

Consumer Behavior in the Era of Digital Marketing: The Mediating Role of Social Media Engagement, Consumer Trust and Purchase Intention

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Abstract

Digital marketing has moved from a supplementary promotional tool to a strategic consumer-engagement infrastructure that influences how consumers search for information, evaluate brands, build trust, form purchase intentions, and ultimately make buying decisions. This study examines the influence of digital marketing activities on consumer behavior in India by testing the mediating roles of social media engagement, consumer trust, and purchase intention. A quantitative cross-sectional research design was adopted, and data were collected from 412 Indian consumers who actively use digital platforms for product information and online purchasing. The proposed model integrates the Theory of Planned Behavior, Technology Acceptance Model, Relationship Marketing Theory, and the Stimulus-Organism-Response perspective. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was used to validate the measurement model and test the structural relationships. The results show that digital marketing significantly enhances social media engagement and consumer trust. Social media engagement further improves trust and purchase intention, while purchase intention strongly predicts consumer behavior. The mediation analysis confirms that consumer trust and social media engagement are critical psychological mechanisms through which digital marketing is converted into purchase intention. The study contributes to digital consumer-behavior literature by positioning engagement and trust as complementary mediators in an emerging-market setting. It also provides actionable implications for marketers seeking to design credible, interactive, personalized, and conversion-oriented digital strategies in India's fast-expanding digital economy.

Keywords: Digital marketing; consumer behavior; social media engagement; consumer trust; purchase intention; PLS-SEM; India; mediation model

1. Introduction

The digital marketplace has fundamentally reconfigured the interaction between firms and consumers. Consumers now encounter brand information through algorithmically curated advertisements, social media conversations, influencer endorsements, short videos, e-commerce recommendations, search engines, reviews, and peer-generated content. This shift has reduced the boundaries between marketing communication, consumer engagement, and purchase behavior.

The Indian context is especially important because the country has one of the world's largest and fastest-evolving digital consumer bases. IAMA and Kantar reported that India had 958 million active internet users in 2025, with rural users accounting for more than 57% of active internet users and short-video consumption becoming a major driver of digital engagement. DataReportal's Digital 2026 India report similarly indicates that India had around 1.03 billion internet users and 500 million social media user identities by late 2025. These trends make India a highly relevant context for examining how digital marketing shapes consumer behavior.

Despite the growth of digital marketing research, many studies still examine direct effects between marketing exposure and purchase intention while giving insufficient attention to the intermediate psychological mechanisms through which digital

marketing becomes persuasive. In digital environments, consumer trust and engagement are not merely outcomes; they are conversion mechanisms that determine whether digital stimuli translate into purchasing intention and actual behavior.

This paper addresses that gap by testing a mediation model in which digital marketing influences consumer behavior through social media engagement, consumer trust, and purchase intention. The study uses survey data from 412 Indian consumers and PLS-SEM to evaluate the measurement and structural models.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Digital marketing investments continue to increase, but organizations often lack clear empirical evidence on how online promotional efforts move consumers from awareness to engagement, trust, intention, and actual buying behavior. The problem examined in this study is whether digital marketing influences consumer behavior directly through purchase intention and indirectly through social media engagement and consumer trust in the Indian digital-consumer setting.

1.2 Research Gap, Novelty, and Contribution

The recent literature highlights the growing importance of engagement, trust, user-generated content, and social media communication in shaping purchase intention. However, three gaps remain prominent: (i) limited integrated modeling of social media engagement and consumer trust as parallel mediators; (ii) insufficient empirical evidence from India's rapidly expanding digital market; and (iii) limited translation of PLS-SEM results into a transparent mathematical model that connects measurement, structural, and mediation relationships.

- Integrates digital marketing, social media engagement, consumer trust, purchase intention, and consumer behavior into a single empirically tested mediation framework.
- Extends TPB, TAM, Relationship Marketing Theory, and S-O-R logic to an Indian digital-consumer setting.
- Presents a formal mathematical model for measurement, structural, reliability, validity, and mediation testing.
- Provides managerial recommendations for building credible, interactive, and conversion-focused digital campaigns.

1.3 Research Objectives

1. To examine the effect of digital marketing on social media engagement.
2. To investigate the direct influence of digital marketing on consumer trust.
3. To analyze the effect of social media engagement on consumer trust and purchase intention.
4. To determine whether consumer trust influences purchase intention.
5. To evaluate the effect of purchase intention on consumer behavior.
6. To test the mediating roles of social media engagement and consumer trust.

