



Effect Of Social Media Marketing Communication On Customer Behavioral Intention Of Fast-Food Restaurant Chain Customers In Sri Lanka: Brand Image As A Mediator

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ABSTRACT

The main goal of this research was to identify the effect of two factors of social media marketing communication (social media advertising and electronic word of mouth) on customer behavioral intention in the fast-food industry in Sri Lanka. It also aimed to determine if brand image mediates the relationship between two features of social media marketing communication and customer behavioral intention. The data was collected from the customers of different fast-food restaurant chains in the western province of Sri Lanka through a quantitative survey with a well-structured questionnaire. After obtaining the desired responses, the data was analyzed by the AMOS 21- structural equation modeling. The results confirmed the significance of brand image in customer behavioral intention. Above all, the findings showed that social media advertising and electronic word of mouth have a significant effect on customer behavioral intention and brand image in the fast-food restaurant chain industry in Sri Lanka. The results also confirmed that brand image mediates the relationship between social media marketing communication features (social media advertising and electronic word of mouth) and customer behavioral intention. Theoretically, this research advances the most recent literature by exploring the mediating effect of brand image among the two features of social media marketing communication and customer behavioral intention with new empirical insights from Sri Lanka, taking into account that earlier research of this nature in the South Asia region is scarce.

Keyword: fast-food industry, social media marketing, social media advertising, electronic word of mouth, brand image, customer behavioural intention

01. Introduction

Food is one of the basic needs of humans and they consume different food items to satisfy their hunger and sustenance (Kamilah & Nandiyanto, 2024; Nirmani et al., 2017). However, food is not only about hunger and sustenance. It reflects the culture of society (Rajan, 2023). A society's food consumption patterns are shaped by its agricultural production, purchasing power, eating habits, cultural traditions, food processing, and food trade practices (Yin et al., 2020). It is commonly called food culture.

Food culture in Sri Lanka is based on Buddhist culture. The traditional foods of Sri Lanka have a long history and unique traditions that have been continued for several thousands of years (Mihiranie et al., 2020). The

majority of Sri Lankans are generally fond of cooking food items in their homes, regardless of whether they are rural or urban (Bandara et al., 2021; Saraniya & Kennedy, 2015). However, the advent of liberalization in the new open economy in 1970 brought about a profound shift in this food culture. The open economy inevitably led to restless lifestyles among Sri Lanka's urban people. They resorted to buying fast food instead of home-cooked food. Many international companies came together to expand the fast-food industry to meet the growing consumer needs. Therefore, Sri Lankan people have been intensively adopting a lifestyle consistent with this fast-food concept (Saraniya & Kennedy, 2015; Sriyalatha & Kumarasinghe, 2021).

Sri Lanka's fast-food industry is growing rapidly. The first international fast-food restaurant chain was established in Sri Lanka in 1991. It was Pizza Hut (Dawoodbhoy, 2018). By the beginning of 2024, the number of fast-food restaurant chains operating in Colombo, the commercial capital of Sri Lanka, was 132. 128 fast-food restaurant chains were operating in Sri Lanka's main commercial province, the Western Province KFC, McDonald's, Pizza Hut, Burger King, Subway, and Taco Bell are at the forefront of those fast-food restaurants (Dissabandara & Dissanayake, 2020; Tripadvisor, 2024).

Many factors influence the growth of fast-food consumption in Sri Lanka with the growing knowledge and adoption of Western culture modify food consumption patterns among Sri Lankan families (Gurunathasivam et al., 2023; Saraniya & Kennedy, 2015; Sriyalatha & Kumarasinghe, 2021). Especially: 1) the growing contribution of women in the workforce; 2) long working days; 3) increasing household income; 4) the declining number of families; 5) rapid urbanization; 6) development in the tourism industry; 7) extended life expectancy; 8) growing level of education in consumers; 9) rising per capita income; 10) way The factors of socializing, 11) fun and entertaining, and 12) promotion activities by fast-food restaurants, distribution networks, and marketing systems have directly led to the growth of the use of fast-food in Sri Lanka (Gurunathasivam et al., 2023; Salwathura & Ahmed, 2023; Bandara et al., 2021; Devendra, 2015; Saraniya & Kennedy, 2015).

