

The Influence of Social Media Advertising on Consumer Purchase Decisions: The Mediating Roles of Brand Perception, Attitudes, and Purchase Intention

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Abstract

This study aimed to examine the direct influence of social media advertising factors on consumer purchase decisions and investigate the mediating roles of brand perception, consumer attitudes, and purchase intention. The research employed a quantitative survey methodology to collect data from 400 Thai active social media users. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used for data analysis and hypothesis testing. The results demonstrated that social media advertising factors—specifically, platform characteristics, user engagement, and influencer credibility—exert both direct and indirect effects, yielding significant total effects on purchase decisions. The structural model explained 66% of the variance in consumer purchase decisions ($R^2 = .66$). Furthermore, the results confirm that consumer brand perception, attitude, and purchase intention act as crucial full and partial mediators in this relationship. Theoretically, this study extends the Hierarchy of Effects model by confirming the sequential cognitive-affective-conative pathway in the context of digital advertising. The study highlights the importance of creating tailored content for specific social media platforms and leveraging authentic influencer partnerships to guide consumers through the decision-making process effectively. These findings contribute to the understanding of modern consumer behavior and offer practical guidelines for marketers to optimize their digital strategies in the post-pandemic era.

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Keywords

Social Media Advertising, Brand Perception, Consumer Attitudes, Purchase Intention, Purchase Decisions

Introduction

In the contemporary digital era, the marketing landscape has been fundamentally reshaped by the proliferation of social media. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok have evolved from mere communication channels into indispensable tools for businesses to connect with consumers, establish their brand identity, and, most importantly, directly influence purchasing decisions (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). With over 4.7 billion active users globally as of 2023 (Anderson et al., 2023), social media offers an unparalleled reach to a vast and diverse audience. The key strength of these platforms lies not just in their scale but in their interactive, two-way communication channels, which enable real-time engagement between brands and consumers. This fosters a sense of community, trust, and emotional connection that traditional media cannot replicate (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

Furthermore, the digital landscape between 2020 and 2024 has witnessed a paradigm shift towards short-form video content. Platforms such as TikTok and Instagram Reels have seen exponential growth, becoming pivotal for modern marketing strategies due to their algorithmic ability to drive high engagement rates (Haenlein et al., 2020). In the post-pandemic era, digital transformation has significantly accelerated, shifting consumer behavior towards a heavy reliance on digital communities and short-form video content (e.g., TikTok, Instagram Reels). Specifically in Thailand, a highly collectivist society with over 81% active social media penetration, consumers heavily depend on social validation before making purchases. Recent statistics indicate that users spend an average of 2 hours and 44 minutes daily on these platforms (Datareportal, 2024). This shift has significantly altered how consumers discover and evaluate products in the post-pandemic era.

A significant phenomenon that has emerged alongside the growth of social media is influencer marketing, where individuals with established credibility and large followings promote products, adding a layer of authenticity and trust that consumers value (Freberg et al., 2011). The growing significance of this new paradigm is evident in the increasing allocation

of marketing budgets to digital platforms. In 2022, global spending on social media advertising surpassed \$200 billion, a clear indicator that the industry recognizes social media as a vital channel for reaching modern consumers (Statista, 2023).

However, while previous research has confirmed that social media advertising can increase brand awareness and positively influence consumer attitudes (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016), a comprehensive understanding of the complex mechanisms through which these factors interact to drive actual purchase decisions remains underexplored. Much of the existing literature has focused on isolated aspects, such as the effectiveness of a specific platform or the impact of influencers on brand perception. These studies often fail to address the simultaneous structural relationships among key advertising factors—namely, platform characteristics, user engagement, and influencer credibility—on the entire consumer journey from initial exposure to final purchase. Theoretically, the influence of advertising on behavior is not strictly direct. Based on the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and the Hierarchy of Effects model, consumers process advertising stimuli cognitively (Brand Perception), which shapes their feelings (Consumer Attitudes), and subsequently forms behavioral motives (Purchase Intention) before the actual purchase.

To fill this research gap, this study aims to develop and test a holistic, integrated model that examines the structural relationships between these interconnected variables. Specifically, it examines how social media advertising factors (independent variables) impact consumer purchase decisions (the dependent variable), both directly and indirectly through the crucial mediating roles of brand perception, consumer attitudes, and purchase intention. By exploring these complex pathways, this research aims to provide a deeper understanding of how brands can strategically leverage social media to guide consumers through the decision-making process and ultimately drive purchases.

