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Beyond Single-Channel Marketing: How Integrated Digital Marketing Strategies Drive Consumer Engagement through Trust

Yude Jiang¹, Reynaldo Gacho Segumpan^{1,*}

¹ City Graduate School, City University Malaysia, Menara City U, No. 8, Jalan 51A/223, 46100 Petaling Jaya, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Platform users experience social media content, search results, and direct messages as parts of a unified purchasing experience when conducting transactions on platform-based e-commerce websites, but empirical research in the field of digital marketing tends to study each of these channels independently. This study examines whether an integrated specification of social media marketing, search engine optimisation, and email marketing explains a higher percentage of variation in consumer engagement than its independent baselines and whether consumer trust is mediating the effects of all three channels as opposed to one. Data have been collected in the form of a cross-sectional survey among 384 active consumers of Chinese e-commerce platforms using stratified random sampling and analysed with hierarchical regression and bootstrapping of the mediation model. Data quality measures have proven to be satisfactory, with internal consistency between 0.841 and 0.892 and average variance extracted between 0.547 and 0.581. An integrated model explained 48.0 per cent of the variance in consumer engagement, compared to 37.5 per cent explained by the strongest of single channels. This increment has been shown to be robust to model adjustments and cross-validation. Jointly estimated, the effect of social media marketing dropped by 38.4 per cent relative to its isolated estimate. Consumer trust partially mediated every path, transmitting between 27.9 and 30.7 per cent of each total effect, and pairwise contrasts between the indirect effects were not significant. Integration therefore yields measurable rather than rhetorical gains, and trust operates as a mechanism attached to the platform rather than to particular touchpoints.

1. Introduction

The digital marketplace in China is no longer a single point of sale but a complex network of touchpoints. According to the 57th statistical report by the China Internet Network Information Center, there are 1.125 billion internet users, with a penetration rate of 80.1 per cent in December 2025, as well as 937 million online shoppers, amounting to 83.2 per cent of the internet users and

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: dr.reynaldo@city.edu.my

1.114 billion social networking service users [7]. As per the platforms' disclosures, the consumer pool in each case has an identical size, and their marketing budget is spent on multiple channels simultaneously [3]. For an average consumer, the process includes the identification of the product via short video, verification through searching the information and finally through the promotional message. Exposure is hence never limited to a single channel, whereas the current literature that informs the budget allocation is concerned with one channel at a time [32].

There is one gap arising from the mismatch. Research on the role of social media marketing, search engine optimisation and email marketing has developed separately, and all three streams have demonstrated the ability of their channels to boost specific engagement aspects [2,28]. The superiority of the integrative approach in comparison with individual channel activities is mentioned repeatedly but almost never formulated in such a way that it would be possible to disprove it and there is no comparison with the integrated specification and the benchmarks, which it should beat. It is important not only for theoretical research but also for estimation purposes. Consumers following brands through social media are most likely to read the promotional messages sent by them and thus exposure is overlapping and when one channel is included in the estimation and other channels are excluded, all shared variance goes into one coefficient.

There is also the question of mechanism. Many studies have found a link between marketing stimuli and engagement outcomes without providing any reasons why certain campaigns cause participation in some consumers and lack of interest in others. Studies in the field of omnichannel have partially addressed this issue through introducing psychological state in-between the variables, where trust has been found to be among the psychological states which mediate the impact [1,6]. Trust in the platform would appear to be a very reasonable variable to assume such a role in the context of platform commerce where deals are concluded with unfamiliar vendors and personal information becomes currency of personalisation. It is yet unclear whether trust plays this role as a by-product of the channel-specific processes or as a mechanism.

The three goals structure the analysis which follows. Firstly, an integrated model involving the use of social media marketing, SEO and email marketing is compared with the best single channel model in terms of how well it predicts additional variance in consumer engagement after accounting for increased model complexity. The relative importance of the three channels is compared simultaneously. The role of consumer trust in mediating the effect of each channel on consumer engagement is further investigated, as well as any differences in indirect effects between the channels. A survey of 384 consumers actively using Chinese online retailing platforms is used in hierarchical regression and bootstrapped mediation analysis, while the single channel models are maintained since the baselines provide the standard against which the integrated model is to be measured.

