

# Social Media Marketing and Branding in Creating Willingness to Pay Premium Prices: A Study of Home Brand Tea Products

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## ABSTRACT

Gambyong, Kemuning Mbok Karti, and Gondang Sari are small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) tea brands that have established themselves as high-quality and well-recognized brands. As a result, they can charge premium prices for their products and effectively market them through social media platforms. This study investigates the impact of social media marketing and branding on consumers' willingness to pay premium prices for home-brand tea products. The research sample consisted of 159 customers of Gambyong Tea, Kemuning Mbok Karti Tea, and Gondang Sari Tea, selected using purposive sampling techniques. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire, and the analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The findings reveal that social media marketing directly influences brand identity, brand awareness, and brand image. Furthermore, brand awareness significantly impacts both brand preference and consumers' willingness to pay premium prices. Similarly, brand image has a significant effect on brand preference, which, in turn, strongly influences willingness to pay premium prices. This study offers a novel contribution by developing a model that highlights the role of social media marketing in shaping branding and driving consumer willingness to purchase home-brand products at premium prices. The findings have important implications for SMEs, emphasizing the strategic use of social media to enhance branding efforts and boost sales of premium products.

## ABSTRAK

Gambyong, Kemuning Mbok Karti, dan Gondang Sari adalah merek teh usaha kecil dan menengah (UKM) yang telah memposisikan diri sebagai merek berkualitas tinggi dan dikenal luas. Sebagai hasilnya, mereka mampu menetapkan harga premium untuk produk mereka dan secara efektif memasarkan produk tersebut melalui platform media sosial. Penelitian ini mengkaji dampak pemasaran media sosial dan branding terhadap kesediaan konsumen untuk membayar harga premium pada produk teh merek lokal. Sampel penelitian terdiri dari 159 pelanggan Teh Gambyong, Teh Kemuning Mbok Karti, dan Teh Gondang Sari, yang dipilih menggunakan teknik purposive sampling. Data dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner terstruktur, dan analisis dilakukan menggunakan Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pemasaran media sosial secara langsung memengaruhi identitas merek, kesadaran merek, dan citra merek. Selain itu, kesadaran merek secara signifikan memengaruhi preferensi merek dan kesediaan konsumen untuk membayar harga premium. Demikian pula, citra merek memiliki pengaruh signifikan terhadap preferensi merek, yang pada gilirannya sangat memengaruhi kesediaan konsumen untuk membayar harga premium. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi baru dengan mengembangkan model yang menyoroti peran pemasaran media sosial dalam membentuk branding dan mendorong kesediaan konsumen untuk membeli produk merek lokal dengan harga premium. Temuan ini memiliki implikasi penting bagi UKM, dengan menekankan penggunaan strategis media sosial untuk meningkatkan upaya branding dan meningkatkan penjualan produk premium.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) often face limitations in communication and information technology capabilities (Faisol et al., 2022). However, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided valuable lessons for SMEs, forcing them to adapt to changes in both market dynamics and communication technologies (Asmawati et al., 2024). During the pandemic, conventional markets – previously the primary channel for SME business operations – shifted to online platforms due to restrictions on social activities outside the home. To sustain their businesses, SMEs increasingly relied on online media, particularly social media, to conduct their operations. Beyond using social media for marketing, SMEs also began focusing on building strong brands for their products to ensure long-term business sustainability (Estensoro et al., 2022).

Social media marketing has emerged as a rapidly growing marketing channel that offers unparalleled opportunities for brand development (Zarei et al., 2022). Today, social media marketing is widely recognized as a standard tool for managing customer relationships, advertising, promotions, and even internal employee interactions across nearly every industry (Seo & Park, 2018). By leveraging various forms of media – such as text, images, videos, and user comments – marketing managers can use social media platforms to disseminate and promote information about their businesses (Aljumah et al., 2021). Social media marketing can also complement other elements of a comprehensive marketing strategy, such as enhancing a brand's digital presence and capabilities (Ashley & Tuten, 2015).

Social networking platforms provide opportunities for two-way engagement, which can significantly contribute to the development of brand image and identity (Barreda et al., 2020). Approximately 39% of social media users rely on these platforms to learn about products and services, viewing social media as a dynamic and up-to-date source of information (Yadav & Rahman, 2018). By sharing their opinions and experiences about products and services, users actively participate in the decision-making process and influence their peers, including potential customers (Kumar & C, 2017). This interaction can be leveraged to build brand image and increase brand awareness among consumers (Yadav & Rahman, 2018).

Previous studies have shown that social media marketing significantly influences brand loyalty and consumers' willingness to pay premium prices (Pourazad et al., 2020). Willingness to pay premium prices is considered a more accurate indicator of brand success than actual purchasing behavior (Augusto & Torres, 2018). These findings highlight the growing importance of social media marketing in the digital era, as consumers increasingly rely on online platforms to make informed decisions about products and services (Barreda et al., 2020).

The global retail industry has undergone a significant transformation in recent years (Hughes et al., 2019). Retailers are becoming less dependent on manufacturers by introducing their own private-label brands, also known as store brands, home brands, or household brands (Hughes et al., 2019). Home brands, which are manufactured under the supervision of retailers and sold under their own names or unique labels, have seen substantial growth over the past decade. Initially, home brands were introduced as cost-effective alternatives to branded products, but their quality and market positioning have evolved significantly over time (Hughes et al., 2019; Mainardes et al., 2020). According to Nielsen (2014), 71% of consumers reported that the quality of home-brand products has improved over time, while 70% cited lower prices as the primary reason for purchasing these products. Understanding the factors that influence willingness to pay premium prices and determining optimal price points can help businesses maximize sales volume and profitability (Malarvizhi et al., 2022).