Research Objectives

The research objectives were as follows:

1. To examine the direct effects of social media advertising factors (platform characteristics, user engagement, influencer credibility) on consumer purchase decisions.
2. To examine the influence of social media advertising factors on the mediating variables of brand perception, consumer attitudes, and purchase intention.

3. To analyze the mediating roles of brand perception, consumer attitudes, and purchase intention in the relationship between social media advertising and purchase decisions.

Literature Reviews

This study is grounded in the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) framework and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), positing that social media advertising features act as stimuli (S) that trigger consumers' internal psychological states (O: Brand Perception and Attitudes), ultimately leading to behavioral responses (R: Purchase Intention and Decisions).

Social Media Advertising and Consumer Purchase Decision

Social media advertising has become a cornerstone of modern marketing due to its unparalleled ability to reach vast audiences with highly targeted and interactive content. Unlike traditional one-way advertising, social media platforms facilitate a dynamic, two-way dialogue between brands and consumers (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). This interactivity allows brands to engage consumers directly, foster a sense of community, and build relationships, which are crucial for influencing purchase decisions (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016). Studies have demonstrated that the visual and interactive elements of social media ads, such as those on Instagram and Facebook, can significantly enhance brand recognition, consumer trust, and the likelihood of a purchase (de Vries et al., 2012; Lipsman et al., 2012). Mainly, in the current digital ecosystem, short-form video content on platforms like TikTok has emerged as a dominant force. Unlike static images, these formats offer immersive experiences that can rapidly enhance brand recall and emotional connection within seconds (Yang et al., 2022). These platforms empower advertisers to customize messages in real time and track consumer responses, enabling a more agile, practical approach to influencing behavior at various stages of the decision-making process.

To comprehensively understand this dynamic, this study focuses on two specific advertising constructs: Platform Characteristics and User Engagement.

First, Platform Characteristics (ST) in this study does not refer to a categorical comparison between platforms, but rather to the consumers' *perception of the platform's unique characteristics and formats* (e.g., algorithmic short-form video delivery on TikTok versus visual grid curation on Instagram).

Second, User Engagement (UE) is defined as the consumers' active behavioral interaction *specifically with the advertising content* rather than the brand itself. It comprises actions such as viewing, liking, commenting, and sharing the content. Crucially, this study posits that user engagement does not directly cause an immediate purchase decision. Instead, it serves as a preliminary interaction that must first cultivate a positive brand perception and attitude before leading to actual sales.

The Role of Influencer Credibility

A key component of contemporary social media advertising is influencer marketing. Influencers, who are individuals with large, dedicated followings, are often perceived as more credible and authentic sources of information than brands themselves (Freberg et al., 2011). The effectiveness of influencer marketing is fundamentally rooted in the concept of source credibility. Based on the widely accepted framework by Ohanian (1990), Influencer Credibility (IC) is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct comprising three distinct dimensions: 1) Expertise (the perceived knowledge and skills of the influencer), 2) Trustworthiness (the perceived honesty, integrity, and authenticity of the endorsement), and 3) Attractiveness (the physical or psychological appeal of the influencer). When consumers perceive high levels of these three dimensions, especially trustworthiness and 'friend-like' authenticity, they develop a strong emotional bond that significantly shapes their subsequent brand attitudes and purchase intentions. Research indicates that consumers are more likely to trust endorsements from influencers, especially when the influencer's values align with their own (Casaló et al., 2020).

Furthermore, recent literature suggests a shift in effectiveness from macro-influencers to micro and nano-influencers. While macro-influencers offer reach, smaller influencers often command higher engagement rates and perceived authenticity (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). This "friend-like" trust is particularly effective in driving conversion among niche audiences. This perceived authenticity fosters an emotional bond among the influencer, their followers, and the endorsed brand, thereby enhancing consumer trust and increasing the likelihood of a purchase decision (Audrezet et al., 2020).

Mediating Factors: Brand Perception, Attitudes, and Purchase Intention

To explain the psychological mechanism between advertising exposure and final behavior, this study examines three sequential mediating constructs:

1. Brand Perception (BP): Defined as consumers' cognitive evaluation and overall mental image of a brand's identity, quality, and value, which is heavily shaped by external stimuli such as influencer content (Aaker, 1996).

