

The Effect of Social Media Marketing Activities on the Online Purchase Intention of Sportswear Customers According to the Mediating Role of the Company's Brand

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Purpose: Today, the online purchase intention can create a competitive advantage for the organization and social media marketing activities can be effective in this field. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine the effect of social media marketing activities on the online purchase intention of sportswear customers according to the mediating role of the company's brand.

Methodology: This research based on the purpose was a practical and based on the nature was a cross-sectional from type of descriptive. The population of this study was the sportswear customers of different brands in Mazandaran province who used social media to buy products. The sample size based on the Krejcie and Morgan table was determined 384 people who these people were selected by available sampling method. The tool of the current research was a 32-item researcher-made questionnaire with three dimensions of social media marketing activities (9 items), online purchase intention (2 items) and company's brand (21 items and 4 components of brand loyalty, brand experience, brand attitude and customer-brand relationship). The content validity of the researcher-made questionnaire was estimated at 0.75 by 8 professors and their reliability was estimated ranged from 0.65 to 0.83. Data were analyzed by structural equation modeling in SPSS-V25 and Smart.PLS-V24 software.

Findings: The results of this study showed that there was a positive and significant correlation between the most variables of social media marketing activities, brand loyalty, brand experience, brand attitude, customer-brand relationship and online purchase intention ($P < 0.05$). Also, the model of social media marketing activities on the online purchase intention of sportswear customers according to the mediating role of the company's brand had a good fit, and in the mentioned model, the variable of social media marketing activities on the brand loyalty, brand experience, brand attitude and customer-brand relationship and the variables of brand loyalty, brand experience, brand attitude and customer-brand relationship on the online purchase intention had a direct and significant effect and the variable of social media marketing activities with the mediating of brand loyalty, brand experience, brand attitude and customer-brand relationship on the online purchase intention had an indirect and significant effect ($P < 0.05$).

Conclusion: Social media marketing activities directly and indirectly through company's brand impact on the online purchase intention. Therefore, to improve customers' online purchase intentions can be improved the social media marketing activities and company's brand.

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Introduction

Today, information technologies, especially the Internet, have significantly changed the way information is exchanged and people's participation in purchases and transactions (Fagerstrom, Arntzen, & Volden, 2021). The remarkable development of the Internet, due to technological growth, has had a significant impact on social life, the commercial space, and the business sector of society, one of the affected areas being online shopping (Egan, Villani, & Soule, 2023). In other words, information technologies have played an important role in the growth and development of various industries, creating a major transformation and providing an unparalleled opportunity for businesses and online shopping (Huang & Lin, 2022). Many small businesses sustain their daily lives and continuity through online buying and selling. Therefore, this mode of purchase has become one of the greatest successes stemming from the growth of information technologies, and their economic value is increasing and noteworthy (Shi, De Vos, Cheng, Yang, & Witlox, 2021). Online shopping environments are a unique type of interaction where users turn to fulfill their purchasing goals. This purchasing method is an activity beyond mere buying and involves skills such as product search, working with web tools, etc. (Zhu, Miao, Wang, & Li, 2023). Online shopping customers highly depend on the quality of their shopping experience, which is formed through previous purchasing experiences and affects an individual's willingness to repurchase online (Fu, Yan, & Feng, 2018). Purchase intention represents the amount of effort an individual is willing to make to perform the purchasing behavior and how much they are inclined to expend their effort for a specific purchasing action (Yuan, Moon, Wang, Yu, & Kim, 2021). Additionally, purchase intention signifies the likelihood of a customer's choice in buying products and services, and on the other hand, this intention is associated with a decision to purchase that is made by the consumer about a specific brand (Ye, Lei, Shen, & Xiao, 2020). Online purchase intention is the most important predictor of actual buying behavior and refers to the outcome of customer evaluations of criteria such as website quality, information search, and product evaluation (Al-Adwan, Alrousan, Yaseen, Alkufahy, & Alsoud, 2022).

