



## Marketing Strategy and Social Influence: How Reference Groups and Internet Marketing Influence Purchasing Decisions Through Brand Image

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### Abstract:

This study explores the interconnections among reference groups, internet marketing, brand image, and consumer buying decisions, focusing on Gen Z consumers. It investigates how reference groups and internet marketing directly impact purchasing behavior and how brand image mediates these relationships. The research employs a quantitative approach with data collected from a survey of Gen Z respondents, analyzed using structural equation modeling. The findings reveal that both reference groups and internet marketing significantly influence buying decisions. Additionally, brand image is identified as a crucial mediating variable that enhances the effects of reference groups and internet marketing on consumer behavior. High convergent and discriminant validity and reliability of the constructs were confirmed. The study contributes to the understanding of consumer behavior by highlighting the mediating role of brand image and offers practical implications for businesses seeking to optimize their marketing strategies through enhanced brand image and strategic use of reference groups and digital marketing. The results underscore the importance of a strong brand image in leveraging the impact of digital marketing and social influences on consumer purchasing decisions.

**Keywords:** Brand Image; Buying Decisions; Internet Marketing; Reference Group

## 1. Introduction

Consumer purchasing choices are critical, as they significantly shape consumer behavior, influence market trends, and impact supply and demand dynamics across diverse industries (Stankevich, 2017). These decisions are essential for businesses to strategize effectively, as they provide valuable insights into the needs and preferences of their target market (Zhao, 2020). By understanding consumer buying behavior, companies can develop more effective marketing strategies that cater to the specific needs of their customers (Zhao, 2020). This allows them to tailor their products and communication to meet the preferences of their target market better, ultimately driving sales and enhancing brand loyalty through a more personalized customer experience (Omar & Sawmong, 2007). Consumer purchasing decisions have significant economic implications, as they directly shape market demand and broader macroeconomic trends across industries (Jaller & Ullström, 2008). These decisions play a crucial role in determining supply and demand equilibria, which in turn impact production, pricing, and the overall functioning of the market economy (Reyes-Heroles et al., 2020). Consumer purchasing decisions can significantly influence market trends and the broader economic system, affecting production, supply chain operations, and overall economic functioning and growth (Stourm et al., 2020).

Informed consumer purchasing decisions are crucial for driving customer satisfaction and fostering long-term brand loyalty (Clemons, 2008). Satisfied customers tend to make more repeat purchases, which supports the continued growth and retention efforts of the organization (Gómez et al., 2004). Consumers who feel their needs are met and preferences catered to are more likely to develop a positive emotional attachment to the brand, which fosters brand loyalty and reduces their inclination to switch to competitors (Zhuo et al., 2022). Additionally, repeat purchases generate a steady revenue stream and contribute to the overall growth and profitability of the organization (Chauhan, 2023).

Reference groups, including family, friends, celebrities, and social media influencers, play a significant role in shaping and influencing consumer behavior (Li et al., 2021). These reference groups often serve as a source of information, guidance, and social norms that consumers use to inform their purchasing decisions (Hoonsopon & Puriwat, 2016). The opinions, preferences, and behaviors of these reference groups can have a profound impact on an individual's attitudes, beliefs, and, ultimately, their buying behavior (Fang et al., 2019). Reference groups function as a point of comparison for individuals, influencing their attitudes, values, and consumer decision-making processes (Hoonsopon & Puriwat, 2016).

The importance of reference groups has grown significantly in the digital age, as online communities and social networks have become crucial platforms for consumers to connect, interact, and seek guidance (Shui-ping et al., 2020). Consumers increasingly look to their reference groups, such as family, friends, and social media influencers, for information, advice, and validation when making purchasing decisions (Enginkaya & Yilmaz, 2014). The opinions, preferences, and behaviors of these reference groups have a profound impact on individuals' attitudes, beliefs, and buying behavior, as they serve as a point of comparison and social validation (Žák & Hasprová, 2020). Internet marketing facilitates direct interaction and two-way communication between brands and consumers, fostering increased engagement, trust, and loyalty (Grewal et al., 2003). Tactics such as content marketing, online reviews, and digital advertising play critical roles in shaping consumer perceptions, providing valuable information, and ultimately driving purchasing decisions (Enginkaya & Yilmaz, 2014). By leveraging these digital marketing strategies, brands can more effectively reach, engage, and influence their target audience throughout the customer journey (Lee & Cho, 2019).