2. Consumer Attitudes (CA): Referring to the affective component, it represents a consumer's consistent favorable or unfavorable evaluation and emotional feeling toward the brand (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016).

3. Purchase Intention (PI): Representing the conative component, it is defined as the conscious probability or willingness of a consumer to buy a specific product in the future. According to the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), intention is the most immediate and robust predictor of actual Purchase Decisions (PD)—the final behavioral outcome of acquiring the product (Ajzen, 1991; Bigné et al., 2010).

The path from advertising exposure to actual purchase is not direct; several crucial psychological factors mediate it. Contemporary consumers are increasingly skeptical of overly polished advertising. Authenticity and transparency—such as clearly labeling sponsored content—have become critical drivers of trust (Audrezet et al., 2020; Pöyry et al., 2022). Brand perception, which refers to how consumers perceive a brand's identity and value, is significantly influenced by social media content and interactions (Aaker, 1996; Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016). Positive brand perception is a critical precursor to favorable consumer attitudes. Attitudes, in turn, are a direct determinant of purchase intention—the likelihood that a consumer will buy a product (Bigné et al., 2010). The Theory of Planned Behavior posits that purchase intention is the most immediate and strongest predictor of actual purchasing behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Therefore, effective social media advertising must successfully navigate this entire sequence: it must first build a positive brand image, which cultivates a favorable attitude, leading to a firm intention to buy.

Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

Based on the literature review, this study proposes a conceptual framework (Figure 1) that illustrates the relationships between social media advertising factors, mediating variables, and consumer purchase decisions. The framework posits that three key independent variables—Platform Characteristics (ST), User Engagement (UE), and Influencer Credibility (IC)—influence Purchase Decisions (PD) both directly and indirectly. This influence is mediated by Brand Perception (BP), Consumer Attitudes (CA), and Purchase Intention (CI).

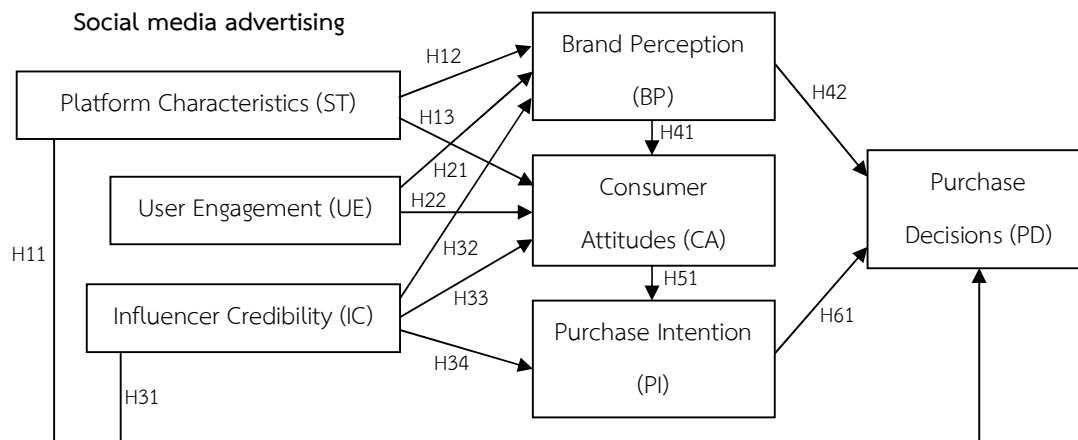


Figure 1: The Research Conceptual Framework

Based on this framework, the following hypotheses were developed for testing:

- H11: ST has a positive direct effect on PD.
- H12: ST has a positive direct effect on BP.
- H13: ST has a positive direct effect on CA.
- H21: UE has a positive direct effect on BP.
- H22: UE has a positive direct effect on CA.
- H31: IC has a positive direct effect on PD.
- H32: IC has a positive direct effect on BP.
- H33: IC has a positive direct effect on CA.
- H34: IC has a positive direct effect on PI.
- H41: BP has a positive direct effect on CA.
- H42: BP has a positive direct effect on PD.
- H51: CA has a positive direct effect on PI.
- H61: PI has a positive direct effect on PD.