Fast-food became more widespread in Sri Lanka with the advent of inexpensive fast-food items, the start of fast-food home delivery services like Uber and Pickme, and the introduction of rice, a staple meal of the country, as fast-food (Saraniya & Kennedy, 2015; Sriyalatha & Kumarasinghe, 2021). Recently, the main factor affecting the growth of this industry was the COVID-19 epidemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a global impact on all sectors and a new normalized society emerged with the COVID-19 pandemic. In this new normalized society, human food consumer patterns have also changed with digital and social media marketing (Bandara et al., 2021; Ludin et al., 2022; MorganStanley, 2020). Social media marketing communication features, which have now developed as a means of interpersonal communication, have positively influenced the spread of fast food (Ludin et al., 2022; MorganStanley, 2020). There are also empirical studies conducted in different contexts to identify that effect. Also, in Sri Lanka, some empirical studies have been performed on general food consumption behavior after the COVID-19 situation. (e.g: Bandara et al., 2021; Devendra, 2020; Gunawardhana and Adikari, 2022; Hapuarachchi, 2024; Nisansala & Rathnasiri, 2022; Priyanath, & Dasanayaka, 2022; Shashikala, & Thilina, 2020; Wijesundara & Guruge, 2020). However, there are few studies in Sri Lanka about the effect of social media marketing communication features on customer behavioral intention through brand image in the fast-food restaurant chain industry. Due to this, the primary objective of this study is to fill that gap. The primary objective of this study is to study the effect of social media marketing communication features on customer behavioral intention through brand image in the fast-food restaurant chain industry in Sri Lanka. Accordingly, three specific objectives have been set in this study. The specific objectives and research questions of the study are given below.

Table 01: *Specific objectives and research question of the study*

No	Specific objective	Research Question
01	To study the effect of social media advertising on customer behavioral intentions	How does social media advertising affect customer behavioral intentions?
02	To study the effect of social media electronic word-of-mouth on customer behavioral intention	How does social media electronic word-of-mouth affect customer behavioral intention?
03	To study the effect of social media advertising on brand image	What is the effect of social media advertising on brand image?
04	To study the effect of social media electronic word-of-mouth on brand image	What is the effect of social media electronic word-of-mouth on brand image?
05	To study the effect of brand image on customer behavioral intention	What is the effect of brand image on customer behavioral intention?
06	To study the effect of social media advertising on customer behavioral intention through brand image	What is the relationship between social media advertising and consumer behavioral intention through brand image?
07	To study the effect of electronic word-of-mouth on customer behavioral intention through brand image	What is the relationship between electronic word-of-mouth and customer behavioral intention through brand image?

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02. Literature review and Hypothesis development

Food plays a major role in cultural expression and everyday creativity in many cultures (Amiriddinova, 2024). As a result, with the development of the times and cultural changes, the food patterns consumed by society are increasingly diverse (Kamilah & Nandiyanto, 2024). Fast food is one such food pattern. Fast food is a familiar culture in developed countries. However, fast-food is still foreign to developing countries like Sri Lanka (Gurunathasivam et al., 2023). Fast food is defined as food that is ready to eat and can be served quickly (Hapuarachchi, 2024). Fast food is quick, reasonably priced, and readily available alternatives to home-cooked food (Jauhari, 2020). In modern society, fast food plays an important role in people's composite lifestyles (Saraniya & Kennedy, 2015). Thus, the fast-food industry (FFI) as a profitable industry began in the 1920s in the United States (Liu et al., 2022). This fast-food industry developed rapidly in modern society and became epidemic worldwide in the 1950s (Jauhari, 2020).