Three contributions are presented below. The paper turns a commonly held belief into an empirical question by measuring the explanatory contribution of integration to models where single channel impacts serve as controls. This research demonstrates that the proportion of each channel's impact delivered via trust is roughly equal among all the channels, a result suggesting the role of trust as a common conversion channel for all the channels. Empirical evidence is provided based on the case of China where search, social and messaging platforms have different structures than in most previous work.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1 Consumer Engagement and the Stimulus-Organism-Response Framing

Engagement is conceptualized here as voluntary and repeated attention, affect and effort investments into the platform, manifested cognitively by means of attention and information processing, affectively via attachment, and behaviourally via revisits, participation, and advocacy. Multidimensionality of engagement rather than counting behaviours has become standard in recent literature synthesis [1,32], and experimental findings from automated service interfaces indicate the independent movements of the cognitive and affective aspects that would otherwise be missed if measured by the behavioural count alone [27]. A combined measure of all three dimensions is used here for the reason that marketing stimuli are not likely to move just one aspect, and a measure consisting only of the behavioural aspect would underestimate the movements in the attention and affect dimensions preceding behaviour [8]. The use of such a composite comes at a price as channels working in different dimensions may generate the same scores, but this price is paid due to the research question being focused on the joint impact of the channels.

Stimulus-Organism-Response theory provides the organising principle [21]. Controlled marketing activities are the stimulus, internal evaluative process is the organism, and multiple dimensions of engagement are the responses. The theory has shown remarkable endurance in digital retail environments, in which features of channels and platforms are considered environmental stimuli and internal evaluations are conducted prior to behaviour [6]. Without the organism variable, the model would merely be able to establish a link between stimulus and response, but the research question of the effects of stimulus on consumers is more relevant.

Cognitive economy is achieved through perceptions of perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use, which come from technology acceptance tradition. These perceptions are incorporated into the appraisal process rather than being independently hypothesised constructs.

2.2 Single-Channel Effects on Consumer Engagement

Social media marketing works through the interactivity, social presence, and content that consumers can extend or refute. Social media activities are structured in such a way that the intensity of consumer interactions is increased with community identity and peer interaction as immediate determinants [15,28]. The informational richness and authenticity determine how deeply users get involved in social media rather than just watching them [31], structured social media campaigns work better than opportunistic social media posting in professional sports and business-to-business settings [20,22], and being responsive on the go increases the likelihood of user participation [19]. Such research findings are generally obtained using single-channel design where simultaneous search or messaging are not controlled or measured [24].

H1a. Social media marketing has a positive effect on consumer engagement.

The search engine optimisation strategy functions by way of accessibility and the legitimacy derived from high organic rankings, with content quality, technical performance and mobile responsiveness being the key features [2,4]. Consistent findings across industries indicate the same trend, as organic ranking is linked with higher intentions to buy compared to paid ranking of the same visibility level [5,34]. The mechanism is partly informational, since the content of the result list shapes what consumers know before they act [30], and partly design-related, since listing composition alters both click and purchase probability [14]. Ranking logic on domestic Chinese search platforms differs

from ranking logic observed on Western sites but the mechanism remains the same. Accessibility improvements are first of all cognitive and only then behavioural, which makes search more appraisal-related process than it is treated as a traffic one.

H1b. Search engine optimisation has a positive effect on consumer engagement.

Email marketing and in-platform messaging rely on personal communication between individuals. Personalised communications result in increased rate of message openings and responses, while transactional communication maintains interaction after the purchase in ways broadcast channels are unable to do [12,33]. However, there is no monotonic relationship here because too much frequency of such interaction and too direct interpretation of behavioural data can be perceived as intrusion [23]. Messaging is therefore expected to contribute positively while carrying a lower ceiling than the other two channels.

H1c. Email marketing has a positive effect on consumer engagement.

2.3 From Single Channels to Integrated Digital Marketing

Each one of the three bodies of literature cited above has its strengths, but none is exhaustive since each tries to measure the channel effect assuming implicitly that all other channels are either nonexistent or irrelevant. When there is any overlap in exposures, then the channel effect of any omitted channel that is correlated with the measured channel and the outcome variable is absorbed into the measurement, which means that isolated measures have an inherent upward bias.