A favorable brand image cultivates consumer trust and perceived worth, thereby increasing the likelihood of consumers selecting a particular brand (Nawaz et al., 2020). It functions as a differentiating factor, enabling brands to distinguish themselves within a competitive market landscape (Cretu & Brodie, 2009). Brand image can operate as a mediating variable, either amplifying or attenuating the impacts of reference groups and internet marketing on purchasing decisions (Lee et al., 2014). Comprehending this mediating role can yield deeper insights into the consumer decision-making process (Kuksov et al., 2013). This study proposes an integrated conceptual framework that examines the interconnected relationships among reference groups, internet marketing, brand image, and consumer buying decisions. The framework provides a basis for understanding how these key variables interact to shape consumer behavior. Empirical evidence has demonstrated significant associations between these factors, warranting further investigation. This research aims to address gaps in the existing literature by examining the mediating influence of brand image on the relationships between the other variables.

This study's examination of the interplay among reference groups, internet marketing, and brand image in shaping consumer buying decisions offers valuable practical implications for businesses. By leveraging these insights, companies can devise more impactful marketing strategies tailored to their target market. Moreover, this research contributes to the academic literature by providing novel perspectives on consumer behavior and marketing, particularly through the investigation of brand image as a mediating factor that enhances our understanding of the consumer decision-making process. This research will involve Gen Z respondents in deciding their product purchases. Given the high digital immersion and social media influence of this cohort, their purchasing behavior is likely to be significantly shaped by reference groups and internet marketing. Drawing on the synthesized conceptual framework, this study will collect primary data through a survey of Gen Z consumers to empirically investigate the hypothesized relationships. The study will employ structural equation modeling to analyze the data and test the mediating role of brand image.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Influence of Reference Group on Buying Decision

Reference groups, which can include family, friends, peers, and social media influencers, exert a significant influence on consumer purchasing decisions (Singh & Singh, 2018). Individuals often look to their reference groups for information, guidance, and social validation when making buying choices (Latif et al., 2014). Reference groups can shape consumer attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors through several mechanisms. By providing information and advice, reference groups can help consumers navigate the decision-making process and evaluate product alternatives (Hoonsopon & Puriwat, 2016). Moreover, the perceived norms and expectations of reference groups can lead individuals to conform their purchasing behavior to align with group preferences, a phenomenon known as normative influence (Shui-ping et al., 2020). Reference groups can have a greater impact on the purchase intentions of some consumer segments compared to others. Utilitarian shoppers, for instance, tend to have higher purchase intentions when influenced by private reference groups, as they seek information and practical guidance (Hoonsopon & Puriwat, 2016). In contrast, hedonic and social value shoppers may be less susceptible to the influence of reference groups, as their purchasing decisions are more heavily influenced by personal preferences and social signaling (Hoonsopon & Puriwat, 2016).

Hypothesis 1: Reference groups have a positive influence on consumer buying decisions.

### 2.2 The Effect of Internet Marketing on Buying Decision

The rise of digital technologies and the proliferation of internet-based marketing have significantly transformed the consumer decision-making process. Internet marketing, including tactics such as content marketing, online reviews, and targeted advertising, can powerfully influence consumer behavior. Online platforms and social media have become crucial spaces for consumers to seek information, evaluate options, and validate their purchasing decisions. Digital marketing strategies can effectively reach, engage, and persuade consumers throughout the customer journey, ultimately shaping their buying decisions. Empirical evidence suggests that digital marketing has a direct and positive impact on purchase intention (Dastane, 2020). Consumers' increased reliance on digital devices and their exposure to online communities, product information, and targeted advertisements have enhanced their trust and willingness to explore new purchasing approaches (Dastane, 2020). By leveraging the interactivity and personalization capabilities of digital channels, internet marketing can foster stronger relationships and loyalty between brands and consumers. These enhanced consumer-brand connections can translate into increased purchase intent and consumer retention.

Hypothesis 2: Internet marketing has a positive influence on consumer buying decisions.