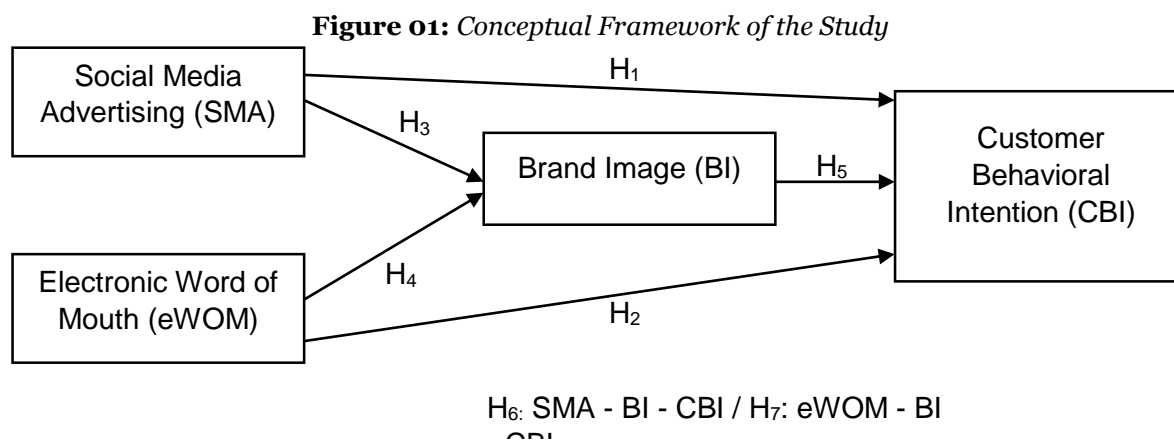
The fast-food industry is one of the most lucrative in the world right now and has experienced tremendous growth (Chun & Nyam-Ochir, 2020). In 2020, the worldwide fast-food market was valued at USD 862 billion and expected to increase from USD 972.74 billion in 2021 to USD 1,467.04 billion by 2028, with an annual growth rate of 6.05% during the forecast period (Fortunebusinessinsights, 2024). To preserve their market position in this fiercely competitive fast-food industry, businesses must keep abreast of the latest consumer trends and preferences (Reshi et al., 2023). Therefore, many empirical studies have been conducted to understand the factors that affect customer behavioral intention in the fast-food industry (Hayuningardi et al., 2024; Sajjad et al., 2023; Singh et al., 2023; Ababneh et al., 2022; Trung et al., 2021; Kaewmahaphinyo et al., 2020; Chun & Nyam-Ochir, 2020). Also, the effect of social media marketing factors on customer behavioral intentions in the fast-food industry has also been the subject of some recent studies (Aisha et al., 2024; Souki et al., 2023; Ababneh et al., 2022; Ning et al., 2022; Ababneh et al., 202; Inthong et al., 2022; Soltani et al., 2021; Na et al., 2021).

Social media marketing (SMM) is a global new trend that is rapidly growing (Chatterjee & Kar, 2020; Moslehpour et al, 2021). Social media marketing can be simply defined as the use of social media platforms to promote a company and its products (Nadaraja & Yazdanifard, 2013). In an expanded definition, social media marketing is "a process that enables individuals to communicate with and reach a much larger community that might not have been accessible via traditional advertising channels and to promote their websites, products, or services through online social channels" (Weinberg & Pehlivan, 2011). Social media marketing is a marketing activity that involves using social media to market products or services. In social media marketing processes, online products or services create interesting content to attract and convince customers (Setianingtyas & Nurlaili, 2020). Social media marketing gives the public the ability to connect widely and quickly with each other. Therefore, social media facilitates direct marketing communication with the target market (Herawati et al., 2024).

Five main forms of social media marketing can be identified: Social media marketing communication (Shirish, 2018; Duffett, 2017); social media marketing analytics and reporting (Gonçalves, 2017); Social media marketing customer engagement (Atherton, 2023; Tsiotsou, 2020; Zailskaite-jakste & Kuvykaite, 2012); social media social listening (Stewart & Arnold, 2018), and social media marketing public relations (Kim, 2020; Quesenberry, 2020). Among these, the feature seen in the interface of social media marketing is social media marketing communication. There are three features that are commonly used in social media marketing communication toward customer (consumer) behavioral intentions. These are Social Media Content (Huang et al., 2024; Fook et al., 2024; Khadim, Younis, Mahmood & Khalid, 2015; Bruhn et al., 2012; Christodoulides et al., 2012; Schivinski, 2011; Bonhommer et al., 2010), Social Media Advertising (Almoalad, 2024; Ziarani et al., 2023) and Electronic Word of mouth (Alnoor et al., 2024; Souki et al., 2023; Duffett, 2017; Severi et al., 2014; Yaakop et al., 2013; Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Castronovo & Huang, 2012). However, only Social Media Advertising and electronic Word of mouth are considered in this study. The primary reason for that was Social Media Advertising (Perera, 2023) and Electronic Word of mouth (Wijesundara & Guruge, 2020) were in front as the most used features in social media marketing communication in the context of Sri Lanka.