This comprehensive set of hypotheses allows for a thorough examination of the entire structural model, from initial advertising inputs to the final behavioral outcome.

Research Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research design to empirically test the hypothesized relationships within the proposed conceptual framework. The research

followed a cross-sectional design, which involves collecting data from a sample of the population at a single point in time. This design is particularly suitable for examining the relationships among variables within a specific context, providing a “snapshot” of consumer perceptions and behaviors in response to current social media advertising exposure (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Population and Sampling

The target population for this study consisted of Thai active users of major social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and X. These platforms were selected for their widespread use for advertising and their significant role in contemporary consumer culture (Anderson et al, 2023). A non-probability convenience sampling method was utilized to recruit participants. While this technique is practical for quickly and cost-effectively reaching active social media users, it is important to acknowledge that the reliance on non-random selection may introduce selection bias. Consequently, the findings may not be fully generalizable to the entire Thai population, particularly those who are less active on digital platforms or belong to different demographic segments (Etikan et al., 2016; Stratton, 2021). This limitation regarding generalizability is further addressed in the limitations section of this study. A final sample size of 400 respondents was achieved, which is considered more than adequate for conducting Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and ensuring sufficient statistical power to detect significant relationships between the variables (Hair et al., 2021).

Data Collection Instrument and Development

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisted of multiple-item scales, designed on the key constructs of the study: ST (4 items), UE (4 items), IC (5 items), BP (4 items), CA (4 items), PI (4 items), and PD (4 items), utilized a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), to measure respondents’ agreement with statements related to each variable.

All measurement items were adapted from validated scales in previous literature to ensure construct validity. Specifically, items for ST, UE, and IC were adapted from Freberg et al. (2011) and Ohanian (1990); BP from Aaker (1996); CA from Schivinski and Dabrowski (2016); and PI from Ajzen (1991) and Bigné et al. (2010). The original English scales were translated into Thai using a back-translation method to ensure semantic equivalence. Content validity was assessed by three academic experts, yielding an Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) index of 0.70 or higher for all items.

A pilot test was conducted with a small group of 30 respondents to assess the clarity and reliability of the survey questions. The results demonstrated high internal consistency across all constructs. The specific Cronbach's alpha coefficients were as follows: ST ($\alpha = 0.76$), UE ($\alpha = 0.79$), IC ($\alpha = 0.81$), BP ($\alpha = 0.84$), CA ($\alpha = 0.85$), PI ($\alpha = 0.88$), and PD ($\alpha = 0.87$). Since all values fell within the range of 0.76 to 0.88, they exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2021), confirming that the instrument was reliable for full-scale data collection.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection was conducted over 3 months, from January to March 2025, by collecting via an online survey distributed through major social media platforms, specifically Facebook Groups and LINE OpenChats, targeting Thai consumers. A screening question was utilized to ensure respondents were active users (using at least one platform daily). Out of 450 distributed surveys, 400 complete responses were obtained, representing an estimated completion rate of 88.8%.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using a two-step approach. First, descriptive statistics were calculated using SPSS to summarize the demographic characteristics of the sample.

Second, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed using Amos to test the hypothesized model. SEM is a powerful, second-generation multivariate statistical technique that enables the simultaneous examination of complex relationships among multiple independent, mediating, and dependent variables (Hair et al., 2021).

SEM was selected as highly robust for testing complex models with multiple mediators simultaneously, allowing for the calculation of direct, indirect, and total effects while accounting for measurement errors. The overall model fit was evaluated using a range of goodness-of-fit indices, including the Chi-square/df ratio (χ^2/df), the Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI), the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). Commonly accepted thresholds for a good model fit include a χ^2/df ratio below 3, GFI and CFI values above 0.90, and an RMSEA value below 0.08 (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Path coefficients (β), their significance levels (p-values), and t-values were then examined to test each specific hypothesis.

Results

The analysis of the data collected from 400 Thai active social media users yielded several key findings that provide empirical support for the proposed conceptual framework. This section presents the results in a structured manner, beginning with the demographic characteristics of the respondents and descriptive statistics of the key variables, followed by the evaluation of the structural model's fit, and culminating in the detailed results of the hypothesis testing.