### 2.3 The Mediating Role of Brand Image

Brand image, defined as the set of perceptions, beliefs, and associations that consumers hold about a particular brand, plays a critical role in the consumer decision-making process. A favorable brand image can serve as a differentiating factor, enabling brands to stand out in a crowded marketplace and capture consumer attention and preference. Reference groups and internet marketing can influence brand image, which in turn impacts purchasing decisions. Reference groups can shape brand perceptions through the sharing of experiences, endorsements, and recommendations (Leparoux et al., 2019). Likewise, digital marketing strategies, such as targeted advertising, content marketing, and influencer collaborations, can cultivate a desirable brand image in the

minds of consumers (Dastane, 2020). As a mediating variable, brand image can amplify or attenuate the effects of reference groups and internet marketing on consumer buying decisions. A strong, positive brand image can reinforce the influence of reference groups and digital marketing, leading to higher purchase intentions. Conversely, a weak or unfavorable brand image may diminish the impact of these factors on consumer behavior (Fianto & Fianto, 2020).

Hypothesis 3: Brand image mediates the relationships between reference groups, internet marketing, and consumer buying decisions.

### 3. Method

The study will adopt a quantitative research design, utilizing a survey-based approach to collect data from a sample of Gen Z consumers. This study uses a simple random sampling technique. The target population will be Gen Z consumers (born between 1997-2012) who are active online shoppers. The survey instrument will include measures for the key constructs: reference group influence, internet marketing, brand image, and buying decision. Scale items will be adapted from validated measures used in previous studies. Structural equation modeling will be employed to analyze the data and test the hypothesized relationships. The analysis will involve assessing the measurement model, evaluating the structural model, and examining the mediating effects of brand image.

The influence of reference groups will be evaluated using a 12-item scale that has been validated in prior studies (Bearden et al., 1989) (Park & Lessig, 1977) (Moschis & Churchill, 1978). For instance, one scale item is "I consult my peers for information before making a purchase decision". Similarly, brand image will be measured using a 12-item scale drawn from previous research (Alvarado-Karste & Guzmán, 2020) (Yoo & Donthu, 2001) (Pappu et al., 2005) (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2001) (Fullerton, 2003) (Keller, 1993), which includes the item "This brand maintains a consistent level of quality". Additionally, the Internet marketing variables will be measured using 12 items, one of which is "I interact with this brand through social media". These items were adapted from prior research (Mangold & Faulds, 2009) (Ellis-Chadwick & Doherty, 2012) (Pulizzi, 2012) (Zeithaml et al., 2002). Lastly, the Buying Decision variable will be assessed using 16 items, such as "I compared different brands before deciding to buy". All items for the Buying Decision variable were adapted from previous studies (Dodds et al., 1991) (Oliver, 1980) (Zeithaml et al., 1996) (Lichtenstein et al., 1993).

### 4. Findings and discussion

#### 4.1 Finding

##### 4.1.1 Validity Test

**Table 1.** Convergent Validity

	<b>Brand image</b>	<b>Buying decision</b>	<b>Internet marketing</b>	<b>Reference group</b>
X1.1				0.762
X1.10				0.796
X1.5				0.818
X1.7				0.821
X1.8				0.802
X1.9				0.809
X2.1			0.783	
X2.11			0.782	
X2.2			0.802	
X2.3			0.804	
X2.4			0.792	
X2.6			0.803	
X2.9			0.804	
Y11		0.817		
Y14		0.787		
Y16		0.814		
Y3		0.808		
Y5		0.833		
Y6		0.797		
Y9		0.807		

Z10	0.792
Z11	0.810
Z3	0.810
Z4	0.807
Z6	0.789
Z8	0.820

The convergent validity analysis results presented in the table demonstrate that the standardized factor loadings for the indicators under the constructs of Brand Image, Buying Decision, Internet Marketing, and Reference Group all exceed the acceptable threshold of 0.70. This indicates good convergent validity for each construct. Specifically, the indicators for Brand Image range from 0.762 to 0.821, for Buying Decision from 0.787 to 0.833, for Internet Marketing from 0.782 to 0.804, and for Reference Group from 0.789 to 0.820. These high factor loadings suggest that the indicators are well-aligned with their respective constructs, providing strong evidence that the constructs are accurately measured by the indicators. Therefore, the constructs in this study have satisfactory convergent validity, supporting the reliability of the measurement model.