Intention and behavior are substantially correlated. An intention is a planned future behavior or action (Manju, 2023a; Shahzadal & Adnan, 2022; Morwitz & Munz, 2020; Mittelman & Rojas-Méndez, 2018). In customer (consumer) behavior, intention becomes a significant concept in understanding consumption-related activities. Thus, customer behavioral intention refers to the likelihood or willingness of a customer to engage in a particular behavior related to purchasing a product or service (Wahyudin et al., 2021). Previously, many studies have identified many factors that affect customer behavioral intention in the context of social media. Thus, advertising is a factor that directly affects customer behavioral intentions (Sudirjo et al., 2024; Wibisana et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2023; Tinezia, 2023; Azmi et al., 2022; Namitha et al., 2021; Alalwan, 2018). Recent empirical studies have also shown that electronic word of mouth directly affects customer behavioral intention (Hafizah & Kussudyarsana, 2024; Nazarian et al., 2024; Khan et al., 2024; Khoirunnisa & Albari, 2023; Moradi & Zihagh, 2022; Yohana et al., 2020; 2020; Uslu, 2020; Khwaja et al., 2020; Arif, 2019; Alrwashdeh et al., 2019; Andrianiet al., 2019; Nuseir, 2019). Some empirical studies have also showed the direct effect of advertisements on brand image (Sutia & Fahlevi, 2024; Sharma et al., 2024; Salhab et al., 2023; Rehman, & Zeb, 2023) and the direct effect of electronic word of mouth on brand image (Romadhon & Susila, 2024; Zahid & Ruswanti, 2024; Budiman, 2021; Yohana et al., 2020; Alrwashdeh et al., 2019). Some recent studies

emphasize that brand image has an effect on customer behavioral intention (Romadhon & Susila, 2024; Zahid & Ruswanti, 2024; Sudirjo et al., 2024; Salhab et al., 2023; Azmi et al., 2022; Yohana et al., 2020; Nuseir, 2019). Also, there is strong empirical evidence for the indirect effect of advertisements on customer behavioral intention through the brand image (Wahyudi & Nurmahdi, 2024; Salhab et al., 2023; Tinezia, 2023; Moslehpour et al., 2021; Raji et al., 2019). Finally, the empirical studies showed the indirect effect of electronic word of mouth on customer behavioral intention through the brand image (Jayanti, 2024; Romadhon & Susila, 2024; Hafizah & Kussudyarsana, 2024; Indahsari et al., 2023; Aditi et al., 2022; Yohana et al., 2020; Yunus et al., 2016). As a result, the conceptual framework and hypothesis of this study regarding the fast-food industry have been developed based on the background of this empirical study.



Hypothesis of Study

H₁: Social media advertising effect to customer behavioral intentions

H₂: Social media electronic word-of-mouth effect to customer behavioral intention

H₃: Social media advertising effect to brand image

H₄: Social media electronic word-of-mouth effect to brand image

H₅: Brand image effect on customer behavioral intention

H₆: Brand image mediate relationship between social media advertising and customer behavioral intention

H₇: Brand image mediate relationship between social media electronic word-of-mouth and customer behavioral intention

03. Research Method

The research method utilized in this study is the quantitative survey method. This method involves collecting data by asking individuals questions that are relevant to the research being conducted. Surveys are a highly effective way of gathering data from a large population within a relatively short period of time (Azam et al., 2021). The independent variables of the study were social media advertising (SMA) and electronic word of mouth (eWOM). The dependent variable was customer behavioral intention (CBI). Brand image as a mediator has been applied in the study. Social media advertising (SMA) and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) are social media communication features. The direct and indirect effects of those variables in the context of the fast-food industry were examined in this study. A very well-structured closed-end questionnaire was used for that. Six (6) items were each used for social media advertising (SMA), and electronic word of mouth (eWOM). Eight (8) items were each used for brand image and customer behavioral intention (CBI). The five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) was applied to assess all the measurement items in this questionnaire.

This study's respondents were fast-food chain customers who use social media in Sri Lanka. However, there are no statistics on its population. Therefore, the author used the sample-to-item ratio guidelines suggested by Hair et al. (2010) to determine the sample size for this study (Hair et al., 2010). The ratio should not be less than 5-to-1 (Gorsuch, 1983; Hatcher, 1994; Suhr, 2006). Thus, this study comprised 210 respondents with a 1:10 ratio to the 21 items (Sadom et al., 2023). The sampling technique in this study was purposive sampling, which falls under the non-probability sampling design (Azam et al., 2021). Social media-using customers between the ages of 18 and 60 who visited fast-food restaurants located in the Western Province of Sri Lanka were selected as respondents. For collecting the data, a web-based survey was used. The web-based survey is a flexible and reliable method for collecting respondents' perceptions and behavioral intentions (Tihamiyu et al., 2020; Sivadasan et al., 2020; Evans & Mathur, 2005). Google Docs was used to build the online questionnaire, and the questionnaire link was disseminated via Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, and WhatsApp (Kupek & Liberali, 2024; Khashan et al., 2024; Sadom et al., 2023; Sujarwoto et al. 2023; Masa'deh et al., 2021; Luc et al., 2018). In the data analysis step, SPSS 26 software was used for demographic data analysis and Exploratory

factor analysis (EFA). The 23rd version of AMOS was used for Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and hypothesis testing.