Online purchase intention is a crucial and determining factor in purchasing behavior, reflecting the customer's inclination to buy online. Several factors, such as website reputation, website quality, social media marketing, and others, influence it (Khorsand Delche & Jalalpour, 2020). In recent years, the popularity of social media has led to significant changes in the fields of marketing and communications. Organizations are now leveraging it as a source of innovation to find additional value for business management (Chen & Lin, 2019). Social media comprises a group of applications connected over the internet based on technological and ideological infrastructures, allowing users and customers to create and exchange information (Balaji et al., 2023). Social media are essential tools for reaching target markets and marketing, to the extent that their effects and consequences cannot be overlooked. Nowadays, social media serve as powerful and influential tools on people's opinions and perspectives, playing a crucial role in making informed decisions about customer and consumer behavior (Ibrahim & Alijarah, 2018). Marketing on social media presents a new way to build profitable relationships with customers. Given the growing trend of people's presence on social media, companies have moved towards a more significant and prominent presence on these platforms to increase customer attraction and retain existing ones (Seo & Park, 2018). Marketing activities through online applications generate information among users and customers, changing the produced content allows managers to make predictions for their business's future and influence the online purchasing behavior and intentions of users and customers (Qenaj & Beqiri, 2022). Influencer marketing is a way to promote a business, service, or product using popular individuals on social media. Today, the power of social media and its impact on increasing sales and attracting customers is undeniable (Majidian, Mahmoudzadeh Vashan, & Hakimpour, 2021). Social media marketing refers to marketing strategies that employ social media to engage in two-way interactions between customers and the company. Among these, the ability to strengthen the social relationship between the consumer and the company is the most critical component of the social media marketing strategy (Yadav & Rahman, 2017). Social media marketing involves using social media to achieve organizational goals with the aim of creating value for stakeholders. Social media marketing activities are a

subset of online marketing activities seeking to grow and prosper their business through online social media (Khan, 2022).

One of the variables that can mediate between social media marketing activities and online purchase intention is the company's brand variable. The brand was introduced for advertising purposes for the first time in the late 1950s and the concept of a brand among management, marketing, and branding experts has extensive definitions. In general, it can be considered as a name, term, sign, design, and a set of elements that distinguish a company's products and services from other companies (Osoulian, Abbaspour Noghani, & Davari, 2017). Branding is an integral and essential part of marketing strategies, and brand marketing is at the heart of business, with well-known and famous global companies and organizations introducing themselves to others through their brands (Golafshan Yousefi, Rahiminik, Nematizadeh, & Momeni, 2023). Brands have the capability to embody and inform others of the desired identity, which both reduces the risk perceived by the customer and saves on decision-making costs (Pedeliento, Andreini, & Veloutsou, 2020). Through increasing marketing efficiency and effectiveness, maintaining proprietary rights, introducing quality levels, creating brand loyalty, improving profits, and achieving a distinct competitive advantage in the competition, the brand can generate profitability and value creation for companies (Lawrence & Kaufmann, 2019). One of the most valuable assets of any company is its trade name or brand, and the more valuable a company's brand is, the more benefits it can gain and attract more customers (Vidler, Stoneham, Edmunds, & Sartori, 2018). Consumer and customer perception as a result of using goods and services depends to some extent on the value created, and companies' ability to create value is not only reliant on tangible assets but also in the application of intangible assets, one of which is the company's brand (Mariano, Silva, Mello, & Santos, 2022). Companies with a strong corporate brand can create a competitive advantage for themselves and, while maintaining their position compared to competitor companies, also improve their position (Brunner & Baum, 2020). Successful companies must present distinct images of themselves to maintain a competitive advantage and create conditions for their intangible assets such as the brand (Meyer-Waarden, Bruwer, & Galan, 2023). Research has been conducted on the impact of social media marketing on online purchasing, but no study was found in this area involving the mediation of company brand. For example, Rastgar, Maleki Minbashrazgah, and Ghazvini (2022) conducted a study on social media marketing activities and customer intent with perceived value and customer satisfaction as mediators. They concluded that social media marketing activities have a direct and significant impact on customer purchase intent, customer perceived value, and customer satisfaction. Moreover, customer perceived value and customer satisfaction have a direct and significant impact on customer purchase intent. Additionally, social media marketing activities have an indirect and significant impact on customer purchase intent through the mediation of customer satisfaction and perceived value. Seifollahi and Eskandari (2021) conducted research on social media marketing and consumer purchase intention with brand image and brand awareness as mediators, finding that social media marketing has a direct and significant impact on brand image, brand awareness, and consumer purchase intention. Brand awareness and brand image have a direct and significant impact on consumer purchase intention. Furthermore, social media marketing has an indirect and significant impact on consumer purchase intention through the mediation of brand awareness and brand image. Khademi and Farazandeh (2020) investigated the factors affecting customer relationship quality in creating brand value and online purchase intention among customers of online stores. They found that customer characteristics, company characteristics, and company's social infrastructure did not significantly affect customer relationship quality. However, interactions had a direct and significant impact on customer relationship quality, which in turn had a direct and significant impact on brand value creation and online purchase intention. Dashti and Mirzaee (2018) studied the effects of social media marketing on online customer behavior and concluded that social media marketing, comprising relational approach components, marketing activities effectiveness, and competitive dynamics, had a direct and significant impact on online customer behavior, which included consumer attitudes, consumers' normative beliefs, and perceived behavioral control. Their research model showed a good fit, indicating that social media marketing directly and significantly affects online customer behavior.