Moreover, integration is substantively distinct from accumulation because the consistency of the message across touchpoints means that an observation about the message in one setting can be corroborated by an observation in another, and corroboration turns exposure into credibility. Omnichannel data support this interpretation of integration as well, in that the level of integration and not the number of channels determines the outcome of interest through evaluative states, not directly [6,29]. Service and information integration improve the experience and engagement across retail categories [16,26], enhance advocacy through message fit and social connectedness [17], increase retention of consumers who switch touchpoints [18], and influence recommendations in mobile word-of-mouth scenarios [35]. There are two ways to think about combining channels that require differentiation. Complementarity suggests that exposure to one channel increases the marginal value of exposure to another, so that there will be a positive interaction effect, while substitution suggests overlap in the information provided and that further exposure is progressively less valuable. Overlap is implied by the correlations given later on, and substitution thus seems like the more sensible assumption. Incremental explanatory value could apply to either scenario, so the claim is limited.

H2. The integrated three-channel model explains significantly more variance in consumer engagement than the best-performing single-channel baseline, after adjustment for model complexity.

2.4 Consumer Trust as the Cross-Channel Organism

Trust within a platform marketplace depends on expectations regarding fulfillment, transactional security and privacy, and the believability of the information one comes across prior to purchasing.

Social content reveals the responsiveness and enables verification by peers; consistent search results indicate the merchant's presence as opposed to being temporary; addressing of messages indicates moderation in use of behavioural data. The findings of synthesis literature establish trust as the key mediating construct between technological, organisational, social, and motivational factors and engagement outcomes in platform-based commerce [1,24].

H3a. Social media marketing has a positive effect on consumer trust.

H3b. Search engine optimisation has a positive effect on consumer trust.

H3c. Email marketing has a positive effect on consumer trust.

The result is that the cost associated with further interaction is also reduced, as a consumer who considers the platform trustworthy will not spend too much time evaluating every interaction and is therefore more likely to interact, be attached, and behave [6].

H4. Consumer trust has a positive effect on consumer engagement.

If trust performs this role, part of each channel's influence should travel through it, although complete transmission is not expected because convenience and informational relevance provide routes that require no credibility judgement.

H5a. Consumer trust mediates the effect of social media marketing on consumer engagement.

H5b. Consumer trust mediates the effect of search engine optimisation on consumer engagement.

H5c. Consumer trust mediates the effect of email marketing on consumer engagement.

The question of whether the mediated share is equal between different channels forms two possible interpretations. According to the channel-based interpretation, trust would be a secondary outcome of social interaction. In terms of the shared mechanism approach, the mediated share should be equal regardless of where the stimulus comes from, because credibility perceptions are associated with the platform itself and not the point of contact.

H6. The indirect effects transmitted through consumer trust do not differ significantly across the three channels.

Figure 1 presents the resulting framework, in which the single-channel baselines and the integrated specification are distinguished and the hypothesised paths are labelled.