04. Results and Discussion

To achieve the minimal sample size requirement for this study, 250 responses were gathered. The use of a Google Doc to set up the questionnaire ensured that there was no missing data. There were 120 (48%) female and 130 (52%) male respondents. Among the total respondents, 128 (51.2%) were between the ages of 45 and 60, and 122 (48.8%) were between 18 and 45. To achieve the minimal sample size requirement for this study, 250 responses were gathered. The use of a Google Form to set up the questionnaire ensured that there was no missing data. There were 120 (48%) female and 130 (52%) male respondents. Among the total respondents, 128 (51.2%) were between the ages of 45 and 60, and 122 (48.8%) were between 18 and 45. After conducting the data screening process, the author assessed the reliability of the items by checking Cronbach's alpha coefficient. This was done following pre-empirical studies (Jinguang et al., 2024; Manju, 2022). Cronbach's alpha coefficient for all variables (SMS = 0.771; eWOM = 0.684; BI = 0.612; CBI = 0.830) was above the moderate range, indicating the high reliability of the items (Azam et al., 2021).

The exploratory factor analysis (EFA) of this study was done using the 26th edition of SPSS software. Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was used to examine the extraction of factors to determine the number of factors to be retained and eliminated in exploratory factor analysis (EFA). To clarify the analysis of factors, Varimax rotation was applied (Hair et al., 2014; Shkeer & Awang, 2019). In EFA's initial step, five of 7 items were removed because they did not represent their appropriate component. (Not loading = SMA03; Abnormal loading = eWOM01; BI05, BI07, BI08, CIB05, CIB06). Then the remaining items were successfully pooled into four components. The following table shows the EFA's final result.

Table 02: EFA's result of the study

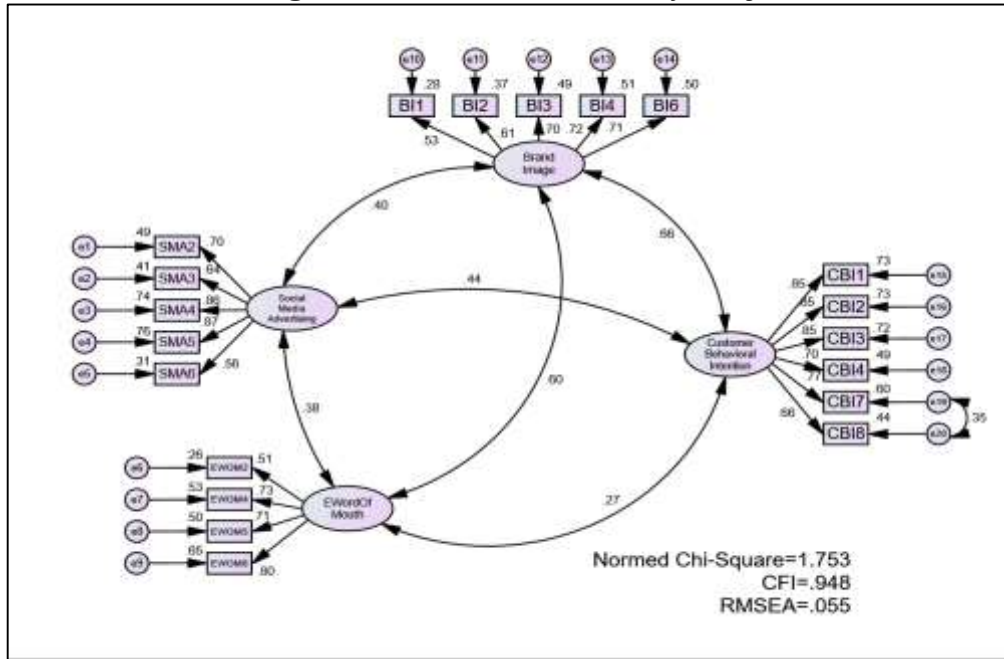
		Rotated Component Matrix^a			
		Component			
		1	2	3	4
Social Media Advertising (SMA)	SMA2		.746		
	SMA3		.624		
	SMA4		.832		
	SMA5		.854		
	SMA6		.669		
Electronic word of mouth (eWOM)	EWOM1				.699
	EWOM2				.743
	EWOM4				.703
	EWOM5				.633
	EWOM6				.667
Brand image (BI)	BI1				.671
	BI2				.597
	BI3				.616
	BI4				.717
	BI6				.662
Customer Behavioral Intention (CBI)	CBI1	.828			
	CBI2	.820			
	CBI3	.803			
	CBI4	.715			
	CBI6	.790			
	CBI8	.700			