Based on the statistics from the Electronic Commerce Development Center in 2019, there were 1.5 billion e-commerce transactions recorded, marking a 36% growth compared to 2018. This significant growth indicates the increasing consumer interest in online purchases. Furthermore, examining the financial turnover of these transactions reveals the volume of online purchases on the country's internet platform. According to this report, the average amount of each electronic purchase was estimated at 2.79 million Rials, with the total turnover estimated at approximately 4.2 trillion Rials. It is evident that in such a large market, online businesses and internet sellers must understand online shopping behaviors of customers and adopt appropriate strategies for marketing and sales (Mazarei, Askarifar & Nikbakht, 2021). Nowadays, predicting consumer or customer behavior can reflect his/her inclination towards buying a product or receiving a special service in the future (Ahmadi, Gholipoursoleimani, Delafroz & Shahrodi, 2021). Globally, approximately 7% of marketers are using social media marketing, and understanding the role of social media is very important and vital for researchers and managers in the field of marketing. Therefore, social media marketing is an inseparable element of businesses in the current century (Khaleghi, Moeini & JamiPour, 2019). Research on the impact of social media marketing on online purchases has been conducted, but no study was found in this area with the corporate brand as a mediator, and there seems to be a gap for such research in sportswear companies. The results of this study could significantly assist professionals, managers, employers, and planners in sportswear companies in improving the online purchase intention of customers. Since today, online purchase intention can create a competitive advantage for an organization, and social media marketing activities can be effective in this area. Therefore, the goal of this study was to determine the effect of social media marketing activities on the online purchase intention of sportswear customers, considering the mediating role of the corporate brand.

Methodology

This research was applied in purpose and descriptive-cross-sectional in nature. The population of this study consisted of customers of various sportswear brands in Mazandaran province who used social media for purchasing products. The sample size was determined to be 384 based on the Krejcie and Morgan table, and these individuals were selected through convenience sampling. In convenience non-probability sampling, not all members of the population have an equal chance of being selected, and individuals are chosen that researchers have access to. The frequency and percentage of demographic information of the samples including gender, age, monthly income, and education level were presented in Table 1. According to this table, the majority of the samples were male (196 individuals), aged between 31-40 years (115 individuals), had a monthly income of 10-15 million (117 individuals), and had a bachelor's degree (155 individuals).