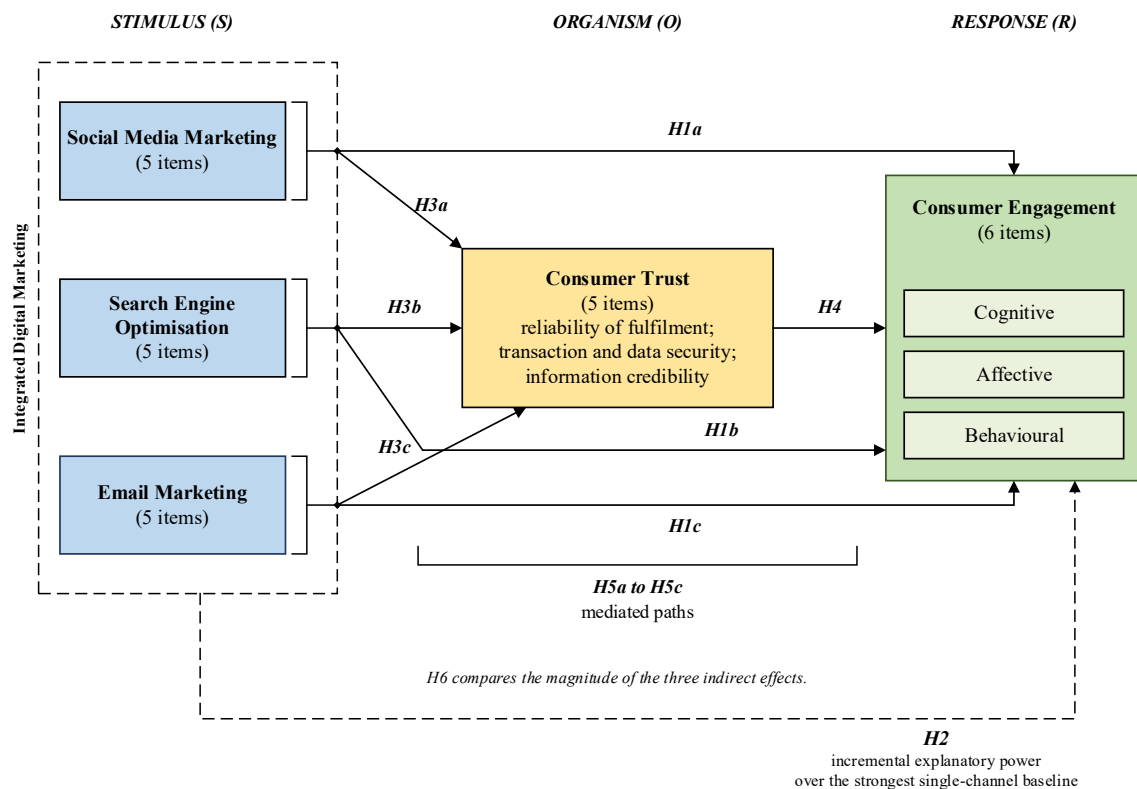


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework based on the stimulus-organism-response perspective

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

Cross-sectional quantitative research design was employed, which is well suited to test relationships that are hypothesized based on theory among a large dispersed group of consumers. It is important to note that the research design is not exploratory but confirmatory in nature, since the concepts and their path directions, including the concept of mediation by trust, were predetermined prior to data collection. Perceptual self-reporting measures were used due to the fact that the concepts of interest relate to how consumers perceive marketing practices on the platform, which are not observable from platform-side behavioural logs.

3.2 Population, Sampling and Data Collection

The targeted population was made up of consumers from mainland China who had come into contact with the digital marketing campaign from a popular e-commerce platform in the year prior to the collection of data. Coming into contact with the digital marketing campaign was considered as viewing or engaging with social media content related to the e-commerce platform, accessing the platform by means of the search result, and opening promotional and transactional communication from the platform. This limitation is required in order to ensure that consumers who do not have prior experience with the channel are not able to make an informed assessment on the channel. The sample frame was selected among active users of the Alibaba group of platforms.

Stratified random sampling was used, and strata were divided on the basis of age groups, online shopping habits and degree of computer usage as the factors which determine exposure and responsiveness to marketing. Proportional sampling ensured that there was no danger of heavy users being over-represented in the sample. The minimum number of samples required is 384, which was

calculated using the tabled requirements for sampling when population exceeds one million at 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error [13].

The questionnaire was delivered via an online survey using the platform “Wenjuanxing”. Amongst 420 delivered surveys, 401 were successfully returned. The return rate was 95.5 percent. In the data screening procedure, those returns containing missing values above 20 percent, duplications based on internet protocol addresses and similar time stamps, and identical answers to all questions were excluded. A total of 17 surveys were eliminated as invalid.

3.3 Measurement and the Operationalisation of Integration

Each construct was assessed using five-point Likert scales with 1 representing the lowest level of the construct and 5 representing the highest level of the construct. The questions were modified from existing validated measures used in previous platform commerce studies, and the scope of the domains was compared to recently published reviews of predictors of trust and engagement to ensure that no dimension of the constructs was overlooked [1,15]. The questionnaire was developed in English, translated into Chinese and back-translated by an independent bilingual translator. The findings of this exercise have been presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Constructs, representative measurement items and sources

Construct	Items	Representative item	Adapted from
Social media marketing	5	I rely on the platform’s social media for product updates and offers	Validated social media marketing scales, coverage checked against recent synthesis evidence
Search engine optimisation	5	I often find the platform at the top of search engine results	Validated search visibility and website engagement scales
Email marketing	5	Personalised messages from the platform match my preferences	Validated direct and personalised messaging scales
Consumer trust	5	I feel secure when making transactions on the platform	Validated platform trust scales covering reliability, security and information credibility
Consumer engagement	6	I feel emotionally connected to the platform because of its marketing activity	Validated multidimensional engagement scales spanning cognitive, affective and behavioural facets

Integration was measured on the analytical rather than perceptual level. Simultaneous measurement of all three channels constitutes the marketing environment that participants have been exposed to. However, perceptual measures of the quality of integration as consistency and seamlessness of communication channels were not considered. It is mentioned here as the restriction that needs to be taken into consideration when interpreting the findings of the study.