1.4 Research Questions

- How does digital marketing influence social media engagement and consumer trust?
- How do social media engagement and consumer trust shape purchase intention?
- Does purchase intention significantly predict consumer behavior?
- Do social media engagement and consumer trust mediate the relationship between digital marketing and purchase intention?

2. Literature Review

The literature review was expanded to include recent empirical work on digital marketing, social media communication, influencer marketing, user-generated content, engagement, trust, and online purchase intention. Table 1 summarizes selected recent studies that directly inform the proposed model.

Table 1. Recent literature positioning the study within 2024–2026 digital marketing research

Author(s), Year	Context / focus	Method / sample	Key finding	Relevance to this study
Otopah et al. (2024)	Digital marketing, engagement, trust, and purchase intention in bank services	Quantitative SEM; banking consumers	Consumer engagement mediated digital marketing and purchase intention; trust influenced the digital marketing-engagement link.	Supports engagement and trust as mechanisms between digital marketing and intention.
Singh et al. (2025)	Social media communication, consumer attitude, and purchase intention in lifestyle products	PLS-SEM; consumer survey	Social media communication significantly shaped consumer attitude and purchase intention.	Reinforces the role of interactive communication in consumer intention formation.
Ho et al. (2024)	Social media marketing activities and purchase intention in Malaysian property industry	Survey research; 331 respondents	Entertainment, interaction, customization, and WOM positively influenced purchase intention.	Confirms the importance of multi-dimensional digital/social media activities.
Sang et al. (2024)	User-generated content and purchase intention in electronic products	Empirical model; Vietnam electronics sector	UGC influenced user emotions and purchase intention; emotions mediated the UGC-intention link.	Shows the importance of peer content and affective response in digital consumer behavior.
Chung (2025)	UGC on social media and purchase behavior using theory of consumption values	Empirical study; Cogent Business & Management	User-generated social media content shapes consumers' purchase behavior.	Highlights social proof and platform-level content as drivers of purchase behavior.
Adaba (2025)	Social media influencers, trust, intention, and behavior	PLS-SEM; 232 social media users in the UK	Influencers increased purchase intention, but intention weakly converted to behavior; trust effects were nuanced.	Strengthens the need to separate purchase intention from actual behavior.
Sarkis et al. (2026)	Influencer attributes, consumer engagement, and brand trust	PLS-SEM; 400 active social media users	Influencer credibility, fit, interactivity, and authenticity enhanced engagement;	Supports engagement as a bridge between digital cues and trust.

			engagement strongly predicted trust.	
Farhat et al. (2025)	E-commerce purchase intention using UTAUT and trust	SEM-based consumer study	Perceived trust mediated relationships involving performance expectancy, social influence, and perceived risk.	Confirms trust as a mediator in technology-enabled commerce.
Samaniego-Arias et al. (2025)	Social media and purchase intention	Sustainability-oriented consumer study	Social media directly and indirectly influenced purchase intention.	Demonstrates current interest in social media mechanisms behind buying intention.
Ahmed (2025)	Social media platforms and sustainable consumption decisions of young people	Quantitative study	Social media platforms affected sustainable consumption decisions.	Shows broader behavioral power of social media platforms beyond routine purchases.
DataReportal (2025)	Digital 2026 India platform statistics	Secondary digital adoption report	India had approximately 1.03 billion internet users and 500 million social media user identities by late 2025.	Justifies India as a high-impact context for digital consumer-behavior research.
IAMAI & Kantar (2026)	Internet in India Report 2025 press release	National digital adoption study	India crossed 958 million active internet users in 2025; rural users were over 57% of the active base.	Provides current market context for digital marketing research in India.

2.1 Synthesis of Literature

Recent studies converge on three insights. First, digital marketing is most effective when it produces interactive engagement rather than passive exposure. Second, trust remains essential because online transactions involve perceived risk, privacy concerns, misinformation, and uncertainty about seller credibility. Third, purchase intention should not be treated as equivalent to consumer behavior; intention must be empirically linked to behavior because conversion can weaken when trust, security, and convenience are inadequate.

