equity effect on online purchase intentions is mediated by brand attachment and brand trust.

Methodology and research methods. As part of this study, the relationships between variables were examined through structural equation modeling (SEM) with partial least squares (PLS).

Population and Sample: The statistical population of this study consisted of customers of the DigiKala online store living in Tehran. A simple random sampling method was used to select participants based on their availability and willingness to participate. To achieve a representative sample, 400 questionnaires were distributed among DigiKala customers, of which 381 questionnaires were returned. After removing 18 incomplete responses, a final sample size of 363 participants was analysed. The determination of sample size was based on previous studies (Asgari et al., 2022) and Cochran's formula that a sample size of 400 would be sufficient to represent DigiKala customers living in Tehran. Each item was measured on a five-point Likert scale with the lowest being completely disagree (1) and the highest being completely agree (5).

Social media marketing: We measured social media marketing using a questionnaire developed by Seo & Park (2018). It included 11 items (2 items for entertainment, 3 items for interaction, 2 items for trendiness, 2 items for customization, and 2 items for perceived risk). Social media marketing activities will be determined by the average score obtained from the items.

Brand equity: We measured brand equity using a questionnaire developed by Seo & Park (2018). It included 6 items (3 items for brand awareness and 3 items for brand image). Based on the items' average scores, brand equity was determined.

Customer brand attachment: To measure customer brand attachment, we used the Hollebeek et al. (2014) questionnaire. This questionnaire measures customer brand attachment in 3 items.

Brand trust: A questionnaire developed by Azize et al. (2012) was used to measure trust.

Online purchase intention: online purchase intention was measured by a questionnaire developed by Sullivan and Kim (2018) in 4 items.

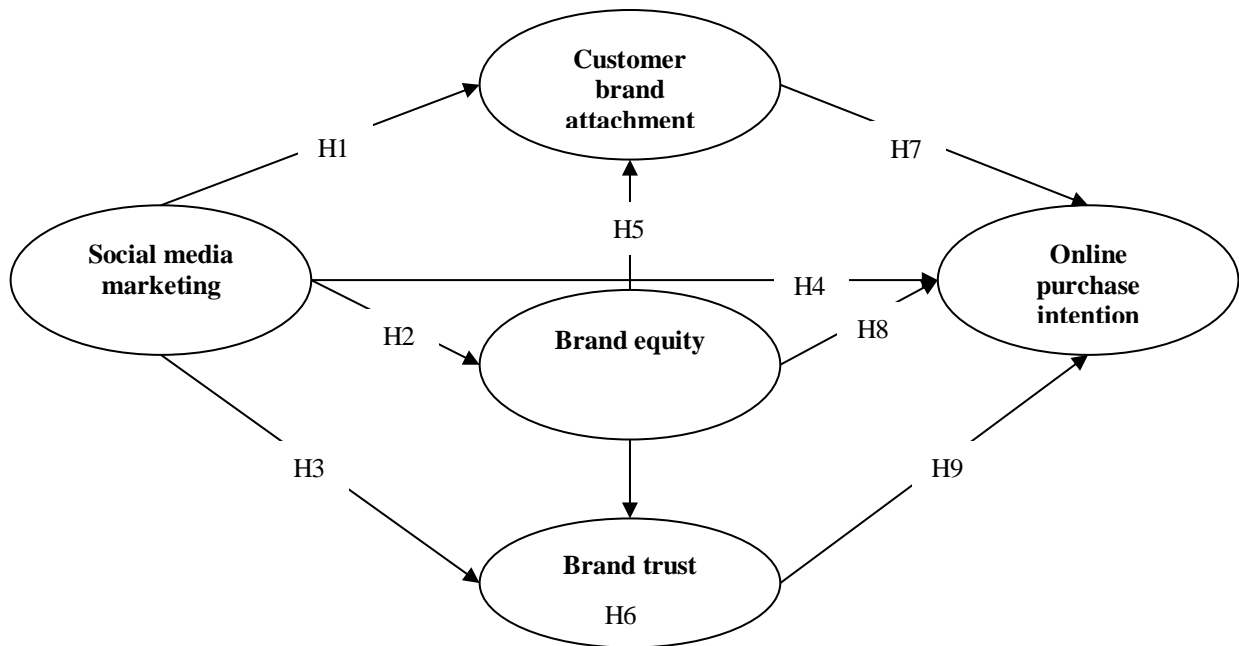


Figure 1. The conceptual model

Sources: developed by the authors.