Several studies have explored the relationship between social media marketing, branding, and willingness to pay premium prices. For instance, Cassidy and Wymer (2016) examined the impact of brand loyalty on willingness to pay premium prices, while Akturan (2020) and Rodrigues and Martins (2016) investigated the effects of perceived quality and brand equity on willingness to pay premium prices. Anselmsson et al. (2014) analyzed the influence of perceived quality, brand awareness, and brand image on willingness to pay premium prices, and Dwivedi et al. (2018) along with Santos and Schlesinger (2021) studied the role of brand experience and credibility in shaping willingness to pay premium prices.

**Table 1.** Premium Tea Prices

No.	Brand	Price
1.	Gambyong Tea	IDR. 7.000 – 40.000
2.	Mbok Karti Kemuning Tea	IDR. 10.000 – 80.000
3.	Gondang Sari Tea	IDR. 10.000 – 23.000

Source: processed from each tea brand's shop

These studies suggest that marketing and branding activities can significantly enhance willingness to pay premium prices, but further research is needed to determine whether these strategies are effective for home brands.

This study focuses on premium local tea brands that also serve as tourist attractions in Karanganyar Regency, namely Gambyong Tea, Kemuning Mbok Karti Tea, and Gondang Sari Tea. These three tea brands are priced higher than other home-brand teas in the region's tourist areas. Table 1 provides an overview of the premium tea prices for these brands, which vary depending on packaging weight. However, in general, the prices of these premium teas exceed the average market price for tea products.

Indonesia is currently the seventh-largest tea producer in the world, with approximately 50% of its tea production exported to international markets. The primary export destinations for Indonesian tea are Russia, the United Kingdom, and Pakistan. Most of the tea exported comes from large plantations within the country, which are typically either state-owned or privately managed and focus on producing high-quality tea. In contrast, small-scale tea growers primarily target the domestic market, as their tea is often of lower quality and, therefore, commands a lower selling price.

To address this challenge, many SMEs have made efforts to improve their branding by enhancing the quality of their tea and designing more attractive packaging. Examples of SMEs that have successfully established themselves as producers of high-quality tea with strong brand reputations include Gambyong Tea, Kemuning Mbok Karti Tea, and Gondang Sari Tea. These brands have been able to set premium prices for their products and effectively market them through social media platforms. A similar success story can be seen in *Getuk Semar*, a local product from Tawangmangu. By using appealing packaging, *Getuk Semar* has managed to sell its products at three times the average market price. This study examines the influence of social media marketing and branding on consumers' willingness to pay higher prices for home-brand products. The research offers a novel contribution by developing a model that highlights the role of social media marketing in shaping branding and driving consumer willingness to purchase home-brand products at premium prices.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

In the current digital era, competition has compelled companies to adopt various strategies to increase sales and maximize profits. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, many SMEs have utilized social media marketing to promote their products and strengthen their branding. This study aims to analyze the impact of social media marketing and branding on consumers' willingness to pay premium prices at local tea companies.

### 2.1. Social Media Marketing

Social media marketing is a digital marketing strategy that integrates social media networks and stakeholder interactions to achieve marketing productivity goals effectively (Zollo et al., 2020). A study by Malarvizhi et al. (2022) explores various elements of social media marketing and examines their effects on brand loyalty, brand value, and the willingness of technology consumers in Malaysia to pay premium prices for portable devices. This research is grounded in the consumer behavior model developed by Howard and Sheth (1969), which was later simplified into the consumer decision model (Howard, 1989).

The consumer decision model is based on three fundamental aspects: cognition (thoughts), affect (emotions), and conation (actions) (Dharmmesta, 1999). In this study, the cognitive aspect is represented by information search through social media marketing, while the affective aspect includes brand identity, brand awareness, brand image, and brand preference. The conative aspect is applied to consumers' willingness to pay premium prices. This research aims to evaluate the impact of social media marketing on consumers' willingness to pay premium prices, with a particular focus on the mediating roles of brand awareness, brand identity, brand image, and brand preference in this relationship.

The study also investigates various elements of social media marketing that facilitate the acquisition of information. These elements, referred to as "stimuli," include personalization, entertainment, engagement, trendiness, and marketing experience (Yadav & Rahman, 2018; Zarei et al., 2022). Several studies have established a strong relationship between social media marketing and brand equity. For instance, Zeqiri et al. (2024) found that social media marketing positively influences brand awareness. Similarly, Anantasiska et al. (2022) demonstrated that social media marketing activities significantly impact brand image, brand awareness, and brand preference. Additionally, studies by Park and Namkung (2022) and Godey et al. (2016) revealed that social media marketing has a positive effect on both brand awareness and brand image. Based on

this reasoning, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H1.** Social media marketing will significantly enhance the brand identity of home-brand tea products.
- H2.** Social media marketing will significantly increase the brand awareness of home-brand tea products.
- H3.** Social media marketing will significantly improve the brand image of home-brand tea products.

## 2.2. Brand Awareness

Brand awareness refers to the process by which individuals become familiar with, recognize, and retain knowledge of a specific brand (Barreda et al., 2020). Social media marketing plays a crucial role in enhancing brand visibility and building a positive brand reputation by fostering engagement with both prospective and existing consumers (Seo & Park, 2018). A strong social media presence allows brands to effectively inform, familiarize, and increase brand recognition, as social media marketing is not restricted by time or location (Malarvizhi et al., 2022; Momen et al., 2020).