Table 1. Frequency and percentage frequency results of the sample's demographic information

Variable	Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	196	51
	Female	188	49
Age	20-30	112	29
	31-40	115	30
	41-50	82	21
	>50	75	20
	5<	91	24
Monthly Income (Million Toman)	5-10	107	27
	10-15	117	30
	15-20	41	12
	>20	28	7
Education	Diploma	87	22

Associate Degree	88	23
Bachelor's Degree	155	40
Master's Degree	54	15

In this study, besides the demographic information form mentioned above, the only research instrument was a researcher-made questionnaire with 32 items across three dimensions: social media marketing activities (9 items), online purchase intention (2 items), and brand of the company (21 items and 4 components including brand loyalty, brand experience, brand attitude, and customer-brand relationship). This tool was designed by the current researchers based on in-depth interviews with experts knowledgeable in the research field. A 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (score 1) to strongly agree (score 5) was used to respond to each item. The score for each dimension and component was calculated by summing the scores of its items, with a higher score indicating a greater presence of that feature (dimension or component). The content validity ratio of the 32-item researcher-made questionnaire was estimated at 0.75 by 8 faculty members, and their reliability (dimensions and components) was estimated in the range of 0.65 to 0.83. Additionally, the results of the content validity ratio, average variance extracted, and reliability using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability methods were presented in Table 2, according to which, the results indicated appropriate validity and reliability.

Table 2. Results of factor loadings, mean extracted variance, and reliability with Cronbach's alpha and composite variables methods

Variable	Content Validity	AVE	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability
Social media marketing activities	0.75	0.50	0.78	0.83
Brand loyalty		0.50	0.59	0.77
Brand experience		0.50	0.75	0.83
Attitude towards the brand		0.51	0.65	0.70
Customer-brand relationship		0.50	0.78	0.84
Intention to purchase online		0.67	0.80	0.83

The implementation phases of the current research were as follows: Based on interviews with experts familiar with the research domain, a researcher-designed questionnaire was developed, and then efforts were made to identify samples for the administration of said questionnaire. The samples were selected using a convenience sampling method, and both the demographic information form and the researcher-designed questionnaire were sent to them electronically. They were asked to respond to the research tools. It is worth mentioning that in the virtual space, both the importance and necessity of the research were explained to them, as well as the importance of adhering to ethical considerations. After several follow-ups, the samples finally responded to the research tools, and the data from these tools were entered into a computer for analysis.

In this study, data were analyzed using structural equation modeling in SPSS V25 and Smart.PLS V24 software after collection.

Findings

In the current study, due to multiple follow-ups in the virtual space, there was no dropout in the research samples, and the participation rate in the research was 100%. The results of the correlation coefficients of variables are presented in Table 3, according to which, there was a positive and significant correlation

between most variables of social media marketing activities, brand loyalty, brand experience, brand attitude, customer-brand relationship, and the intention to purchase online ($P < 0.05$).

Table 3. Results of the variables' correlation coefficients

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Social media marketing activities	1					
2. Brand loyalty	0.03	1				
3. Brand experience	0.66**	0.46**	1			
4. Attitude towards the brand	0.66**	0.46**	0.63**	1		
5. Customer-brand relationship	0.05	0.03	0.12*	0.07	1	
6. Intention to purchase online	0.70**	0.08*	0.09*	0.03	0.16**	1

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

The results of the fit indices for the model of social media marketing activities on the online purchase intention of sportswear customers, considering the mediating role of the company brand, were presented in Table 4, indicating that the model had an appropriate fit.

Table 4. Fit indices of the current research model

Variables	Q^2	R^2	GOF
Brand loyalty	0.34	0.55	
Brand experience	0.31	0.54	
Attitude towards the brand	0.18	0.33	0.52
Customer-brand relationship	0.02	0.04	
Intention to purchase online	0.21	0.33	

The examination of the model of social media marketing activities on the online purchase intention of sportswear customers, considering the mediating role of the company brand, was presented in Figures 1 and 2, respectively, for the significance of the coefficients and the standardization of the coefficients.