Demographic Profile and Descriptive Statistics

The demographic analysis revealed a diverse sample group. Of the 400 respondents, 62% were female, and 38% were male. The age distribution was predominantly young, with 45% in the 18-24 age group, 35% in the 25-34 age group, and 20% aged 35 and above. Regarding social media use, 88% reported using it daily for several hours, indicating a highly engaged sample. Instagram was the most frequently preferred platform for engaging with brands (42%), followed by Facebook (30%), YouTube (18%), and Twitter (10%).

An analysis of the descriptive statistics, presented in Table 1, reveals a consistently positive response pattern across all key variables. Mean scores were interpreted based on an equal-interval criterion (3.41 – 4.20 indicates a 'High' level of agreement). The highest mean was observed for PD ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 0.68$), indicating that participants frequently acted on their intentions. Similarly, PI ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.71$) and ST ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.77$) also scored highly, reflecting a strong inclination to buy and an acknowledgment of the platform's influence.

Variables such as BP ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 0.82$), UE ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 0.76$), IC ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.73$), and CA ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 0.80$) all received positive scores, reinforcing their importance in the consumer process. Notably, the standard deviations for BP ($SD = 0.82$) and CA ($SD = 0.80$) were the highest, suggesting greater diversity of opinion on these constructs than on PD ($SD = 0.68$), which showed the greatest consensus among respondents.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Platform Characteristics (ST)	4.12	0.77
User Engagement (UE)	4.09	0.76
Influencer Credibility (IC)	3.96	0.73
Brand Perception (BP)	4.06	0.82
Consumer Attitudes (CA)	3.93	0.80
Purchase Intention (PI)	4.10	0.71
Purchase Decisions (PD)	4.17	0.68

Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

Prior to SEM analysis, the data met all multivariate assumptions. Skewness and kurtosis values fell within the acceptable range of ± 2.0 , confirming univariate normality. Additionally, Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values were strictly below 3.0, indicating no multicollinearity issues among the independent variables.

The proposed structural model was tested using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The model's fit indices indicate an excellent fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 2.365$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.669$; $CMIN/DF = 0.591$; $GFI = 0.998$; $CFI = 1.000$; $RMSEA = 0.000$). The non-significant chi-square ($p > 0.05$) and the values for CFI, GFI, and RMSEA all fall well within the thresholds for an outstanding model fit, providing strong support for the model's structure and allowing for a confident interpretation of the individual path coefficients, as shown in Figure 1 and Table 2.

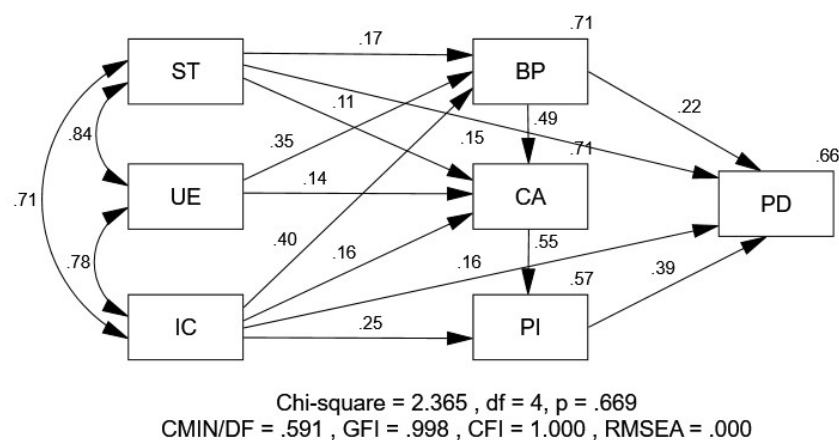


Figure 1: Fit of the Proposed Structural Model to the Empirical Data

The hypothesis testing results and effects of variables are shown in Tables 2 and 3