Results. An essential part of the measurement model is the ability to test the reliability of constructs and instruments based on their internal consistency and discriminant validity. As Fornell & Larcker (1981) argued, the reliability of constructs can be evaluated in three ways. To begin with, the reliability of items can be tested individually, followed by the composite reliability of each construct, followed by the average variance. The first criterion is examined by noticing that an item with a factor load of at least 0.4 in a confirmatory factor analysis indicates that each item is reliable for the purpose of testing the construct as a whole (Tavana et al., 2021). The factor loadings for each item should be at least significant at the level of 0.01 in order to be significant (Alipour et al., 2022, Gefen & Straub, 2005). There is a bootstrap test that is used to determine the significance of factor loadings (with 500 subsamples), in which the t-value is calculated. In order to check the composite reliability of each construct, Dillon-Goldstein coefficient (ρ_c) values of not less than 0.7 should be used, which is the minimum value that is acceptable. AVE is the third criteria, and Fornell & Larcker (1981) recommend that AVE values be at least 0.50, which indicates that the construct is explaining at least 50% of the variance in marker scores (Wynne, 1988), that is, a substantial amount of the variance in its markers. The loadings of the factors for the variables, their composite reliability, and their AVEs are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The loadings of factors, composite reliability, and AVE of variables

Variable	Item	Factor load	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE
Entertainment	1	0.859	0.76	0.87	0.71
	2	0.889			
	3	0.868			
Interaction	4	0.914	0.76	0.90	0.84
	5	0.829			
Trendiness	6	0.979	0.95	0.98	0.95
	7	0.976			
Customization	8	0.939	0.89	0.94	0.88
	9	0.950			
Perceived risk	10	0.901	0.82	0.90	0.79
	11	0.916			
Brand awareness	1	0.887	0.79	0.92	0.87
	2	0.904			
	3	0.874			

Continued Table 1

Variable	Item	Factor load	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE
Brand image	1	0.832	0.54	0.77	0.72
	2	0.665			
	3	0.691			
Customer brand attachment	1	0.852	0.72	0.89	0.81
	2	0.850			
	3	0.848			
Brand trust	1	0.779	0.59	0.85	0.77
	2	0.838			
	3	0.776			
	4	0.681			
Online purchase intention	1	0.838	0.61	0.86	0.79
	2	0.816			
	3	0.733			
	4	0.742			

Sources: developed by the authors.

To check a construct's validity or discriminant validity, Wynne (1988) proposes two criteria. (1) It is necessary for the items within the construct to have a high factor load in order to have a small cross sectional load on other constructs. Gefen & Straub (2005) recommend that for each item to be considered to have a significant load on a related construct, the factor load of the item should be at least 0.1 higher than its load on the unrelated construct. (2) There must be a greater correlation between the square root of the AVE from a construct and its markers than between the square root of the AVE from other constructs. Table 2 shows the cross-sectional loads that are applied to the constructs as a result of the loads on the items.

Table 2. Validating questionnaires with cross-sectional factor loads

Question/variable	Social media marketing	Brand equity	Customer brand attachment	Brand trust	Online purchase intention
AB1	0.356	0.887	0.449	0.386	0.431
AB2	0.487	0.904	0.472	0.401	0.434
AB3	0.332	0.874	0.34	0.323	0.39
AB4	0.429	0.832	0.347	0.412	0.39
AB5	0.301	0.665	0.192	0.164	0.195
AB6	0.448	0.691	0.331	0.284	0.326
BR1	0.859	0.363	0.339	0.458	0.383
BR2	0.889	0.408	0.481	0.486	0.48
BR3	0.868	0.422	0.431	0.449	0.445
BR4	0.914	0.43	0.375	0.419	0.527
BR5	0.829	0.313	0.358	0.333	0.424
BR6	0.979	0.484	0.478	0.311	0.376
BR7	0.974	0.438	0.392	0.248	0.338
BR8	0.939	0.293	0.324	0.376	0.391
BR9	0.95	0.225	0.287	0.384	0.351
BR10	0.901	0.248	0.265	0.302	0.421
BR11	0.916	0.275	0.266	0.291	0.381
DM1	0.377	0.398	0.852	0.396	0.396
DM2	0.472	0.468	0.85	0.545	0.443
DM3	0.351	0.336	0.848	0.445	0.528
ET1	0.569	0.352	0.363	0.779	0.485
ET2	0.495	0.303	0.403	0.838	0.465
ET3	0.299	0.298	0.49	0.776	0.377
ET4	0.202	0.329	0.481	0.681	0.366
GK1	0.512	0.418	0.421	0.543	0.838
GK2	0.379	0.397	0.465	0.435	0.816
GK3	0.288	0.408	0.406	0.355	0.733
GK4	0.351	0.235	0.395	0.396	0.742

Sources: developed by the authors.