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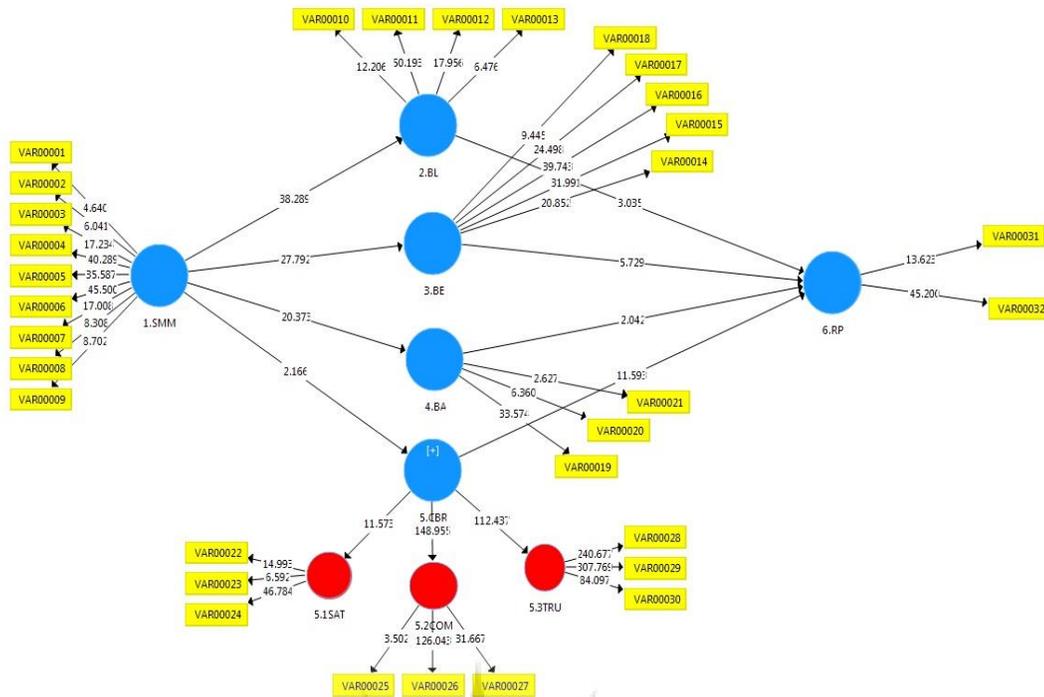


Figure 1. Model of social media marketing activities on the online purchase intention of sportswear customers, considering the mediating role of the company brand in the significance of the coefficients