3.4 Secondary Data and Traceability

The contextual magnitudes cited in this study come from publicly accessible data sources such that any figure presented can be attributed to the organization that published it. The figures for national internet usage and online shopping were retrieved from the periodic reports issued by China Internet Network Information Center on its website, www3.cnnic.cn [7]. The measures for platform-level characteristics including active users per year and marketing spend came from annual reports filed with United States Securities and Exchange Commission and available in the EDGAR database

on www.sec.gov/edgar [3]. Each of the sources in the reference section is accompanied by the name of the reporting body, report title, year of publication, date of access and the network address. No paid-for data source was accessed and therefore all contextual magnitudes can be verified independently.

3.5 Analytical Procedure

The analysis process involved the following steps: descriptive statistics and normality checks, reliability and validity tests, common method bias assessment, correlation and multicollinearity, hierarchical regression, and bootstrap mediation. Factorability was first checked with the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy and the test of sphericity by Bartlett, after which construct validity was evaluated with exploratory factor analysis through principal axis factoring and Promax rotation, with oblique solution being justified by the assumption that constructs would correlate. Each item had to have a factor loading of 0.50 or more on the intended factor and less than 0.30 on all other factors, with the solution chosen having to explain at least 60 per cent of cumulative variance [10]. Internal consistency was used to measure reliability, convergent validity through average variance extracted and composite reliability, while discriminant validity was evaluated by comparing the square root of average variance extracted with inter-construct correlations [9,10]. Finally, common method bias was evaluated with full collinearity variance inflation factors, since single-factor extraction is considered inadequate for common method bias detection [25].

The incremental contribution of the integrated specification was evaluated against the strongest single-channel baseline using the change in explained variance, computed as

$$F_{change} = \frac{(R_{full}^2 - R_{reduced}^2) / (k_{full} - k_{reduced})}{(1 - R_{full}^2) / (n - k_{full} - 1)} \quad (1)$$

together with the adjusted coefficient of determination and the Stein cross-validity coefficient, computed as

$$\rho_{Stein}^2 = 1 - \left[\left(\frac{n-1}{n-k-1} \right) \left(\frac{n-2}{n-k-2} \right) \left(\frac{n+1}{n} \right) \right] (1 - R^2) \quad (2)$$

Mediation was tested with bias-corrected bootstrapping over 5,000 resamples, with indirect effects judged significant where the 95 per cent confidence interval excluded zero, and pairwise contrasts used to compare indirect effects across channels (Hayes, 2022). The proportion of each total effect transmitted through trust was computed as

$$P_M = \frac{a \times b}{(a \times b) + c'} \quad (3)$$

where "a" denotes the effect of a channel on trust, "b" the effect of trust on engagement controlling for the channel, and "c" the residual direct effect.

4. Results

4.1 Respondent Profile

Demographic makeup of the 384 usable cases is presented in Table 2 below. There was an even gender split, and the majority of respondents were in the age group of 25 to 44 years, which relates to the demographic that is mostly affected by marketing efforts on the platforms. Education level among respondents was relatively high as more than seven out of ten respondents were college graduates or higher; this can be attributed to online surveying and urban demographics of the base of platform users. Incomes were in medium categories. Purchase frequency suggests that the respondents surveyed were active buyers and not occasional buyers because more than eight in ten respondents made purchases two to three times per month.

Table 2

Respondent profile (N = 384)

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	201	52.3
	Female	178	46.4
	Prefer not to say	5	1.3
Age (years)	18 to 24	74	19.3
	25 to 34	138	35.9
	35 to 44	103	26.8
	45 to 54	51	13.3
	55 and above	18	4.7
Education	High school or below	29	7.6
	Diploma or associate degree	58	15.1
	Bachelor's degree	183	47.7
	Master's degree	96	25.0
	Doctoral degree	18	4.7
Monthly income (CNY)	Below 3,000	38	9.9
	3,000 to 6,000	91	23.7
	6,001 to 10,000	147	38.3
	10,001 to 20,000	82	21.4
	Above 20,000	26	6.8
Purchase frequency	More than once a week	67	17.4
	About once a week	134	34.9
	Two to three times a month	112	29.2
	About once a month	49	12.8
	Less than once a month	22	5.7