A minimum distance between construct factor loads of 0.1 is observed in Table 2; additionally, all variables have the highest factor load on their constructs, which implies good validity of constructs. Analysis of correlation and mean of the root of AVE is reported in Table 3.

Table 3. Matrix of correlation and mean the root of the extracted variance of variables

Variable	Social media marketing	Brand equity	Customer brand attachment	Brand trust	Online purchase intention
Social media marketing	0.66				
Brand equity	0.56**	0.82			
Customer brand attachment	0.49**	0.48**	0.85		
Brand trust	0.46**	0.44**	0.56**	0.77	
Online purchase intention	0.56**	0.54**	0.49**	0.53**	0.78

Note: On the diagonal of the correlation matrix, the numbers represent the square root of AVE.

Sources: developed by the authors.

Using Table 3 as an example, we can see that the square root of the AVEs of all variables are greater than the correlation between the variables themselves. As a result, the discriminant validity of the test is determined by the second criterion. Moreover, the numbers below the diagonal of the correlation matrix are used as a method of establishing whether there is a relationship between variables. As shown in Table 3, there is a positive and significant correlation between all variables. As the model is saturated with no available paths, the fit values of the measurement model were assessed. The results showed that the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) value was 0.060, which is less than 0.08, and the normed fit index (NFI) was 0.944, which is greater than 0.90. These findings suggest that the data fits well with the model.

Structural Model Testing: It was determined by using the partial least squares method that the proposed conceptual model was capable of predicting online purchase intentions when tested using SEM. In order to determine the significance of path coefficients, the bootstrap method was employed (with 500 sub-samples) by calculating the t-values. This figure illustrates the tested model. Brand equity, customer brand attachment, brand trust, and online purchase intention are positively and significantly affected by social media marketing, as shown in Figure 2.

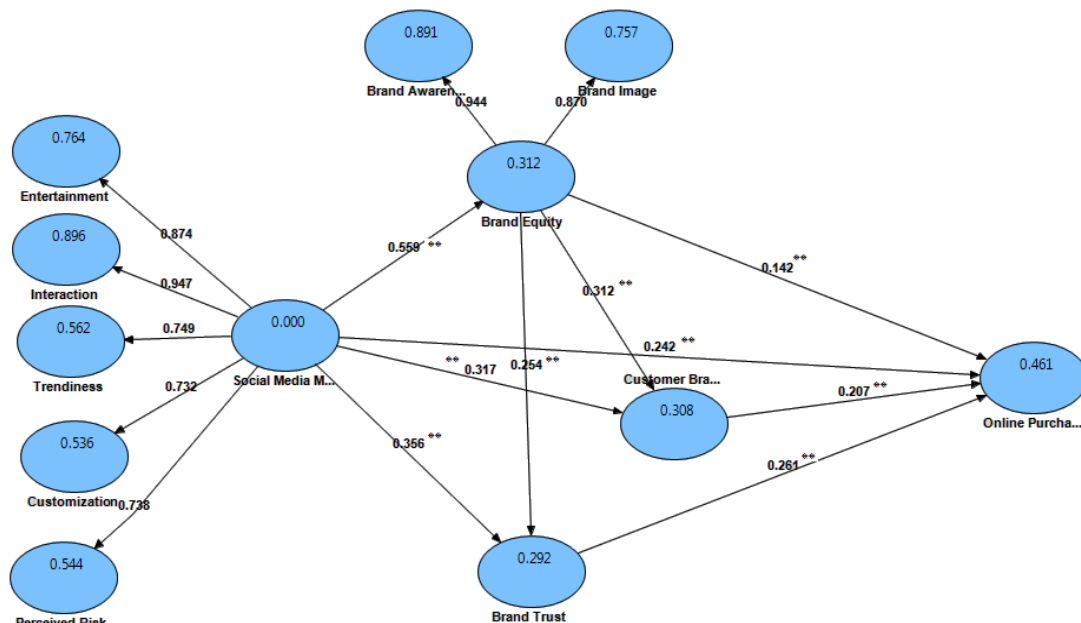


Figure 2. The tested model

Sources: developed by the authors.