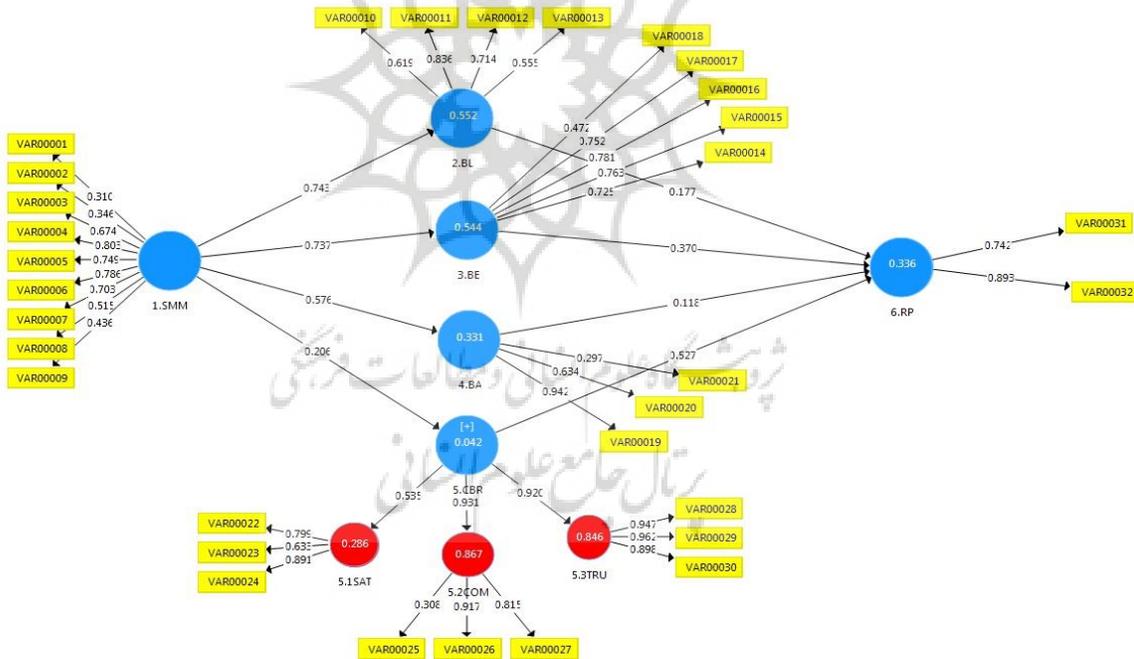


Figure 2. Model of social media marketing activities on the online purchase intention of sportswear customers, considering the mediating role of the company brand in the standardization of the coefficients

The results of the effects in the model of social media marketing activities on the online purchase intention of sportswear customers, considering the mediating role of the company brand, were presented in Table 5. According to these results, the variable of social media marketing activities had a direct and significant effect on brand loyalty, brand experience, brand attitude, and customer-brand relationship. Additionally, the variables of brand loyalty, brand experience, brand attitude, and customer-brand relationship had a direct

and significant effect on online purchase intention. The variable of social media marketing activities, through the mediation of brand loyalty, brand experience, brand attitude, and customer-brand relationship, had an indirect and significant effect on online purchase intention ($P < 0.05$).

Table 5. Results of structural equation modeling

Effects	Beta Coefficient	t-value	p
Social media marketing activities' effect on brand loyalty	0.74	38.28	<0.001
Social media marketing activities' effect on brand experience	0.73	27.79	<0.001
Social media marketing activities' effect on attitude towards the brand	0.57	20.37	<0.001
Social media marketing activities' effect on the customer-brand relationship	0.20	2.16	<0.05
Brand loyalty's effect on the intention to purchase online	0.17	3.03	<0.01
Brand experience's effect on the intention to purchase online	0.37	0.72	<0.001
Attitude towards the brand's effect on the intention to purchase online	0.11	2.04	<0.05
Customer-brand relationship's effect on the intention to purchase online	0.52	11.59	0.001
Social media marketing activities, mediated by brand loyalty, on the intention to purchase online	0.12	4.34	<0.001
Social media marketing activities, mediated by brand experience, on the intention to purchase online	0.27	5.38	<0.001
Social media marketing activities, mediated by attitude towards the brand, on the intention to purchase online	0.06	2.12	<0.05
Social media marketing activities, mediated by the customer-brand relationship, on the intention to purchase online	0.10	2.68	<0.01

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to determine the effect of social media marketing activities on the online purchase intention of sportswear customers, considering the mediating role of the company brand.

The results of this study showed that there was a positive and significant correlation between most variables of social media marketing activities, brand loyalty, brand experience, brand attitude, customer-brand relationship, and online purchase intention. Furthermore, the model of social media marketing activities had an appropriate fit on the online purchase intention of customers of sportswear brands, considering the mediating role of the company's brand. In the model, the variable of social media marketing activities had a direct and significant effect on brand loyalty, brand experience, brand attitude, and customer-brand relationship, and the variables of brand loyalty, brand experience, brand attitude, and customer-brand relationship had a direct and significant effect on online purchase intention. The variable of social media marketing activities had an indirect and significant effect on online purchase intention through the mediation of brand loyalty, brand experience, brand attitude, and customer-brand relationship. These findings are consistent with the research findings of Rastgar et al. (2022), Seifollahi and Eskandari (2021), Khademi and Farazandeh (2020), and Dashti and Mirzaee (2018).