Brand awareness has a significant influence on other key variables, such as brand image and brand loyalty (Barreda et al., 2020). Anselmsson et al. (2014) found that brand awareness positively impacts both brand preference and consumers' willingness to pay premium prices. Customers who can easily recognize a brand's logo or identity are more likely to support the brand and are often willing to pay a higher price for its products or services (Malarvizhi et al., 2022). Previous research has consistently shown that strong brand recognition enables brands to command higher prices in the market (Anselmsson et al., 2014; Bougenvile & Ruswanti, 2017). Based on these findings, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H4.** Brand awareness significantly increases brand preference for home-brand tea products.
- H5.** Brand awareness significantly increases the willingness to pay premium prices for home-brand tea products.

## 2.3. Brand Image

Brand image refers to the perception that customers hold about a brand (Keller & Lane, 2013). A strong brand image is expected to provide additional benefits and positively influence consumer behavior. Conversely, a negative brand image can unintentionally foster unfavorable consumer attitudes, leading many customers to disengage from the brand (Kazmi & Mehmood, 2016). According to Li et al. (2021), a strong brand image shapes consumer perceptions, which, in turn, enhances brand loyalty. A positive brand image is crucial for fostering customer loyalty and satisfaction, as it is more likely to be quickly accepted by consumers (Murtiasih et al., 2021).

Organizations with a strong brand image are better positioned to execute effective promotional strategies and strengthen consumer loyalty, while those with a weak brand image often experience the opposite effect (Dash et al., 2021). Furthermore, Yodpram and Intalar (2020) suggested that brand image directly influences consumers' willingness to pay premium prices. Consumers with a favorable perception of a brand are more likely to pay higher prices to obtain its products (Keller & Lane, 2013).

Previous research has shown that effectively communicating a brand's identity enhances its overall perception and reputation, which increases consumers' willingness to pay premium prices (Farzin et al., 2021). Studies by Sääksjärvi and Samiee (2011) and Dressler & Paunovic (2021) found that brand identity influences both brand image and brand awareness. Similarly, Anantasiska et al. (2022) demonstrated that brand image and brand awareness significantly impact brand preference. Additionally, research by Clottey et al. (2023) and Alvarado-Karste & Guzmán (2020) highlighted the influence of brand identity on brand image. Based on these findings, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H6.** Brand identity significantly increases brand awareness of home-brand tea products.
- H7.** Brand identity significantly improves the brand image of home-brand tea products.
- H8.** Brand image significantly increases brand preference for home-brand tea products.
- H9.** Brand image significantly increases consumers' willingness to pay premium prices for home-brand tea products.

## 2.4. Brand Preference

Brand preference refers to the degree to which customers favor a specific company's brand and choose its products or services over those of competitors offering similar options (Hellier et al., 2003). Similarly, Chang and Liu (2009) define brand preference as the positive attitude customers hold toward a particular brand. Alamro and Rowley (2011) found that brand preference plays a crucial role in enabling brands to charge

premium prices. This is achieved through the development of strong consumer relationships and the incorporation of symbolic benefits into competitive strategies, which allow consumers to feel represented by the brand's personality. Additionally, price can enhance the overall brand experience, further strengthening brand preference (Hwang et al., 2019). Empirical evidence from studies by Gomes (2022) and Mahmood et al. (2021) indicates that brand preference has a positive impact on willingness to pay premium prices. Based on these findings, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

**H10.** Brand preference significantly increases willingness to pay premium prices for home-brand tea products.

## 2.5. The Mediation Roles of Brand Identity, Brand Awareness, Brand Image, and Brand Preference

Several studies have demonstrated that brand awareness and brand image mediate the relationship between social media marketing and both brand loyalty and willingness to pay premium prices (Malarvizhi et al., 2022; Rodrigues & Martins, 2016; Seo & Park, 2018). Additionally, research by Sääksjärvi and Samiee (2011) and Dressler and Paunovic (2021) has shown that brand identity influences both brand image and brand awareness. Based on these findings, the following hypotheses are proposed:

**H11.** Brand identity mediates the influence of social media marketing on brand awareness.

**H12.** Brand identity mediates the influence of social media marketing on brand image.

**H13.** Brand awareness mediates the influence of social media marketing on brand preference.

**H14.** Brand awareness mediates the influence of social media marketing on willingness to pay premium prices.

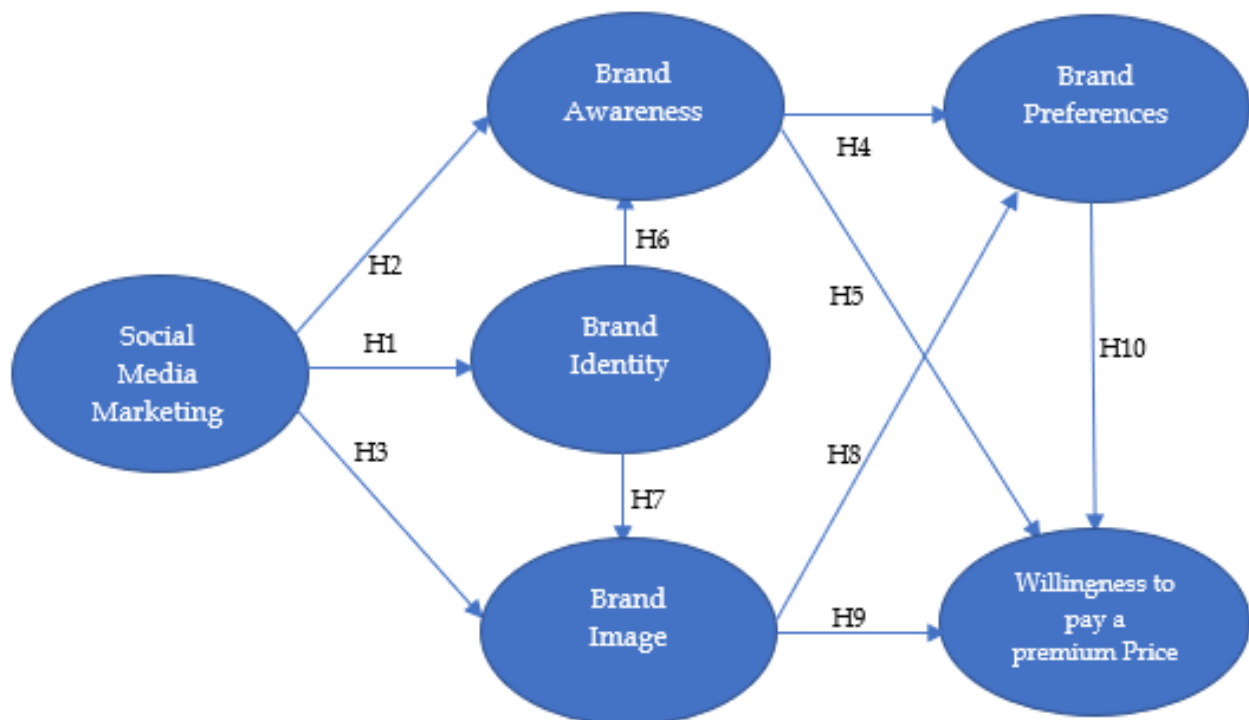
**H15.** Brand image mediates the influence of social media marketing on brand preference.

**H16.** Brand image mediates the influence of social media marketing on willingness to pay premium prices.

**H17.** Brand preference mediates the effect of brand awareness on willingness to pay premium prices.

**H18.** Brand preference mediates the influence of brand image on willingness to pay premium prices.

To explain these conceptual relationships, this study provides a theoretical foundation for the impact of social media marketing on willingness to pay premium prices, with branding elements – such as brand awareness, brand identity, brand image, and brand preference – serving as mediating variables. The hypotheses developed in this study are visually represented in the conceptual model shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Theoretical framework

### 3. RESEARCH METHOD

The sample for this study consisted of customers of Gambyong Tea, Kemuning Mbok Karti Tea, and Gondang Sari Tea. Data were collected using a questionnaire and purposive sampling. The criteria for participation required respondents to be customers or buyers of these tea brands who had made at least two prior purchases. The questionnaire was distributed directly to tea buyers at tea shops or tea houses, with the assistance of the research team. After filtering respondents based on their purchase frequency, a final sample of 159 respondents was obtained, all of whom met the criterion of having purchased the tea brands more than twice.

According to Hair et al. (2017), the minimum sample size recommended for Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) is 10 times the number of indicators or 10 times the number of arrow directions in the structural model. In this study, the structural model includes 10 arrow directions, meaning the minimum required sample size is 100 (10 x 10). Therefore, the sample size of 159 respondents exceeds the minimum requirement and satisfies the adequacy criteria for analysis.

The independent variable in this study is social media marketing. Social media marketing is defined as a digital marketing strategy that integrates social media networks and stakeholder interactions to achieve marketing productivity goals effectively. The mediating variables in this study are brand awareness, brand identity, brand image, and brand preference. Brand awareness refers to the process by which individuals become familiar with, recognize, and retain knowledge of a specific brand. Brand identity encompasses the elements that form the "face" of a brand, distinguishing it from competitors. Brand image is the perception that customers hold about a brand. Brand preference reflects consumers' repurchase intentions and their commitment to choosing certain brands over others. The dependent variable in this study is willingness to pay premium prices. Willingness to pay premium prices is defined as a consumer's willingness to spend more money on a product or service in exchange for higher quality compared to other available options.

The variables of social media marketing, brand awareness, and willingness to pay premium prices were measured using instruments developed by Malarvizhi et al. (2022). The variables brand identity, brand image, and brand preference were adapted from Sääksjärvi and Samiee (2011). All variables were measured using a 7-point Likert scale. Data analysis was conducted using PLS-SEM with the software SmartPLS version 3.3.2.

**Table 2.** Respondent description

No	Description	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Age	< 20 years	12	7.55
		20-30 years	33	20.75
		31-40 years	45	28.30
		41-50 years	57	35.85
		> 50 years	12	7.55
2	Gender	Male	96	60.38
		Female	63	39.62
3	Education	Elementary School	3	1.89
		Junior High School	14	8.81
		High School	46	28.93
		Diploma	24	15.09
		Bachelor's Degree	48	30.19
4	Type of work	Postgraduate	24	15.09
		Students	12	7.55
		Civil servants/military	48	30.19
		Private employees	40	25.16
		Entrepreneurs	59	37.11
5	Customer	Gambyong Tea	44	27.67
		Mbok Karti's Kemuning Tea	72	45.28
		Gondang Sari Tea	33	20.75