In addition to brand attachment and brand trust, brand equity has a significant impact on online purchase intention. Brand trust and online purchase intention are positively influenced by customer brand attachment.

Online purchase intention is positively influenced by brand trust. There is an explanation for the variance of the variables in the circled numbers. Detailed information regarding the estimates of the path coefficients and variance explained for the variables can be found in Table 4.

Table 4. Explanation of path coefficients and variance

Variable	β	t-value	Variance explained
On online purchase intention via:			0.46
Brand trust	0.26**	4.463	
Customer brand attachment	0.21**	3.704	
Brand equity	0.25**	4.40	
Social media marketing	0.24**	4.237	
On brand trust via:			0.29
Brand equity	0.25**	3.855	
Social media marketing	0.36**	6.311	
On customer brand attachment via:			0.31
Brand equity	0.31**	4.770	
Social media marketing	0.32**	4.836	
On brand equity via:			0.31
Social media marketing	0.56**	13.972	
Mediating role of brand equity in the effect of:			-
Social media marketing on online purchase intention	0.14**	4.197	
Social media marketing on customer brand attachment	0.17**	4.514	
Social media marketing on trust	0.14**	3.716	
Mediating role of customer brand attachment in the effect of:			-
Social media marketing on online purchase intention	0.07**	2.940	
Brand equity on online purchase intention	0.06**	2.925	
Mediating role of brand trust in the effect of:			-
Social media marketing on online purchase intention	0.09**	3.644	
Brand equity on online purchase intention	0.07**	2.917	

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Sources: developed by the authors.

The influence of social media marketing on online purchase intention, customer brand attachment, and trust is mediated in part by brand equity, which plays a positive and significant role in mediating the influence of social media marketing on online purchase intention, customer brand attachment, and trust. Online purchase intention is significantly mediated by customer brand attachment and brand equity, in the case of social media marketing. Social media marketing affects the intention to purchase online, and brand equity affects the intention to purchase online in a positive and significant way. Upon further analysis of Table 4, it is found that 46% of the variance in online purchase intention, 29% of the variance in trust, 31% of the variance in customer brand attachment, and 31% of the variance in brand equity can be explained by these variables.

An index that measures the goodness of fit (GOF) of a PLS model is used to determine the general validity or quality of the model. An index such as this examines whether the tested model is able to predict the endogenous variables with a high degree of prediction performance and predictability. There is a good fit between the tested model and the present study, $GOF = 0.64$, indicating that the model is a good fit. It is considered good and acceptable when the model has a quality value > 0.36 (Wetzels et al., 2009).

Conclusions. This study tended to present a model to determine whether social media marketing is effective on online purchase intention considering the mediating role of customer brand attachment, brand trust, and brand equity using SEM. Consequently, we find that the proposed model is relatively well fitting to the data and that it gives an explanation of 46% of the variance in online purchase intention, 29% of the variance in trust, 31% of the variance in customer brand attachment, and 31% of the variance in brand equity.

In the study, social media marketing contributed significantly to brand equity, customer brand attachment, trust, and online purchase intention as a result of its positive and significant effects. This finding is consistent with Wijayaa et al. (2021); Moslehpour et al. (2020); Laksamana (2018); Alalwan (2018) and Godey et al. (2016). Accordingly, brand equity, customer brand attachment, trust, and online purchase intention will increase if customers are entertained by social media, customer find the content provided by social media interesting, customers can share information on social media, customers can make conversations, or exchange opinions with others in social media, customer can easily express their comments in social media, updated information is presented in the social media, customized search and customized services are provided in social

media, the brand, products, and services can be shared on social media, blogs, and YouTube channels, and customers can also share them with their friends. In addition, customer-company communication via social media and information sharing improves brand trust, attachment, and enthusiasm and as a result, increases purchase intention. Therefore, brand equity, customer brand attachment, trust, and consequently online purchase intention will increase if the store shares product-services information using social media, exchanges and transmits product-service information via social media, delivers up-to-date information on products and services to customers via social media, introduces services and products view social media and provides customers with social media search capabilities.