4.2 Measurement Quality and Common Method Bias

The results regarding reliability and convergent validity are presented in Table 3. Internal consistency varied between 0.841 and 0.892, composite reliability between 0.869 and 0.906, and average variance extracted between 0.547 and 0.581. Thus, all constructs surpassed the traditional reliability threshold of 0.70 and variance extracted threshold of 0.50 [10]. Indices of sampling adequacy varied between 0.836 and 0.878 and the tests of sphericity turned out to be statistically significant for all constructs. Therefore, correlation matrices were factorable. The exploratory factor analysis yielded an expected five-factor solution explaining 63.7 per cent of the variance. The target

loadings of the twenty items measuring three channels and trust were above 0.70, while the six engagement items had the loading on one factor between 0.741 and 0.812. Cross-loadings were from 0.074 to 0.138, that is below 0.30 criterion. The results obtained justify the decision to treat the engagement items as a composite variable.

Table 3
Reliability and convergent validity

Construct	Items	Alpha	CR	AVE
Social media marketing	5	0.863	0.887	0.564
Search engine optimisation	5	0.841	0.869	0.547
Email marketing	5	0.857	0.879	0.553
Consumer trust	5	0.879	0.897	0.581
Consumer engagement	6	0.892	0.906	0.573

Note. Sampling adequacy indices ranged from 0.836 to 0.878 and Bartlett's test was significant at $p < .001$ for all constructs.

Method bias was evaluated through complete collinearity variance inflation factors, which are more reliable than univariate extraction of factors since they consider both lateral and vertical variances. These values varied from 1.559 in the case of email marketing to 2.148 in consumer engagement, and were far below 3.3, meaning that the method variance cannot explain the existing relationships. Various procedural interventions undertaken during the development phase such as anonymity and construct separation strengthen the argument [25].

4.3 Descriptive Statistics, Correlations and Collinearity

Table 4 provides means, standard deviations, inter-concept correlations and collinearity diagnostics. Skewness values were in the range of -0.421 to -0.298 and kurtosis values from 0.043 to 0.201, so all distributions satisfied acceptable limits of parametric estimation. All correlations were positive and significant at $p < .01$. Engagement was found to correlate highest with trust at .631, then with social media marketing at .612, with search engine optimisation at .543 and with email marketing at .519. Correlations between the three marketing concepts were in the range of .461 to .514, which is the empirical indication of overlap and explains why individual channel-based estimations will be biased. Discriminant validity is present since the square root of average variance extracted is larger than every correlation outside the diagonal row and column.

Table 4
Descriptive statistics, correlations, discriminant validity and collinearity

Construct	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	VIF
1 Social media marketing	3.80	0.71	<i>.751</i>					1.886
2 Search engine optimisation	3.72	0.74	.514	<i>.740</i>				1.644
3 Email marketing	3.60	0.78	.487	.461	<i>.744</i>			1.559
4 Consumer trust	3.79	0.70	.573	.521	.498	<i>.762</i>		1.966
5 Consumer engagement	3.72	0.68	.612	.543	.519	.631	<i>.757</i>	2.148

Note. Diagonal entries in italics are square roots of average variance extracted (AVE). All correlations significant at $p < .01$. VIF values are full collinearity indices.

4.4 Single-Channel Baselines and the Integrated Model

Table 5 compares the three baselines to the integrated approach. In individual estimates, each of the channels had a substantial impact on the variance, where social media marketing explains 37.5 per cent of the variance, search engine optimisation 29.5 per cent, and email marketing 26.9 per cent. However, simultaneous estimation brought significant changes to the results. The integrated model accounted for 48.0 per cent of the variance, with a value of 47.6 per cent when adjusted. All three variables were statistically significant at $p < .001$, while VIFs ranged from 1.42 to 1.52.

Table 5

Hierarchical regression comparing single-channel baselines with the integrated model

Model	Predictor	Beta	t	R2	Adjusted R2	Stein p^2	F
1	Social media marketing	.612	15.12	.375	.373	.370	228.75 (1, 382)
2	Search engine optimisation	.543	12.64	.295	.293	.289	159.73 (1, 382)
3	Email marketing	.519	11.87	.269	.267	.264	140.83 (1, 382)
4	Social media marketing	.377	8.26	.480	.476	.470	116.88 (3, 380)
	Search engine optimisation	.247	5.50				
	Email marketing	.221	5.02				

Note. All coefficients significant at $p < .001$. Stein p^2 is the Stein cross-validity coefficient, which estimates the variance the model would explain in an independent sample of the same size. Unstandardised coefficients for Model 4 are 0.361, 0.227 and 0.193 with an intercept of 0.810.