Table 2: Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypotheses	b	SE	β	t-value	Summarized
H11: ST $\rightarrow$ PD	.135	.040	.15	3.334**	Supported
H12: ST $\rightarrow$ BP	.178	.055	.17	3.254**	Supported
H13: ST $\rightarrow$ CA	.118	.053	.11	2.212*	Supported
H21: UE $\rightarrow$ BP	.373	.061	.35	6.065**	Supported
H22: UE $\rightarrow$ CA	.149	.062	.14	2.408*	Supported
H31: IC $\rightarrow$ PD	.147	.048	.16	3.070**	Supported
H32: IC $\rightarrow$ BP	.447	.049	.40	9.085**	Supported
H33: IC $\rightarrow$ CA	.173	.052	.16	3.322**	Supported
H34: IC $\rightarrow$ PI	.246	.048	.25	5.169**	Supported
H41: BP $\rightarrow$ CA	.477	.048	.49	9.900**	Supported
H42: BP $\rightarrow$ PD	.180	.044	.22	4.073**	Supported
H51: CA $\rightarrow$ PI	.490	.044	.55	11.203**	Supported
H61: PI $\rightarrow$ PD	.365	.038	.39	9.731**	Supported

Note: b = Unstandardized regression coefficient, β = Standardized regression coefficient, SE = Standard error. * p < .05, ** p < .01

Table 3: The Effect of Variables in the Proposed Model

Variables	BP			CA			PI			PD		
	DE	IE	TE	DE	IE	TE	DE	IE	TE	DE	IE	TE
ST	.17	-	.17	.11	.09	.20	-	.11	.11	.15	.08	.23
UE	.35	-	.35	.14	.17	.31	-	.17	.17	-	.14	.14
IC	.40	-	.40	.16	.20	.36	.25	.19	.44	.16	.26	.42
BP				.49	-	-	-	.27	-	.22	.10	-
CA							.55	-	.55	-	.21	.21
PI										.39	-	.39

Notes: DE = Direct effect, IE = Indirect effect, TE = Total effect (β)

Data in Figure 1 and Table 2 show that an examination of the standardized path coefficients (β) confirmed the significance of the hypothesized relationships within the model. The analysis revealed that the antecedent variables—ST, UE, and IC—exert their influence through a series of mediating variables. Furthermore, to rigorously establish the

mediating roles of BP, CA, and PI, the Standardized Direct Effects (DE), Indirect Effects (IE), and Total Effects (TE) were analyzed as shown in Table 3

Specifically, IC was a significant predictor, positively influencing BP (H32: $\beta = 0.40$), CA (H33: $\beta = 0.16$), and PI (H34: $\beta = 0.25$). UE also demonstrated a significant positive effect on both BP (H21: $\beta = 0.35$) and CA (H22: $\beta = 0.14$). The influence of ST was also supported, with positive paths to BP (H12: $\beta = 0.17$) and CA (H13: $\beta = 0.11$).

The model further illuminated the critical sequential relationship among the mediating variables. BP was a strong positive predictor of CA (H41: $\beta = 0.49$). In turn, CA strongly influenced PI (H51: $\beta = 0.55$).

Finally, all paths leading to the outcome variable PD were significant. The strongest direct predictor of a purchase decision was PI (H61: $\beta = 0.39$), followed by BP (H42: $\beta = 0.22$), IC (H31: $\beta = 0.16$), and ST, which also had a significant direct effect (H11: $\beta = 0.15$).

Model Explanatory Power (R^2)

Beyond hypothesis testing, the model's explanatory power was assessed using the Squared Multiple Correlation (R^2). The results indicate that the structural model explains a substantial amount of variance across all endogenous constructs. Specifically, the model accounts for 71% of the variance in BP ($R^2 = .71$), 71% in CA ($R^2 = .71$), and 57% in PI ($R^2 = .57$). Ultimately, the model explains 66% of the variance in PD ($R^2 = .66$), demonstrating the model's robustness in predicting the final consumer outcome.

Practical Significance of Path Coefficients

Regarding the practical significance of the findings, the standardized path coefficients (β) were evaluated according to Cohen's (1988) effect size criteria: small (~ 0.10), medium (~ 0.30), and large (> 0.50). The results indicated that the relationship between CA and PI ($\beta = 0.55$) represents a large effect, with attitude identified as the most critical driver of intention. Similarly, BP exerted a strong medium-to-large effect on CA ($\beta = 0.49$), and IC showed a medium effect on BP ($\beta = 0.40$). Conversely, the direct effects of ST on PD ($\beta = 0.15$) and CA ($\beta = 0.11$) were statistically significant but represented small effects, suggesting that while platform choice matters, its impact is largely realized when combined with strong engagement and credible influencers.