3. Theoretical Foundation and Hypothesis Development

The study is grounded in four complementary perspectives. The Theory of Planned Behavior explains how attitudes and subjective norms contribute to intention and behavior. The Technology Acceptance Model explains how perceived usefulness

and ease of online interaction increase acceptance of digital marketing channels. Relationship Marketing Theory explains why trust and long-term engagement are necessary for sustainable consumer relationships. Finally, the Stimulus-Organism-Response framework positions digital marketing as a stimulus, engagement and trust as organismic internal states, and purchase intention/consumer behavior as responses.

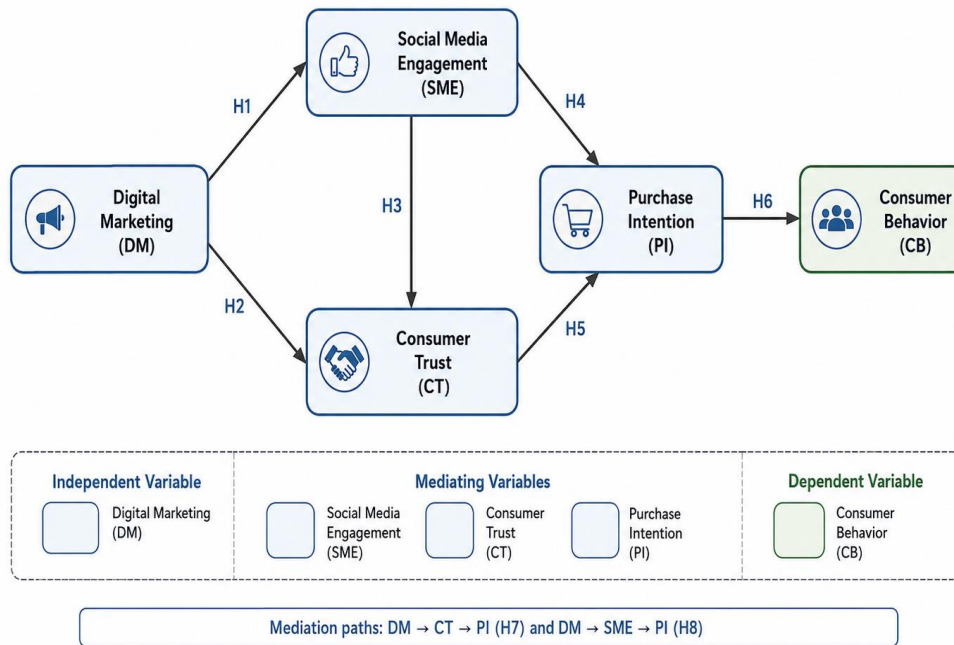


Figure 1. Proposed conceptual framework

3.1 Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Statement
H1	Digital Marketing positively influences Social Media Engagement.
H2	Digital Marketing positively influences Consumer Trust.
H3	Social Media Engagement positively influences Consumer Trust.
H4	Social Media Engagement positively influences Purchase Intention.
H5	Consumer Trust positively influences Purchase Intention.
H6	Purchase Intention positively influences Consumer Behavior.
H7	Consumer Trust mediates the relationship between Digital Marketing and Purchase Intention.
H8	Social Media Engagement mediates the relationship between Digital Marketing and Purchase Intention.

4. Mathematical Modelling and Empirical Specification

To improve methodological transparency, this section formalizes the measurement, structural, and mediation components of the empirical model. The equations are provided as editable Word text so that authors can modify them during final journal submission.

4.1 Latent Construct Notation

Let DM denote Digital Marketing, SME denote Social Media Engagement, CT denote Consumer Trust, PI denote Purchase Intention, and CB denote Consumer Behavior. Each latent construct is measured by observed questionnaire indicators using a reflective measurement specification.

$$x_{ij} = \lambda_{ij}\eta_j + \varepsilon_{ij} \quad (1)$$

where x_{ij} is the i -th observed indicator of latent construct η_j , λ_{ij} is the outer loading, and ε_{ij} is the measurement error term.

4.2 Structural Model

The structural model can be represented as a system of regression-like equations among latent variables:

$$SME = \beta_1 DM + \zeta_1 \quad (2)$$

$$CT = \beta_2 DM + \beta_3 SME + \zeta_2 \quad (3)$$

$$PI = \beta_4 SME + \beta_5 CT + \zeta_3 \quad (4)$$

$$CB = \beta_6 PI + \zeta_4 \quad (5)$$

where β_1 to β_6 represent standardized structural path coefficients and ζ_1 to ζ_4 are structural disturbance terms.