**Table 3.** Statistical data of variable

Variable	Mean	Median	Min	Max	Stdev
Social media marketing (SMM)	5.56	6.00	1.00	7.00	0.048
Brand Identity (BID)	5.44	6.00	2.00	7.00	0.038
Brand Awareness (BA)	5.45	5.00	2.00	7.00	0.038
Brand Image (BIM)	5.45	5.50	1.00	7.00	0.044
Brand Preference (BP)	5.36	5.50	1.00	7.00	0.094
Willingness to Payment Price Premium (WPP)	5.47	6.00	1.00	7.00	0.040

**Table 4.** Construct validity and reliability

Variable	Outer Loading	Cronbach Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Social media marketing (SMM)	0.791 – 0.893	0.936	0.948	0.724
Brand Identity (BID)	0.832 – 0.892	0.819	0.892	0.734
Brand Awareness (BA)	0.677 – 0.894	0.714	0.838	0.636
Brand Image (BIM)	0.883 – 0.921	0.883	0.927	0.809
Brand Preference (BP)	0.924 – 0.940	0.848	0.929	0.868
Willingness to Payment Price Premium (WPP)	0.889 – 0.901	0.876	0.923	0.801

#### 4. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

##### 4.1. Respondent Description

The characteristics of the respondents in this study are presented in Table 2. According to the data, the largest age group of respondents falls between 41 and 50 years old (35.85%). The majority of respondents are male (60.38%), and the most common education level is a Bachelor's degree (30.19%). In terms of occupation, the largest group consists of self-employed individuals (37.11%). Additionally, the majority of tea product customers are from Teh Kemuning Mbok Karti (45.28%).

##### 4.2. Statistical Data

The data summary for each variable is presented in Table 3, which illustrates the respondents' perceptions of the variables analyzed in this study. The results indicate that all variables are perceived positively by the respondents, as evidenced by the average scores exceeding 5 on a scale ranging from 1 (lowest) to 7 (highest).

##### 4.3. Construct Validity and Reliability

The following tables present the results of the data analysis along with explanations of the findings. Table 4 shows that all items or indicators have outer loading values greater than 0.5. While an outer loading value above 0.5 is acceptable, it is important that the construct also meets the criteria for validity and reliability. Based on the reliability of the outer loading values, it can be concluded that all items or indicators demonstrate item validity. Furthermore, all constructs have a Cronbach's Alpha greater than 0.7 and composite reliability values exceeding 0.70, indicating that the constructs are reliable. Additionally, an Average Variance Extracted (AVE) score above 0.50 confirms a high level of convergent validity, meeting the criteria for good convergent validity.

The evaluation of the measurement model also includes an assessment of discriminant validity, which involves empirically verifying that constructs are distinct from one another. This study employed the Fornell-Larcker Criterion (FLC) and the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) test to assess discriminant validity. The Fornell-Larcker Criterion was satisfied (Table 5), as the square root of the AVE (which represents the amount of variance shared within a construct) was greater than the correlations with other constructs. Similarly, the HTMT test requirements were met (Table 6), as the shared variance between constructs was less than 0.90, confirming discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2018).

The assessment also included an evaluation of multicollinearity using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), hypothesis testing through  $p$ -values, and the direct effect size ( $f^2$ ). According to Hair et al. (2018), the  $f^2$  effect size is categorized as low (0.02), moderate (0.15), or high (0.35).

**Table 5.** Fornell and Lacker Criterion (FLC)

	BA	BID	BIM	BP	SMM	WPP
BA	0.813					
BID	0.654	0.836				
BIM	0.767	0.676	0.833			
BP	0.684	0.590	0.699	0.840		
SMM	0.678	0.618	0.676	0.616	0.845	
WPP	0.721	0.584	0.623	0.624	0.640	0.931

**Table 6.** Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

	BA	BID	BIM	BP	SMM	WPP
BA						
BID	0.782					
BIM	0.891	0.825				
BP	0.789	0.713	0.812			
SMM	0.748	0.713	0.752	0.684		
WPP	0.801	0.676	0.700	0.698	0.685	

**Table 7.** Structural model evaluation

	Path	P Values	VIF	f <sup>2</sup>	Category
BA -> BP	0.358	0.000	2.426	0.115	Low
BA -> WPP	0.511	0.000	2.705	0.216	Moderate
BID -> BA	0.380	0.000	1.618	0.198	Moderate
BID -> BIM	0.418	0.000	1.618	0.248	Moderate
BIM -> BP	0.425	0.000	2.426	0.163	Moderate
BIM -> WPP	0.077	0.420	2.820	0.005	Not Significant
BP -> WPP	0.222	0.028	2.182	0.051	Low
SMM -> BA	0.443	0.000	1.618	0.268	Moderate
SMM -> BID	0.618	0.000	1.000	0.618	High
SMM -> BIM	0.418	0.000	1.618	0.248	Moderate

**Table 8.** R square value

	R Square	R Square Adjusted	SRMR
BA	0.549	0.543	0.087
BID	0.382	0.378	
BIM	0.565	0.559	
BP	0.542	0.536	
WPP	0.554	0.545	

Table 7 shows that the inner VIF values for all variables are below 5, indicating the absence of multicollinearity between variables. The results of the direct impact test reveal that, on average, the variables exhibit a moderate influence. Among the tested variables, one demonstrates a high influence, while another is not statistically significant.