Discussion

This study aimed to develop and empirically test an integrated model explaining the influence of social media advertising factors on consumer purchase decisions. The findings not only confirm the significance of the proposed relationships but also provide a nuanced understanding of the psychological mechanisms that govern the consumer journey in the digital landscape. The excellent fit of the structural model provides strong support for the conceptual framework, suggesting that it is a robust representation of the process.

A central finding of this research is that the influence of antecedent advertising factors—namely, platform characteristics, user engagement, and influencer credibility—on the final purchase decision is fully mediated. This finding extends the existing literature by clarifying that these factors typically do not operate in isolation to trigger a purchase. Instead, they function as crucial catalysts that initiate a cognitive and affective sequence. The significant impact of influencer credibility on brand perception, consumer attitudes, and purchase intention aligns perfectly with prior research highlighting the power of authenticity and trust in shaping consumer behavior (Freberg et al., 2011; Casaló et al., 2020). Our model, however, demonstrates that this credibility translates into action through the cultivation of positive brand cognitions and intentions, rather than as a direct command to buy. Similarly, the positive effects of user engagement and platform characteristics on brand perception and attitudes reinforce the importance of interactive, two-way communication channels in fostering a sense of connection that traditional media cannot replicate (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

The validated sequential pathway among the mediating variables—from brand perception to consumer attitudes and then to purchase intention—is perhaps the most significant theoretical contribution of this study. The strong path from brand perception to consumer attitudes confirms that a positive brand image, often shaped by social media content, is a critical precursor to forming favorable attitudes, a notion supported by Aaker (1996) and Schivinski & Dabrowski (2016). Furthermore, the strong relationship between consumer attitudes and purchase intention, and, subsequently, the dominant influence of purchase intention on actual purchase decisions, provides strong empirical support for the Theory of Planned Behavior in the context of social media advertising (Ajzen, 1991). The finding that purchase intention is the most immediate and robust predictor of the final decision underscores that the goal of any advertising effort must be to solidify this intent.

The analysis of total effects provides robust evidence for the title’s premise: the relationship between social media advertising and purchase decisions is predominantly mediated. While platform characteristics and engagement have small direct effects on purchases, their total impact becomes highly significant only when they successfully cultivate a positive brand perception and consumer attitude.

From a managerial perspective, these findings carry significant implications. The evidence of full mediation suggests that a successful social media strategy cannot be one-dimensional. Marketers cannot simply focus on maximizing engagement or hiring a popular influencer and expect a direct increase in sales. Instead, they must adopt a holistic approach that nurtures the consumer through the entire decision-making journey. The results emphasize that authentic influencers should be leveraged to build a positive brand perception; engaging content should be tailored to specific platforms to foster favorable attitudes; and these efforts must converge to build a firm purchase intention. The model’s substantial explanatory power, accounting for 66% of the variance in purchase decisions, validates this journey-based approach and provides marketers with a clear, empirically backed roadmap for converting social media presence into tangible consumer action.

Comparison with Recent Studies and Platform-Specific Dynamics

These findings align with and extend recent research published between 2020 and 2025, which underscores that social media efficacy relies heavily on community-based trust rather than mere visibility. For instance, Mason et al. (2021) similarly found that post-pandemic consumers actively seek authenticity over polished marketing, reinforcing our finding on the pivotal role of influencer credibility.

Furthermore, the significance of Platform Characteristics in our model warrants a deeper discussion on platform-specific features. Unlike traditional social networks, algorithm-driven platforms like TikTok utilize short-form video content to create high-immersion experiences that drive immediate emotional responses, whereas Instagram relies more on aesthetic curation and social graphs (Haenlein et al., 2020; Su et al., 2020). This suggests that the “Platform Characteristics” variable captures the unique ability of specific algorithms (e.g., TikTok’s “For You” page) to accelerate the journey from brand perception to purchase intention more effectively than others.

Influencer Typology and Cultural Context

While this study examined influencer credibility broadly, recent literature suggests a nuance between influencer tiers. Our results support the growing trend towards micro- and nano-influencers, who, despite having smaller followings than macro-influencers, often command higher engagement rates and perceived trustworthiness due to their “friend-like” relatability (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Hudders et al., 2021). This distinction is crucial for understanding why credibility had a stronger effect than platform characteristics alone.