4.3 Mediation Model

Specific indirect effects were assessed using bootstrapping in PLS-SEM. Conceptually, the mediation paths can be written as follows:

$$IE_{(DM \rightarrow CT \rightarrow PI)} = \beta_2 \times \beta_5 \quad (6)$$

$$IE_{(DM \rightarrow SME \rightarrow PI)} = \beta_1 \times \beta_4 \quad (7)$$

$$IE_{(DM \rightarrow SME \rightarrow CT \rightarrow PI)} = \beta_1 \times \beta_3 \times \beta_5 \quad (8)$$

The empirical mediation coefficients reported in the study are interpreted as bootstrapped specific indirect effects. Where exact SmartPLS output is available, confidence intervals should be reported alongside t -values and p -values.

4.4 Reliability and Validity Formulas

Internal consistency and convergent validity were evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE):

$$\alpha = [k / (k - 1)] \times [1 - (\sum \sigma_i^2 / \sigma_t^2)] \quad (9)$$

$$CR = (\sum \lambda_i)^2 / [(\sum \lambda_i)^2 + \sum \theta_i] \quad (10)$$

$$AVE = \sum \lambda_i^2 / n \quad (11)$$

$$t = \beta / SE(\beta) \quad (12)$$

where k is the number of items, σ_i^2 is item variance, σ_t^2 is total scale variance, λ_i is the standardized factor loading, θ_i is the error variance, β is the estimated coefficient, and SE is the standard error obtained through bootstrapping.

5. Research Methodology

5.1 Research Design

The study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design. This design is appropriate because the study aims to test hypothesized relationships among latent constructs at a specific point in time using structured responses and PLS-SEM.

5.2 Population, Sampling, and Data Collection

The target population consisted of Indian consumers who use digital platforms and social media to collect product information and/or make online purchases. Non-probability convenience and purposive sampling were used to recruit digitally active respondents. After screening incomplete responses, 412 valid responses were retained for analysis. All items were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

5.3 Measurement Instrument

Table 2. Measurement constructs and questionnaire items

Construct	Items
Digital Marketing (DM)	DM1: Digital advertisements attract my attention; DM2: Personalized advertisements influence my choices; DM3: Brand content on social media is informative; DM4: Digital marketing improves product awareness.
Social Media Engagement (SME)	SME1: I frequently interact with brand content; SME2: I share brand-related posts; SME3: I comment on product-related content; SME4: Social media helps me evaluate products.
Consumer Trust (CT)	CT1: I trust brands with an active digital presence; CT2: Online information provided by brands is credible; CT3: Digital marketing communications appear reliable; CT4: I feel secure purchasing from digitally active brands.
Purchase Intention (PI)	PI1: I intend to purchase products promoted online; PI2: Digital advertisements encourage purchases; PI3: I consider buying products recommended on social media; PI4: Online brand engagement increases buying intentions.
Consumer Behavior (CB)	CB1: Digital marketing affects my purchases; CB2: Social media influences product selection; CB3: Online reviews influence buying decisions; CB4: I often purchase products discovered online.

5.4 Data Analysis Technique

The data were analyzed using PLS-SEM because the model includes multiple latent variables, mediation relationships, and prediction-oriented structural paths. The analysis followed two stages: (i) measurement model assessment using reliability and convergent validity indicators, and (ii) structural model assessment using path coefficients, bootstrapped t-values, and mediation testing.

5.5 Ethical and Data-Quality Considerations

Participation was voluntary, and the questionnaire was designed for academic research purposes. Respondents were expected to answer anonymously. To strengthen data quality, incomplete responses were excluded. For final journal submission, the authors should retain the anonymized dataset, questionnaire, SmartPLS output, and consent statement as supplementary materials if required by the target journal.

6. Data Analysis and Results

6.1 Measurement Model Evaluation

Cronbach's alpha values for all constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, confirming internal consistency reliability. The source manuscript reports AVE values between 0.61 and 0.76 and Composite Reliability values between 0.84 and 0.93, satisfying commonly recommended thresholds for convergent validity and construct reliability.