The third evaluation involves assessing the goodness-of-fit (GoF) of the model. In this study, GoF was evaluated using  $R^2$  and the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) (Hair et al., 2018). The data analysis results in Table 8 indicate that social media marketing has a moderate influence on brand identity (38.2%), brand awareness (54.9%), and brand image (56.5%). Additionally, the combined impact of social media marketing, brand identity, brand awareness, and brand image on brand preference accounts for 54.2% of the total variance, indicating a moderate level of influence. Furthermore, the combined effect of social media marketing, brand identity, brand awareness, brand image, and brand preference on willingness to pay premium prices accounts for 55.4% of the total variance, which also reflects a moderate level of influence.

The SRMR measures the adequacy of the model by comparing the observed correlation matrix with the correlation matrix estimated by the model (Hair et al., 2018). According to Hair et al. (2018), SRMR values below 0.10 indicate a well-fitting model. In this study, the SRMR value is 0.087, suggesting that the model achieves a satisfactory level of fit. This result indicates that the observed data effectively explains the relationships between the variables in the model.



**Table 9.** Hypothesis testing (direct effect)

Hypothesis	Path	$\beta$	<i>t</i> -statistics	<i>p</i> -values
H1	SMM -> BID	0.618	9.846	0.000
H2	SMM -> BA	0.443	5.829	0.000
H3	SMM -> BIM	0.418	4.899	0.000
H4	BA -> BP	0.358	3.670	0.000
H5	BA -> WPP	0.511	5.234	0.000
H6	BID -> BA	0.380	5.355	0.000
H7	BID -> BIM	0.418	5.865	0.000
H8	BIM -> BP	0.425	4.049	0.000
H9	BIM -> WPP	0.077	0.808	0.420
H10	BP -> WPP	0.222	2.210	0.028

**Table 10.** Mediation analysis

Hypothesis	Path	$\beta$	<i>t</i> -statistics	<i>p</i> -values
H11	SMM -> BID -> BA	0.235	5.080	0.000
H12	SMM -> BID -> BIM	0.258	5.671	0.000
H13	SMM -> BA -> BP	0.158	2.978	0.003
H14	SMM -> BA -> WPP	0.226	4.005	0.000
H15	SMM -> BIM -> BP	0.178	2.845	0.005
H16	SMM -> BIM -> WPP	0.032	0.785	0.433
H17	BA -> BP -> WPP	0.079	1.661	0.097
H18	BIM -> BP -> WPP	0.094	2.087	0.037

#### 4.4. Hypothesis Testing

The results of hypothesis testing, as shown in Table 9, indicate that all hypotheses are supported except for Hypothesis 9 ( $p < 0.05$ ). These findings suggest that social media marketing has a direct influence on brand identity, brand awareness, and brand image. Additionally, brand awareness and brand image have a significant impact on brand preference and willingness to pay premium prices. Furthermore, brand preference significantly affects willingness to pay premium prices. The results of the mediation analysis are presented in Table 10. The findings reveal that brand image mediates the effect of social media marketing on brand awareness and brand image. Both brand awareness and brand image significantly mediate the influence of social media marketing on brand preference. Moreover, brand awareness mediates the effect of social media marketing on willingness to pay premium prices for local tea brands. Additionally, brand preference significantly mediates the influence of brand image on willingness to pay premium prices. However, brand image does not mediate the effect of social media marketing on willingness to pay premium prices, and brand preference does not mediate the effect of brand awareness on willingness to pay premium prices. Figure 2 provides a visual representation of the PLS-SEM analysis results and further explains the relationships between the variables.

#### 4.5. Discussion

The high demand for tea products in Indonesia has led to increasingly intense competition across large, medium, and small industrial scales, as well as among individual or micro businesses. Karanganyar Regency, one of the regions in Indonesia with tea plantations, is home to many SMEs that produce tea. Some of these SMEs have developed well-known brands and successfully charge premium prices for their products. To strengthen their branding, tea SMEs are improving product quality and adopting more attractive packaging. Gambyong, Kemuning Mbok Karti, and Gondang Sari are examples of tea SMEs that have successfully created high-quality products and established strong brands. These SMEs have also effectively marketed their products through social media marketing, enabling them to charge premium prices. The success of these tea SMEs provides valuable insights and serves as a reference for other SMEs aiming to achieve similar results.

The findings of this study demonstrate that social media marketing has a positive impact on brand identity, brand awareness, and brand image. This positive effect stems from improved marketing management by SMEs through social media, which enhances consumer perceptions of their products. These results align with the findings of Malarvizhi et al. (2022), who reported that social media marketing significantly

influences brand loyalty, brand equity, and willingness to pay premium prices. Additionally, this study supports the research of Park (2022), Godey (2021), and Zeqiri et al. (2024), which found that social media marketing positively affects brand image and brand awareness.

Based on factor loading values, respondents identified engaging social media content as the most important factor in building brand equity for premium local tea products. This was followed by the availability of relevant information shared via social media, the inclusion of trending content, and the provision of information that meets customer needs. Managers also emphasized the importance of customer interaction and visually appealing social media content for local tea SMEs. Therefore, effective social media management is essential for building brand equity for local tea products. Popular platforms used by tea SMEs for promotion include Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok. These SMEs, which began as home-based businesses catering to tourists visiting the scenic slopes of Mount Lawu in Karanganyar, have successfully leveraged social media to promote their products. In addition to selling tea, they offer tea-drinking experiences in tea houses with views of Mount Lawu, a region renowned for its natural beauty and high-quality tea production in Central Java Province.