These findings also align with recent studies on post-pandemic consumer shifts (2023-2024), where the effectiveness of short-form videos (e.g., TikTok, Instagram Reels) relies heavily on AI-driven personalization and algorithmic delivery. The strong total effect of influencer credibility also supports recent literature emphasizing that contemporary consumers demand authenticity over polished traditional advertisements.

Finally, these results must be interpreted within the Thai cultural context. Thailand is characterized as a collectivist society with high social media penetration (Datareportal, 2024). Thai consumers tend to rely heavily on social validation and peer recommendations rather than direct corporate messaging. This cultural predisposition explains the strong mediating role of consumer attitudes in our model; for Thai users, “liking” and “trusting” the messenger (Influencer) are mandatory prerequisites for “trusting” the brand (Phugsarug, 2023).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This research successfully developed and empirically validated a comprehensive model that illustrates the intricate process through which social media advertising influences consumer purchase decisions. The study’s primary conclusion is that the influence of key advertising factors—platform characteristics, user engagement, and influencer credibility—is not direct but is entirely mediated through a critical psychological sequence. These antecedents function as catalysts that build a positive brand perception, which in turn shapes favorable consumer attitudes. These positive attitudes are then crucial in solidifying purchase intention, the most potent and immediate predictor of an actual purchase decision. The model’s excellent fit and substantial explanatory power, accounting for 66% of the variance in purchase decisions, confirm that this journey-based framework is a robust representation of modern consumer behavior in the digital sphere.

In conclusion, the empirical validation of the structural model, specifically the analysis of total and indirect effects, demonstrates that social media advertising factors primarily function as catalysts.

Academic and Social Contributions

Theoretically, this research makes a significant contribution to the body of knowledge regarding digital consumer behavior. It validates the applicability of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) in the context of modern social media advertising, demonstrating that purchase decisions are not impulsive but result from a psychological process mediated by brand perception and attitudes. Socially, the findings benefit society by illuminating the mechanisms of trust in the digital age. By understanding how influencer credibility shapes decisions, consumers can better navigate the digital landscape, fostering a more digitally literate society that values authenticity over mere popularity.

Managerial Recommendations

The findings offer a clear, empirically-backed roadmap for marketers. Based on the demonstrated mechanics of the consumer journey, the following actions are recommended:

1. **Prioritize Authentic Influencers:** Influencer credibility was the most potent antecedent in driving the entire mediating chain. Marketers should focus on building partnerships with influencers whose authenticity and values align with the brand, as this is crucial for establishing a strong initial brand perception and trust.

2. **Adopt a Journey-Centric Strategy:** The evidence of complete mediation implies that a one-dimensional focus on a single metric (e.g., engagement rates) is insufficient. Brands must develop a holistic strategy that nurtures consumers at each stage: using platform-specific content to build brand perception, fostering an interactive community to shape positive attitudes, and deploying clear calls-to-action to convert those attitudes into firm purchase intention.

3. **Implement Platform-Specific Formats:** Marketers should use TikTok for high-immersion, short-form, entertaining videos to build brand perception through viral challenges rapidly. Conversely, Instagram Reels and grid posts should be leveraged to create highly aesthetic, lifestyle-oriented content that shapes positive consumer attitudes.

Policy Implications for Regulatory Bodies

Beyond managerial strategies, this study offers critical implications for policymakers and regulatory agencies responsible for consumer protection. Given the powerful influence of

influencer credibility found in this study, regulators should strictly enforce transparency standards, such as mandatory disclosure of sponsored content (e.g., #ad, #sponsored), to prevent deceptive advertising practices. Furthermore, agencies should establish clear guidelines to protect consumers from misleading claims made by influencers, ensuring that the digital marketplace remains a fair and safe environment for all users.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged to guide future research.

1. Sampling Method: The study utilized non-probability convenience sampling, which, while practical, may introduce selection bias. Consequently, the findings may not be fully generalizable to the broader Thai population across all demographic segments.
2. Geographic Scope: The scope was confined to Thai social media users. Therefore, the results may reflect specific cultural nuances (e.g., high trust in influencers in collectivist cultures) and may not be directly applicable to Western contexts.
3. Research Design: The research employed a cross-sectional design, capturing data at a single point in time. This prevents the assessment of long-term causal relationships. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to track how consumer attitudes evolve after sustained exposure to social media campaigns.

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