There is significant evidence that brand equity affects customers' attachment to brands, trust in their brands, and intention to purchase online in a positive and significant way. As a result, this finding is supported by Majeed et al. (2021); Azzari & Pelissari (2021); Poturak & Softic (2019). To explain this finding, customer brand attachment and brand trust will increase and customers will be proud of using brand products/services and will use them in long term and will be committed to using them if customers quickly remember the brand whose services and products they use, recognize it among other competitors, are well aware of the brand services and quality, recognize the brand symbol or logo, Customer-centricity should be a primary objective of the brand and should be a representative of its industry. Customers who are attached to brands have a positive impact on their intention to purchase online. It is clear that this finding is in agreement with Lin & Ku (2018); Hudson et al. (2015) and Dolbec & Chebat (2013). To explain this finding, online purchase intention will increase if customers feel that they are interested in the brand, their feelings towards the brand can be described using emotion, their feelings towards the brand can be described using the feeling of personal connection, they have a feeling of attachment towards the brand, they are enthusiastic for the brand, customer feelings towards the brand can be described using enjoyment, and they feel that the brand has attracted them.

According to the findings of current research, the relationship between customer trust and the intentions of making an online purchase is significant and positive. It is clear that this finding is in agreement with Ha and Nguyen (2019), Lu et al. (2016). To explain this finding, online purchase intention will increase if the brand fulfils its obligations to customers, payment services are reliable, the services offered by the brand meet customer expectations, the brand considers the interests of its customers, helps customers if needed, is interested in the well-being of customers, the obligations are trusted by customers, and customers do not doubt the honesty of the brand. A positive mediating influence of social media marketing on online purchase intentions is demonstrated by customer brand attachment, brand trust, and brand equity. Customer brand attachment and brand trust positively and significantly mediate the influence of brand equity on online purchase intention. Therefore, social media marketing increases online purchase intention through customer brand attachment, brand trust, and brand equity. In this study, only a sample of customers of the DigiKala online store participated; therefore, the generalization of the findings is difficult. Study data were collected from self-reports. Therefore, as part of future research, it will be possible to use qualitative and mixed research methods to examine the factors that greatly affect the intention of customers to make an online purchase.

Conflicts of Interest: Authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

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Маркетинг у соціальних мережах як інструмент нарощування обсягів продажу: роль лояльності, довіри та капіталу бренду

У статті досліджено вплив використання інструментів маркетингу у соціальних мережах на обсяги продажів в Інтернеті, а також визначено роль та силу впливу таких факторів як: лояльність споживачів, їх довіра та капітал бренду. Авторами зазначено, що в Ірані обсяги онлайн-продажів є низькими не дивлячись на те, що електронна комерція та онлайн-торгівля стрімко розвиваються у світі. Метою статті є визначення факторів, що впливають на рішення іранських клієнтів щодо покупок в Інтернеті. Об'єктом дослідження обрано Digikala, яка є найбільшою двосторонню онлайн-торгівельною платформою в Ірані. Для формування вихідної бази дослідження використано метод простої випадкової вибірки клієнтів Digikala. У ході дослідження було опитано 363 респондентів через онлайн-анкетування. Для аналізу даних застосовано метод структурного моделювання (Structural equation modeling, SEM) з використанням програмного забезпечення SmartPLS. Результати дослідження показали, що маркетинг у соціальних мережах створює позитивні зміни у вартості бренду, лояльності клієнтів до нього, а також довіри та наміри покупки в Інтернеті. Результати дослідження підтвердили гіпотезу, що наміри покупки в Інтернеті, довіра та лояльність мають позитивний статистично значущий вплив на вартість бренду. Своєю чергою, рівень лояльності до бренду позитивно впливає на довіру та наміри купівлі онлайн. Збільшення довіри до бренду провокує зростання намірів споживачів купувати онлайн. На основі емпіричних розрахунків визначено, що намір купувати онлайн, лояльність та довіра до бренду мають статистично значущий позитивний вплив на вартість бренду при використанні інструментів маркетингу у соціальних мережах. Авторами доведено, що маркетинг у соціальних мережах стимулює онлайн-продажі, за умови, коли довіра до бренду є позитивною та статистично значущою.

Ключові слова: маркетинг у соціальних мережах, прив'язаність клієнта до бренду, довіра до бренду, капітал бренду, намір купувати онлайн.