This study also reveals that consumers' willingness to pay premium prices is significantly influenced by their familiarity with and identification of a brand. These findings align with Barreda et al. (2020), who demonstrated that strong brand awareness significantly impacts brand image and brand loyalty. Similarly, Anselmsson et al. (2014) found that brand awareness positively affects both brand loyalty and willingness to pay premium prices. Consumers who can easily identify a brand's logo are more likely to endorse the brand and pay higher prices for its products or services (Malarvizhi et al., 2022). Previous research has also shown that strong brand recognition enables brands to command higher prices in the market (Anselmsson et al., 2014; Bougenvile & Ruswanti, 2017). Respondents in this study indicated a high level of familiarity with the three local tea brands, suggesting that these brands hold a special place in their customers' hearts. Factor loading values show that the unique characteristics of local tea products are the strongest contributors to building brand awareness, followed by symbols, logos, and product knowledge. To further enhance brand awareness, local tea SMEs should focus on creating distinctive characters, symbols, logos, and product knowledge that resonate with their customers.

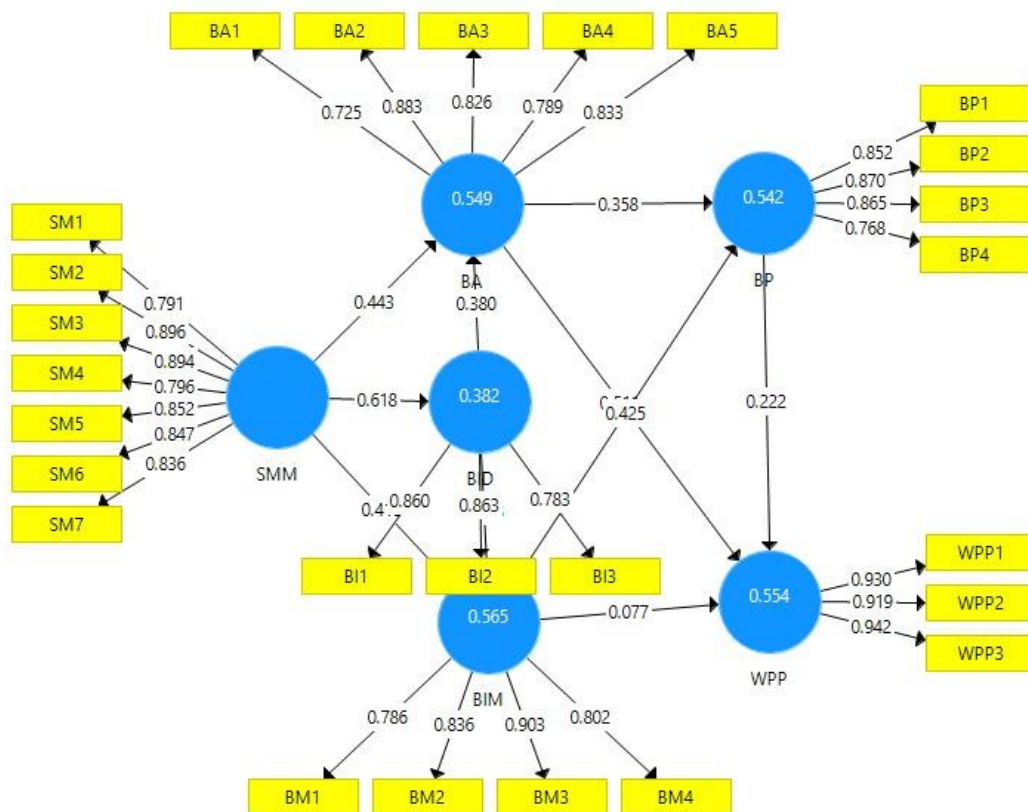


Figure 2. Research Results Model

A positive brand image provides additional advantages and significantly influences customer behavior. This study shows that brand image has a substantial impact on brand preference and brand loyalty but does not significantly affect willingness to pay premium prices. These findings support the research of Li et al. (2021), which demonstrated that a strong brand image enhances consumer perceptions, leading to increased brand loyalty. Murtiasih et al. (2021) also found that a favorable brand image improves customer satisfaction and loyalty. Organizations with a strong brand image can execute strategic promotions more effectively and enhance consumer loyalty, while those with a weak brand image experience the opposite effect. However, this study contradicts the findings of Yodpram and Intalar (2020), as it does not provide evidence of a direct impact of brand image on willingness to pay premium prices. The weak influence of brand image on willingness to pay premium prices may be attributed to the lack of emphasis on uniqueness, social image, and regional origin in the brand image of local products, as well as unclear justification for the high pricing of these products (Anselmsson et al., 2014). Addressing these aspects may help increase consumers' willingness to pay premium prices.

This study also highlights the significant role of brand identity in enhancing brand image and increasing consumer awareness, which in turn leads to a greater willingness to pay premium prices. These findings align with the research of Farzin et al. (2021). Respondents' perceptions of the tea brands indicate high levels of loyalty, although they also expressed moderate satisfaction with the current pricing, which is higher than that of competing tea products. Factor loading values show that the unique character of home-brand tea products is the strongest contributor to brand image, followed by trust in the brand, overall quality, and product variety. To build a strong brand image, tea SMEs should focus on creating unique product characteristics, fostering trust, ensuring high quality, and offering diverse product options that differentiate them from competitors.