In interpreting the findings of this study, it can be stated that social media marketing activities enable marketers to actively communicate with customers and identify an easy access source. Consequently, it facilitates their search for information about brands and precisely because customers appreciate regular brand communication, it can further increase their brand loyalty. Therefore, social media marketing is essential in creating relationship equity and brand loyalty. Social media marketing can shape customers' attitudes towards the brand. Attitudes can cause individuals to like or dislike goods and services. The more positive an individual's attitude towards a product and brand, the higher the likelihood of using the product, and vice versa, the less favorable the attitude, the less likely the use of that product. Moreover, the experiential

paradigm of social media marketing suggests a fundamental role of marketing communications in enhancing customer experience and brand value, which can combine sensory, emotional, cognitive, and social experiences of customers in a new way. Researchers, in addition to traditional channels such as television advertising, personal selling, and sales promotion, confirmed the importance of online channels, namely the company's website and social media platforms, in the marketing communication mix of the company and their vital role in shaping the brand experience. Furthermore, the more effective the interaction and communication with customers, the stronger the existence of customer and brand relationships becomes, which may lead to brand loyalty. Social media marketing, as an active communication tool, offers more communicative relationships between customers and businesses, and this two-way relationship provides extensive information about brands that are easily accessible to users and customers, providing good opportunities for marketers to have broader access and establish more effective long-term relationships with consumers and customers. Therefore, a positive effect was found between social media marketing activities and the company's brand, including brand loyalty, brand experience, brand attitude, and customer-brand relationship.

In interpreting other findings of this study, it can be stated that brand loyalty will lead to the intention to purchase online. A customer or consumer who is highly loyal to a brand will not easily shift their purchase to another brand, regardless of what happens to that brand. As their loyalty to a brand increases, their vulnerability to threats and attacks from competing product and service brands can be reduced. Therefore, loyalty to a brand is one of the main indicators of a company's brand equity, which is associated with sales opportunities and signifies the guarantee of the company's profit in the future. Brand experience also affects online purchase intention, and in an online shopping environment, previous online shopping experience leads to reduced ambiguities and ultimately increases the customer's purchase intention. Online buyers who have purchased products and services online are more inclined to repurchase online compared to others. Satisfactory online purchases lead to future online purchases, while negative past experiences decrease the intention to purchase online. When customers have a positive emotional inclination towards a store, they tend to perceive more value. In other words, positive emotional responses cause consumers to go beyond the logical evaluation of a store and enhance their perception of the value propositions. Additionally, attitudes towards the brand affect online purchase intention. Attitude is primarily the result of a cognitive process; that is, it originates solely from a consultative or rule-based, analytical, purposeful, and evaluative approach. When a customer saves time and enjoys the convenience of shopping at any time and place, online shopping is perceived as desirable by the customer. Consequently, gaining insight into how buyers' and customers' attitudes are formed and how they affect intentions and behavioral outcomes for online purchasing is essential. Furthermore, the customer-brand relationship affects the intention to purchase online. Interaction between customers and employees can impact the emotional attachment and overall customer experience. Studies indicate that the interaction between customers and employees affects the shopping experience in an online environment, while customer satisfaction is often influenced by the quality of the interpersonal interaction between customers and employees.

Every research and scholarly activity has limitations, and this study faced limitations including the use of self-reporting tools for data collection, limiting the research population to customers of various sportswear brands in Mazandaran province who used social media for purchasing products. Additionally, few studies have been conducted on the relationships between social media marketing activities, online purchase intention, and company brand, which somewhat complicates comparing the results of this study with previous studies. Therefore, further research is recommended on the relationships between social media marketing activities, online purchase intention, and company brand in customers of different brands. Moreover, the use of in-depth interviews for data collection, research on sportswear customers in other provinces, even luxury cosmetic users, and the use of random sampling methods are suggested. According to the results of this study, social media marketing activities directly and indirectly affect online purchase intention through the company

brand. Therefore, to improve customers' online purchase intentions, social media marketing activities and company branding can be enhanced.

Ethical Considerations

The authors endeavored to adhere to all ethical considerations and guidelines.

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Authors' Contributions

In the current study, the first author was responsible for data collection, while the other authors were responsible for data analysis and manuscript writing.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there was no conflict of interest.

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