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
 Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.
 a. Rotation converged in 6 iterations.

Source: SPSS output

The number of items referred forward in this study is 21. They are divided into 4 components (5 items for Social Media Advertising (SMA); 5 items for eWord of Mouth (eWOM); 5 items for Brand image (BI); and 6 items for Customer Behavioral Intention (CBI). These four components accounted for a total of 61.953% of the variance. The KMO value was 0.892, and Bartlett's test of Sphericity was significant (Approx. Chi-Square - 2537.675; df - 210). These indicators suggested that the data and sample were appropriate for confirmatory factor analysis. (Threshold value: TVE > 60% (Hair et al., 2014); KMO > 0.60 (Kaiser, 1970); Bartlett's of Sphericity - p-value should be less than 0.05 and should be significant (Hair et al., 2014)). Under confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), the first step was to create the measurement model. In the initial step of EFA, the author excluded eWOM01 from the analysis due to its low factor loading (0.468). The final measurement model of the study is shown below.

Figure 02: Measurement model of Study



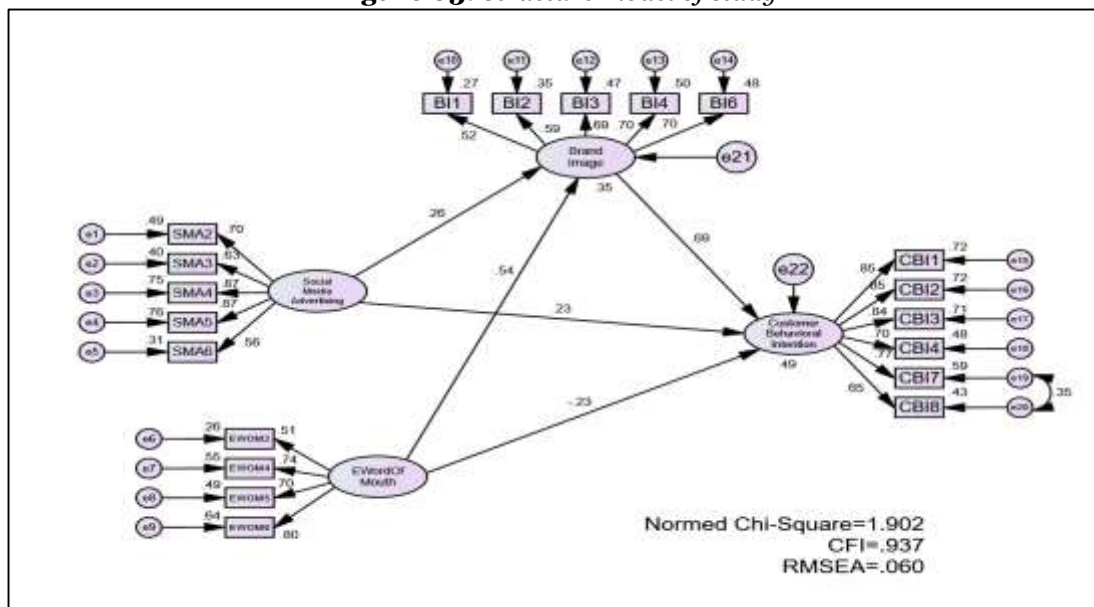
Source: Amos output

The evaluation of the measurement model revealed that all the items of the construct displayed a factor loading value greater than 0.5. The model fit indicators confirmed that the measurement model was fitting well. ($\chi^2 = 285.686$, $df = 163$, $\chi^2/df = 1.753$, $CFI = 0.948$, $RMSEA = 0.055$).