A comparison between Model 4 and Model 1 results in an increase in explained variance of .105 with a change statistic of 38.49 with 2 and 380 degrees of freedom and $p < .001$, which means that H2 is confirmed. This is because the increase in variance cannot be due to an increased number of parameters, as both the adjusted coefficient of determination and the Stein cross-validity coefficient rise alongside the raw value.

The amount of reduction of the effect of social media is equally instructive. In isolated estimation, the coefficient was .612, while in joint estimation, it went down to .377, a reduction of 38.4%. For search engine optimisation, the coefficients reduced from .543 to .247, a reduction of 54.5%, while for email marketing, the reduction was from .519 to .221, a reduction of 57.4%. The two lesser influential channels thus suffered more in reduction in the amount of influence than the most influential channel in joint estimation, which means that a significant portion of the influence from the two lesser influential channels comes from the interaction with social media. This indicates that in single-channel designs, the amount of influence attributed to a channel is in fact an overestimation of the influence of the whole marketing environment, and the hypotheses H1a to H1c are thus supported at smaller figures than in isolated estimation.

4.5 Trust as A Cross-Channel Mechanism

The regression of trust in the three channels yielded significant coefficients of .340, .245, and .219 with an R-squared value of .432, confirming H3a-H3c. The inclusion of trust in the engagement model increased the R-squared value from .480 to .534, an increase of .054, with a change statistic of 44.32 on 1 and 379 degrees of freedom. The trust coefficient of .310 supports H4, its bootstrap interval running from .220 to .395. The decomposition of effects is shown in Table 6.

Table 6
Mediation results and hypothesis decisions

Path	a	b	Indirect	95% CI	Direct	Total	Mediated share	Decision
Social media marketing to trust to engagement	.340	.310	.105	[.068, .153]	.272	.377	27.9%	H5a supported
Search engine optimisation to trust to engagement	.245	.310	.076	[.045, .118]	.171	.247	30.7%	H5b supported
Email marketing to trust to engagement	.219	.310	.068	[.038, .107]	.154	.221	30.7%	H5c supported

Note. Confidence intervals are bias-corrected bootstrap intervals based on 5,000 resamples.

Zero was excluded from all three indirect effects, while all three direct effects continued to show significance with [.180, .362], [.086, .259] and [.070, .239] intervals, showing partial rather than complete mediation. The comparisons among the indirect effects showed values of .029, .037 and .008 with intervals [-.017, .082], [-.007, .091] and [-.036, .056], respectively. Hence, hypothesis H6 is supported. The share of mediation was in the narrow range of 27.9 to 30.7 percent, irrespective of the channel through which the stimulus was received. Figure 2 presents the estimated path model with standardised coefficients.