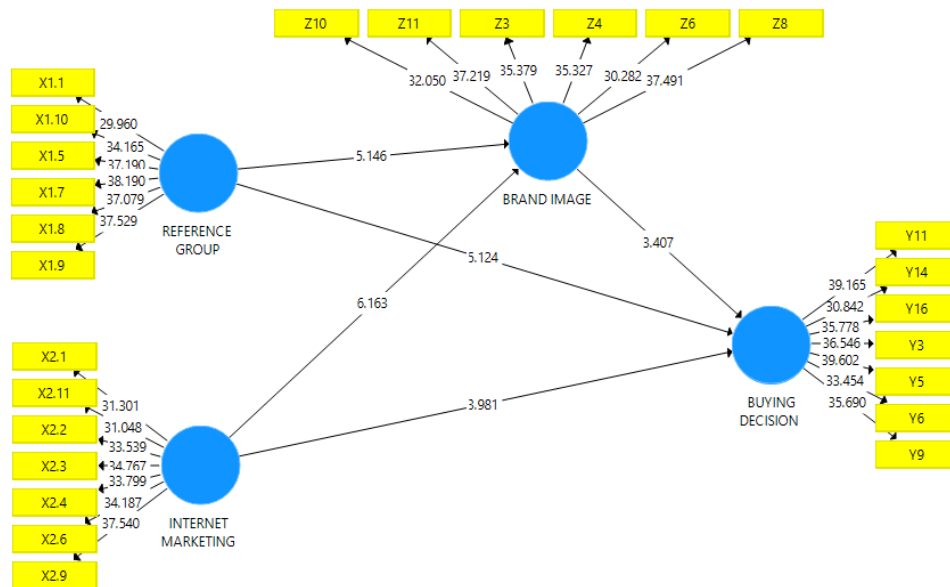
#### 4.1.2 Reliability Test

**Table 2.** Reliability Test

	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Brand image	0.891	0.917	0.647
Buying decision	0.912	0.930	0.655
Internet marketing	0.903	0.924	0.633
Reference group	0.888	0.915	0.642

The reliability test results for Brand Image, Buying Decision, Internet Marketing, and Reference Group are presented with Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability, and Average Variance Extracted values. All constructs demonstrate strong reliability, with Cronbach's Alpha exceeding the accepted 0.70 threshold, indicating high internal consistency. Specifically, Brand Image has a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.891, Buying Decision 0.912, Internet Marketing 0.903, and Reference Group 0.888. The Composite Reliability values are also above the recommended 0.70 minimum, further supporting the reliability of the constructs. The CR values are 0.917 for Brand Image, 0.930 for Buying Decision, 0.924 for Internet Marketing, and 0.915 for Reference Group, demonstrating consistent measurement by their respective indicators. The Average Variance Extracted values for all constructs are above the 0.50 threshold, indicating good convergent validity. Brand Image has an AVE of 0.647, Buying Decision 0.655, Internet Marketing 0.633, and Reference Group 0.642, suggesting a substantial amount of variance in the indicators is explained by the constructs. Overall, the constructs exhibit high reliability and validity, confirming the robustness of the measurement model.

**Figure 1.** Structural Equation Modeling



4.1.3 Direct Effect

Table 3. Direct Effect

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics ( O/STDEV )	P Values
Internet marketing -> buying decision	0.325	0.324	0.082	3.981	0.000
Reference group -> buying decision	0.391	0.396	0.076	5.124	0.000

The direct effect analysis reveals that both Internet Marketing and Reference Group exert significant positive influences on Buying Decision. The path coefficient for the relationship between Internet Marketing and Buying Decision is 0.325, with a T-statistic of 3.981 and a P Value of 0.000, indicating a statistically significant relationship. Likewise, the path coefficient for the relationship between Reference Group and Buying Decision is 0.391, with a T-statistic of 5.124 and a P Value of 0.000, also demonstrating a statistically significant impact. These findings suggest that both Internet Marketing and Reference Group play crucial roles in shaping consumers' purchasing decisions.

4.1.4 Indirect Effect

Table 4. Indirect Effect

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics ( O/STDEV )	P Values
Internet Marketing -> Brand Image -> Buying Decision	0.122	0.121	0.043	2.827	0.005
Reference Group -> Brand Image -> Buying Decision	0.106	0.103	0.035	2.991	0.003

The indirect effect analysis reveals the mediating function of Brand Image in the relationships between Internet Marketing and Buying Decisions, as well as between Reference Group and Buying Decisions. Regarding the path from Internet Marketing to Buying Decisions via Brand Image, the path coefficient is 0.122 with a T-statistic of 2.827 and a P-Value of 0.005. This indicates a statistically significant indirect effect, suggesting that Internet Marketing positively influences Buying Decisions through its impact on Brand Image. Similarly, for the path from Reference Group to Buying Decision through Brand Image, the path coefficient is 0.106 with a T-statistic of 2.991 and a P-Value of 0.003. This also indicates a statistically significant indirect effect, demonstrating that Reference Group positively affects Buying Decisions via the mediating role of Brand Image. These findings underscore the importance of Brand Image as a mediator in the influence of both Internet Marketing and Reference Groups on

Buying Decisions, highlighting that enhancing Brand Image can amplify the positive effects of these factors on consumers' purchasing behavior.