The average variance extracted (AVE) values for each construct was above 0.40. (Social Media Advertising (SMA) = 0.544, eWord of Mouth (eWOM) = 0.484, Brand Image (BI) = 0.431, Customer Behavioral Intention (CBI) = 0.616). Additionally, the composite reliability (CR) value for each construct was above 0.7. (Social Media Advertising (SMA) = 0.853, eWord of Mouth (eWOM) = 0.786, Brand Image (BI) = 0.789, Customer Behavioral Intention (CBI) = 0.905).

These values indicate that all constructs in the measurement model were reliable and valid. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for all constructs was above 0.70 (Social Media Advertising (SMA) = 0.846; eWord of Mouth (eWOM) = 0.781; Brand Image (BI) = 0.782; Customer Behavioral Intention (CBI) = 0.980), indicating that the constructs are suitable for creating a structural model. Below is the structural model of this study. (Threshold value: Factor loading > 0.50 (Sudha et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2019; Hair et al., 2014) / Model fit - $\chi^2/df < 5.0$; $CFI > 0.90$; $RMSEA < 0.80$ (Awang, 2014) / $AVE < 0.40$ with $CR < 0.70$ (Hair et al., 2014) / Cronbach's alpha > 0.70 (Awang, 2014)).

Figure 03: Structure model of study



Source: Amos output

The hypothesis testing in this study was carried out using the Structure model. Here, the causal relationship was examined through path analysis. The results of the path analysis showed that hypotheses H1 to H5 were significant. The details are presented in the table below.

Table 3: Result of path analysis

H _x	Relationship	Estimate (Standardized)	S.E.	C.R.	P
H ₁	Social Media Advertising → Customer Behavioral Intention	.232	.081	3.413	***
H ₂	eWord of Mouth → Customer Behavioral Intention	-.226	.173	-2.509	.012
H ₃	Social Media Advertising → Brand Image	.255	.046	3.274	.001
H ₄	eWord of Mouth → Brand Image	.536	.111	4.626	***
H ₅	Brand Image → Customer Behavioral Intention	.685	.237	5.792	***

Source - Amos Output

The study examined the mediating effect using a two-tailed significance test and the bootstrap technique (Manju et al., 2024; Collier, 2020). According to the recommendation of Collier (2020), the number of bootstrap samples was set as 5000. Also, the bias-corrected confidence intervals were set as 95% (Collier, 2020). The results of the Amos output are shown below in Table 4. The below results revealed the significant indirect effect of social media advertising on customer behavioral intention through brand image (p = 0.000, H₁ was significant; thus, there was partial mediation), supporting H₆. Also, the results revealed a significant indirect effect of eWord of Mouth on customer behavioral intention through brand image (p = 0.008, H₂ was significant, thus, there was partial mediation), supporting H₇. This revealed that the brand image has been confirmed as a mediating variable.

Table 04: Result of the Two-tailed significance test

H _x	Relationship	Confidence Interval		P-Value	Conclusion
		Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
H ₆	SMA → BI → CBI	0.095	0.358	0.000	Significant (Full mediation)
H ₇	eWOM → BI → CBI	0.372	1.317	0.000	Significant (Partial mediation)

Source - Amos output / Unstandardized values

05. CONCLUSION

The main objective of this study was to explore the impact of social media marketing communication features on customer behavioral intention in the fast-food industry, specifically in Sri Lanka. The study also investigated the mediating role of brand image in this process. The results showed that social media advertising has a significant positive effect on customer behavioral intention, but electronic word of mouth has a significant negative effect on customer behavioral intention. The study also found that social media marketing communication features, such as social media advertising and electronic word of mouth, have a positive effect on brand image. Furthermore, it was confirmed that brand image positively effect on customer behavioral intention. The study's most significant finding was the identification of brand image as a moderating variable. Thus, the result showed that brand image mediates the relationship between social media advertising and customer behavioral intention as well as the relationship between electronic word of mouth and customer behavioral intention. Overall, the study has two implications for the fast-food industry. Firstly, social media is a powerful communication platform that can be used to promote the fast-food industry. However, the study highlights the problem of information disorder (Manju et al., 2023b; Wardle, 2020; 2017) especially due to electronic word of mouth. Therefore, attention should also be paid to the negative outcomes that may arise from this. Secondly, the study suggests that the use of purposive sampling as a sampling technique is a limitation of the study. To address this, the study should be conducted in other contexts using different sampling techniques.

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