Table 3. Reliability and convergent validity summary

Construct	Cronbach's α	Reliability status	Composite reliability	AVE
Digital Marketing (DM)	0.89	Accepted	CR reported within 0.84–0.93 range	AVE reported within 0.61–0.76 range
Social Media Engagement (SME)	0.91	Accepted	CR reported within 0.84–0.93 range	AVE reported within 0.61–0.76 range
Consumer Trust (CT)	0.88	Accepted	CR reported within 0.84–0.93 range	AVE reported within 0.61–0.76 range
Purchase Intention (PI)	0.90	Accepted	CR reported within 0.84–0.93 range	AVE reported within 0.61–0.76 range
Consumer Behavior (CB)	0.87	Accepted	CR reported within 0.84–0.93 range	AVE reported within 0.61–0.76 range

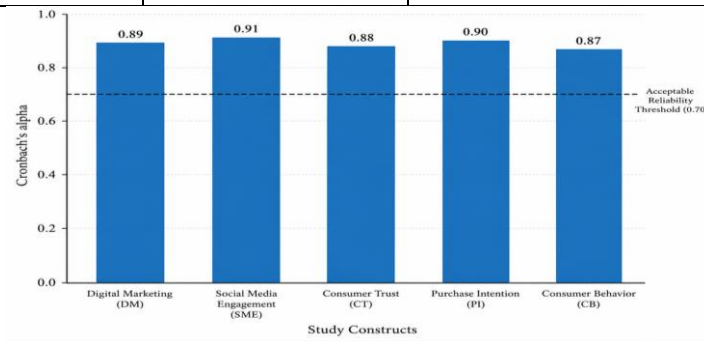


Figure 2. Cronbach's alpha values by construct

6.2 Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

The bootstrapped structural model indicates statistically significant positive paths for all hypothesized direct relationships. The strongest direct relationship is observed between purchase intention and consumer behavior ($\beta = 0.73$), followed by digital marketing and social media engagement ($\beta = 0.68$).

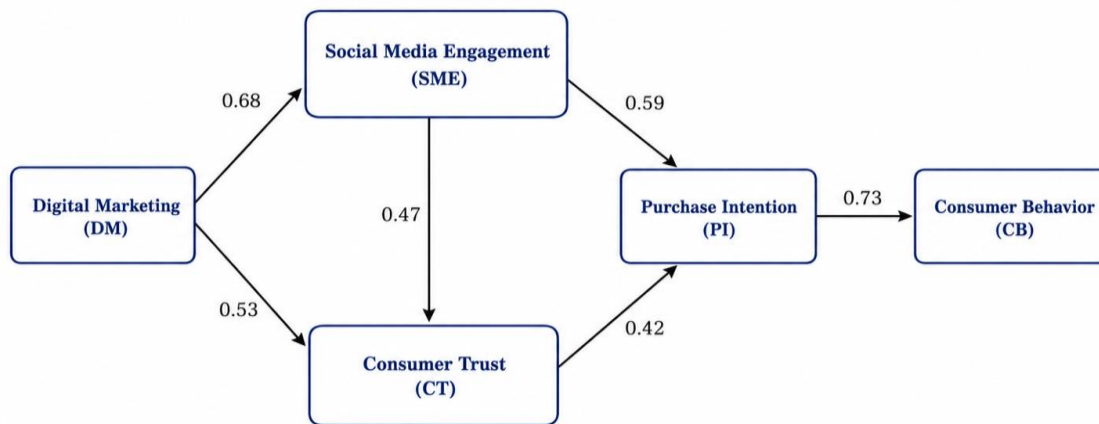
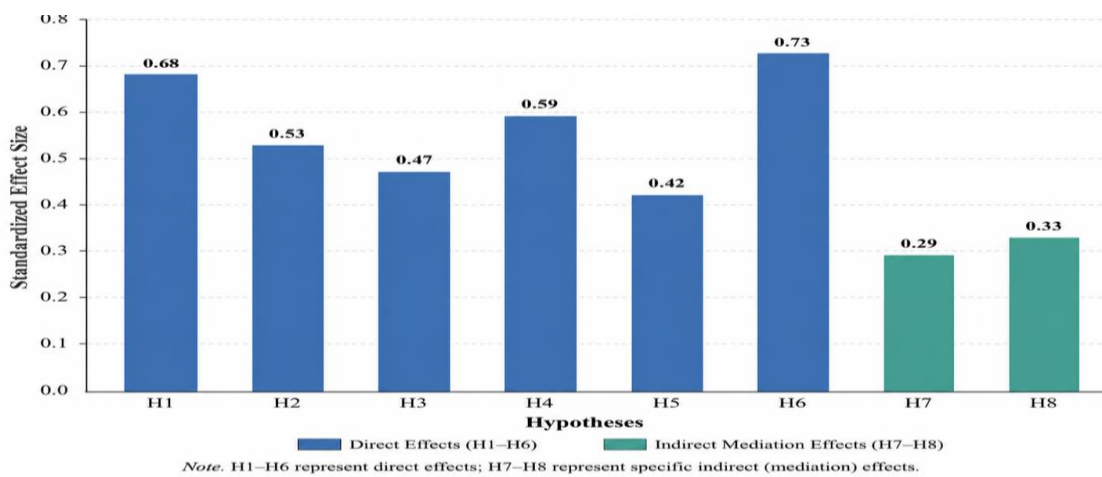