The study's findings also demonstrate that brand preference and loyalty have a significant positive impact on willingness to pay premium prices. This indicates that the more consumers like a particular tea product, the more likely they are to pay a premium price for it. These results validate previous studies on premium brands, such as Godey et al. (2016), which found that brand loyalty motivates consumers to purchase premium products. Yodpram and Intalar (2020) also identified a direct relationship between brand loyalty, brand image, and willingness to pay premium prices. Similarly, Pourazad et al. (2020) empirically confirmed the positive influence of brand loyalty on willingness to pay premium prices. Factor loading values in this study show that consumer preference for local tea products is strongly influenced by their liking for the product, followed by their desire to repurchase, visits to tea production houses, and repeat purchases. To enhance brand preference, home-brand tea producers should focus on improving these factors.

The mediation analysis reveals that brand identity mediates the impact of social media marketing on brand awareness and brand image. Brand identity, which includes elements such as a brand's name, product design, symbols, and advertising, helps create a distinct identity in the minds of consumers (Chalil, 2021). These findings suggest that social media marketing is more effective in influencing brand awareness and brand image when local SMEs have a strong brand identity.

Brand awareness also mediates the relationship between social media marketing and brand preference, indicating that strong brand awareness enhances the effectiveness of social media marketing in shaping consumer brand choices. Additionally, brand awareness mediates the impact of brand identity and social media marketing on willingness to pay premium prices for local tea products, suggesting that strong brand awareness amplifies the influence of social media marketing on willingness to pay premium prices.

Brand image mediates the effect of social media marketing on brand preference, indicating that social media marketing has a stronger influence on brand preference when local tea products have a strong brand image. However, brand image does not mediate the relationship between social media marketing and willingness to pay premium prices. This suggests that brand image is not a key factor in linking social media marketing to willingness to pay premium prices. The study also found that brand preference mediates the relationship between brand image and willingness to pay premium prices but does not mediate the effect of brand awareness on willingness to pay premium prices. These findings indicate that brand image has a stronger influence on willingness to pay premium prices when local tea products have high brand preference, while brand preference does not significantly enhance the impact of brand awareness on willingness to pay premium prices.

According to the "Digital 2023: Indonesia" report by We Are Social, there are 167 million active social

media users in Indonesia, representing 60.4% of the population. Indonesians spend an average of three hours and 18 minutes per day on social media, ranking 10th globally for social media usage duration. This data highlights the strategic importance of social media as a promotional platform for local tea SMEs. Home-brand tea SMEs can leverage social media platforms, both free and paid, to effectively promote their products and reach a wider audience.

## 5. CONCLUSION, IMPLICATION, SUGGESTION, AND LIMITATIONS

The growing number of social media users today presents a significant opportunity for SMEs to promote their products and enhance brand equity. To remain competitive in the increasingly tight market of the digital era, SMEs must effectively utilize social media as a marketing tool. This study specifically examines the influence of social media marketing on willingness to pay premium prices, with brand awareness, brand image, and brand preference serving as mediating variables. The findings highlight the direct benefits of social media marketing on brand identity, brand awareness, and brand image.

The results also emphasize the critical role of brand awareness and brand image in building brand preference and increasing willingness to pay premium prices. Notably, brand awareness plays a key role in strengthening the influence of social media marketing on both brand preference and willingness to pay premium prices. In contrast, brand image primarily enhances the impact of social media marketing on brand preference. This indicates that social media marketing is more effective in increasing brand preference when home-made tea products have strong brand awareness and brand image among consumers. Furthermore, social media marketing is more likely to increase willingness to pay premium prices when home-made tea products have strong brand awareness.

This research provides valuable managerial implications for local tea SMEs. It demonstrates that marketing and promotion through social media are highly effective in enhancing the brand and image of premium-priced products. Premium tea products cater to a specific consumer segment, particularly tea enthusiasts with refined tastes. These consumers are loyal and willing to pay higher prices compared to competitors' tea products. A study by Malarvizhi et al. (2022) examined the influence of social media marketing, brand awareness, and brand image on willingness to pay premium prices. Building on this, the present study incorporates brand identity and brand preference as additional variables influencing willingness to pay premium prices. A key finding of this study is that brand identity significantly impacts brand image and brand awareness and serves as a mediator between social media marketing and these variables. Another important finding is that brand preference positively affects willingness to pay premium prices. These insights provide a foundation for future research to further refine models related to willingness to pay premium prices.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in refining the consumer decision model theory developed by Howard (1989). The refinement highlights the role of information technology and communication stimuli, such as social media marketing, as a marketing tool that influences customer emotions (brand equity), thereby encouraging conative behavior (willingness to pay premium prices). The use of social media as a marketing tool is particularly relevant in the current context, given the large number of active social media users in Indonesia and the lower costs associated with social media compared to conventional marketing methods.

This research, however, has several limitations. First, it does not differentiate between the specific social media platforms used by each SME, making it difficult to assess the effectiveness of advertising on different platforms for home-brand tea products. Second, the data collection relied solely on questionnaires, which limited the ability to explore respondents' perceptions in greater depth. Future research should address these limitations by distinguishing between the social media platforms used by SMEs and incorporating interview techniques to complement questionnaire data. Third, the study is geographically limited to Indonesia. Expanding the research to include other countries could provide broader insights. Fourth, the study focuses exclusively on tea products. Future research could examine a wider range of product categories to enable broader generalizations.

Additionally, this study does not evaluate the efficiency of advertising on social media platforms. Future research should investigate the effectiveness and efficiency of promotions across different social media platforms used by SMEs. Another area for future exploration is the distinction between the effects of paid and unpaid advertising on sales and brand equity. Since most SMEs in Indonesia rely on unpaid advertising to market their products, future studies could examine the comparative impact of paid and unpaid advertising on brand equity and sales performance.

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