## 4.2 Discussion

### 4.2.1 Reference groups and consumer buying decisions

The findings from this study contribute to the existing literature by empirically demonstrating the influential role of Internet Marketing and Reference Groups on Buying Decisions, with Brand Image serving as a significant mediating variable. The results reveal that Internet Marketing and Reference Groups have direct positive effects on Buying Decisions, corroborating previous research (Harmeling et al., 2017) (Fianto & Fianto, 2020). Additionally, the study highlights the mediating function of Brand Image, which emerged as a crucial factor in shaping the influence of Internet Marketing and Reference Groups on Buying Decisions. (Fianto & Fianto, 2020). Reference groups have been found to exert significant influence on consumer behavior by shaping individuals' attitudes, beliefs, and purchasing decisions. (Li & Liang, 2010)

### 4.2.2 Internet Marketing and Buying Decisions

The study also provides insights into the impact of Internet Marketing on Buying Decisions. The findings suggest that effective Internet Marketing strategies can positively influence consumers' purchasing decisions, aligning with existing literature on the topic. (Fianto & Fianto, 2020) Internet Marketing allows businesses to create and communicate compelling brand narratives, engage with target audiences, and leverage social media influence, all of which can enhance Brand Image and ultimately drive Buying Decisions.

### 4.2.3 Brand Image as a mediator

The study's most significant contribution lies in the identification of Brand Image as a crucial mediating variable in the relationships between Internet Marketing, Reference Groups, and Buying Decisions. (Wang & Yang, 2010) (Fianto & Fianto, 2020). The results demonstrate that Brand Image plays a pivotal role in translating the positive effects of Internet Marketing and Reference Groups into tangible purchasing behavior (Shui-ping et al., 2020). By serving as a mediating variable, Brand Image amplifies the influence of these factors, enabling them to shape consumer buying decisions more effectively (Chauhan, 2023). Through the enhancement of Brand Image, businesses can harness the power of Internet Marketing and Reference Groups to drive more favorable and measurable purchasing outcomes (Gong et al., 2023).

By enhancing Brand Image, businesses can amplify the influence of their marketing efforts and the power of reference groups, leading to more favorable Buying Decisions (Brinker & Haasis, 2022). This can be achieved through the development of a strong, positive, and differentiated brand identity that resonates with consumers (Katerina et al., 2023). Effective Internet Marketing strategies that focus on building brand awareness, fostering brand engagement, and creating compelling brand narratives can contribute to the enhancement of Brand Image (Fu, 2022). Additionally, leveraging the influence of reference groups, such as opinion leaders and social influencers, can further strengthen brand image and impact consumer buying decisions.

## 5. Conclusion and recommendation

The present study provides empirical evidence on the influential role of Internet Marketing and Reference Groups in shaping consumers' Buying Decisions, with Brand Image emerging as a significant mediating variable that amplifies these relationships. The findings reveal that effective Internet Marketing strategies and the influence of Reference Groups can positively impact consumers' purchasing behavior, and that enhancing Brand Image plays a crucial role in translating these effects into favorable purchasing outcomes.

The findings suggest that effective Internet Marketing strategies and the influence of Reference Groups can positively impact consumer Buying Decisions, and that Brand Image plays a crucial mediating role in these relationships. By leveraging Internet Marketing to build strong, positive brand identities and tapping into the influential power of Reference Groups, businesses can enhance Brand Image and more effectively drive favorable purchasing outcomes from consumers.

By understanding the interplay between these factors, businesses can develop more targeted and effective marketing strategies to enhance Brand Image and ultimately drive favorable purchasing outcomes. This may involve crafting compelling brand narratives, leveraging social media to engage with target audiences, collaborating with influential reference groups or opinion leaders, and consistently delivering high-quality products or services that reinforce a positive brand identity. By strategically aligning their Internet Marketing efforts with the influence of relevant reference groups, businesses can more effectively shape consumer perceptions and drive desirable buying decisions.

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