Figure 3. Structural model with standardized coefficients

Table 4. Direct structural path results

Hypothesis	Path	β	t-value	Result
H1	Digital Marketing → Social Media Engagement	0.68	14.52	Supported
H2	Digital Marketing → Consumer Trust	0.53	10.34	Supported
H3	Social Media Engagement → Consumer Trust	0.47	9.88	Supported
H4	Social Media Engagement → Purchase Intention	0.59	12.42	Supported
H5	Consumer Trust → Purchase Intention	0.42	8.97	Supported
H6	Purchase Intention → Consumer Behavior	0.73	16.23	Supported



6.3 Mediation Results

The mediation results indicate that both consumer trust and social media engagement significantly transmit the effect of digital marketing to purchase intention. These results confirm that digital marketing does not operate only as a direct promotional input; it becomes effective when it creates credible engagement and trustworthy brand perceptions.

Table 5. Mediation analysis results

Hypothesis	Specific indirect path	Indirect effect	t-value	Result
H7	Digital Marketing → Consumer Trust → Purchase Intention	0.29	6.11	Supported
H8	Digital Marketing → Social Media Engagement → Purchase Intention	0.33	7.04	Supported

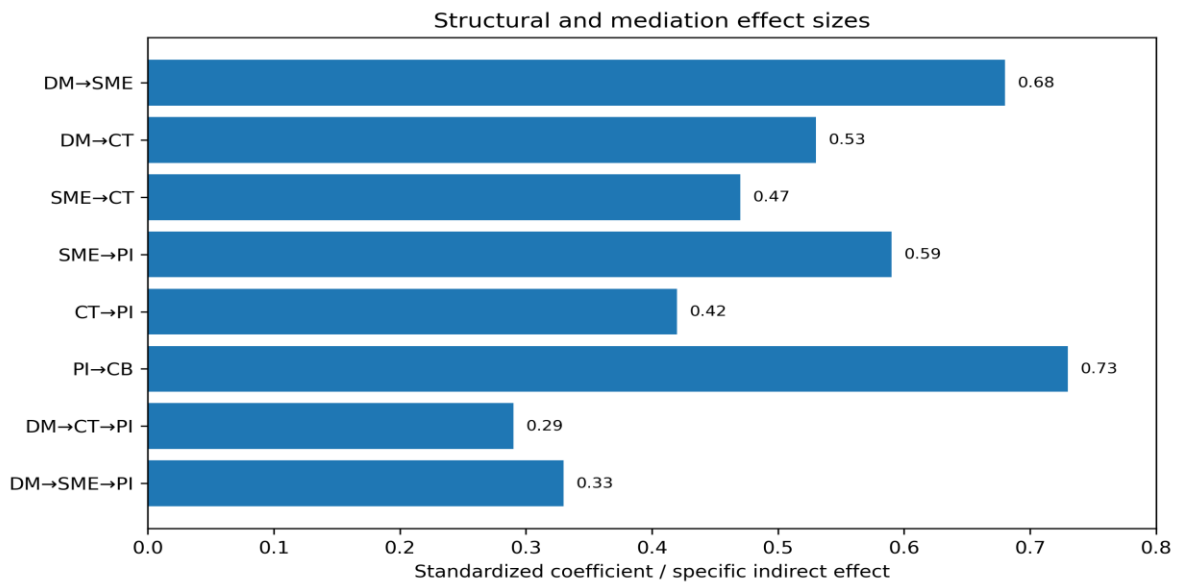


Figure 4. Direct and indirect effect sizes

6.4 Summary of Hypotheses

Table 6. Hypothesis decision summary

Hypothesis	Statement	Decision
H1	Digital Marketing positively influences Social Media Engagement.	Accepted
H2	Digital Marketing positively influences Consumer Trust.	Accepted
H3	Social Media Engagement positively influences Consumer Trust.	Accepted
H4	Social Media Engagement positively influences Purchase Intention.	Accepted
H5	Consumer Trust positively influences Purchase Intention.	Accepted
H6	Purchase Intention positively influences Consumer Behavior.	Accepted
H7	Consumer Trust mediates the relationship between Digital Marketing and Purchase Intention.	Accepted
H8	Social Media Engagement mediates the relationship between Digital Marketing and Purchase Intention.	Accepted

7. Discussion

The results demonstrate that digital marketing has a strong effect on social media engagement and consumer trust. This suggests that digital marketing strategies are most productive when they move beyond simple visibility and create interactive, credible, and personalized experiences. The significant path from social media engagement to trust shows that engagement helps consumers evaluate brands through repeated exposure, peer interaction, and participatory communication.

The effect of social media engagement on purchase intention confirms that engaged consumers are more likely to proceed toward buying. Engagement transforms passive awareness into active consideration. Similarly, the significant trust-intention path demonstrates that credibility and perceived security are central to online purchase decision-making. In digital markets, trust reduces perceived risk and strengthens consumer confidence.

The strongest direct path in the model is between purchase intention and consumer behavior. This is consistent with TPB, where behavioral intention is a proximal predictor of action. However, the recent influencer-marketing literature cautions that intention does not always convert fully into actual purchase behavior. Therefore, marketers must treat purchase intention as a necessary but not sufficient condition for conversion.

8. Theoretical Contributions

- The study extends TPB by positioning digital engagement and trust as mechanisms through which digital stimuli shape intention and behavior.
- The study complements TAM by showing that usefulness of digital marketing content must be accompanied by credibility and interaction to influence consumer decisions.
- The study supports Relationship Marketing Theory by validating trust as a central mediator in digital consumer relationships.
- The study contributes to S-O-R-based marketing research by modeling digital marketing as a stimulus, engagement and trust as organismic states, and purchase intention/behavior as consumer responses.

9. Managerial Implications

Table 7. Managerial implications for digital marketing practice

Strategic area	Recommended action
Personalized communication	Use data-driven segmentation to deliver relevant, non-intrusive messages.
Interactive content	Deploy polls, comments, short videos, live sessions, and review prompts to increase active engagement.
Trust-building design	Use transparent pricing, verified reviews, secure payment cues, privacy notices, and clear return policies.
User-generated content	Encourage authentic reviews, testimonials, and peer-to-peer product discussions.
Influencer fit	Select influencers whose audience, values, and content style match the brand identity.
Conversion monitoring	Track the gap between purchase intention and actual purchase using analytics, retargeting, and post-click behavior.

10. Limitations and Future Research

The study has limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design limits causal interpretation. Second, convenience and purposive sampling may restrict generalizability beyond digitally active Indian consumers. Third, the study relies on self-reported perceptions, which may introduce common method bias. Fourth, the source manuscript did not provide complete item-level outer loadings, discriminant validity statistics, R^2 values, VIF values, SRMR, f^2 , Q^2 , or confidence intervals. These statistics should be extracted from SmartPLS/AMOS output and added before final journal submission if available.

Future research can adopt longitudinal designs, compare urban and rural digital consumers, examine generational differences, incorporate AI-driven personalization and privacy concern variables, and test the model across sectors such as healthcare, education, banking, apparel, FMCG, and OTC medicines. Multi-group analysis and importance-performance map analysis can also provide deeper managerial insights.

11. Conclusion

This study confirms that digital marketing significantly shapes consumer behavior in India through social media engagement, consumer trust, and purchase intention. Digital marketing increases engagement and trust, engagement strengthens trust and intention, trust improves intention, and intention strongly predicts consumer behavior. The mediation results highlight that engagement and trust are not peripheral outcomes but central conversion mechanisms. For firms operating in India's rapidly expanding digital economy, effective marketing requires credible, interactive, personalized, and consumer-centric strategies that convert digital exposure into meaningful behavioral outcomes.

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