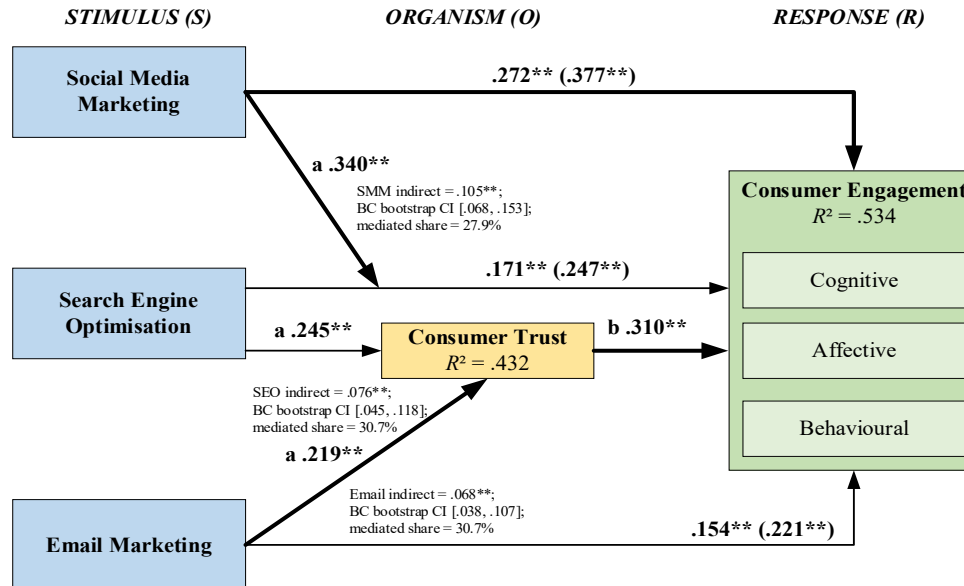


Fig. 2 Mediation path model with standardised coefficients

5. Discussion

This key conclusion can be stated as follows: integration produces a real rather than a symbolic benefit. The independent estimation of the most influential channel resulted in its explaining 37.5 per cent of the variance in engagement; the combined estimation increased the number to 48.0 per cent. This increase of .105 withstands correction for complexity, as it is seen in both the adjusted coefficient of determination and the Stein cross-validation index, which increased along with the raw

statistic, from .370 to .470. Under integration, not only does the predictive performance get enhanced but not merely because of the increase of the number of variables, but an often-made managerial statement gets an empirical confirmation that single-channel design cannot provide. No less important is the implication that this comparison makes about the nature of the extant literature, because the standardised impact of social media marketing diminished by 38.4 per cent after the inclusion of other channels into the analysis. Effect sizes identified in single-channel designs must be treated as upper estimates of the contribution of each channel in reality [32].

The stability of the ordering of the three channels supports its robustness and casts doubt about its interpretation as an estimation artefact. Social media marketing continued to have the biggest coefficient, easily explainable by the fact that in a market where social networking is practised by 98.9 per cent of the internet users and where interactive content and peer verification are normal parts of the purchase process [7,15], social media marketing plays a bigger role than any other communication channel. Search engine optimisation had the middle position, in line with research that shows that higher visibility and quality of the content increase the engagement through an accessibility route acting on the pre-action evaluation stage [2,4].

The emergence of trust was a phenomenon that worked over touchpoints rather than within each one. The portion of the overall effect conveyed via the trust variable showed only modest variation, being bounded between 27.9 per cent and 30.7 per cent. Pairwise comparisons were inconsequential, with confidence intervals including zero. In essence, the most parsimonious explanation for this result is that credibility is tied to the platform and not the specific channel via which it is encountered, such that a consumer made confident by peer opinions and one made confident by persistent search visibility reach the same evaluative conclusions. Such an interpretation resonates with omnichannel research, whereby integration affects relationship outcomes through evaluative states and synthesis studies placing trust as the primary mediator between technological, social and organisational antecedents of engagement [1,6,26]. Nonetheless, such an interpretation needs to be taken with moderation, since all three indirect paths utilise the same trust to engagement coefficient and similar ratios arise when the antecedent and residual direct effect scale in tandem. What the analysis confirms is merely the lack of channel specificity, a modest and well-substantiated claim compared to proving the identical mechanism.

In each of the paths, mediation was partial, with direct effects still holding significance after introducing the variable of trust into the equation. Convenience, information value, and entertainment provide channels for influence that do not involve the process of making a judgment on credibility. This means that the organism is just one of many possible channels within the stimulus-organism-response process and cannot be considered the only channel through which influence takes place [21]. There are two other explanations that deserve consideration. One is reverse specification where consumers who are currently involved in an activity tend to seek more marketing messages and report more exposure, which means that some of the coefficients would be reflecting selection effect. Another is a common evaluation bias where consumers who have positive dispositions towards each construct rate it higher.

There are two important implications to this. Theoretically, integration can be described as explanatory power incremental to established baselines, turning a statement made as an assertion into one that may have been false but was not, while the constancy of the share accounted for by mediation takes the stimulus-organism-response approach toward an extension where stimuli come from more than one source at the same time [29]. On a practical note, the findings show that coherence of message delivery across multiple touchpoints has more weight than intensity at any single touchpoint, since it is the integrated coefficients that are the appropriate basis for budgeting purposes. Credibility messages need to be placed on both high- and low-interaction touchpoints,

considering the similarity of impact on search visibility, messaging and social content in terms of reliance on credibility.

6. Conclusion

The integration of social media marketing, search engine optimisation and email marketing explains much more of consumer engagement variance than any individual channel, and the increase holds after controlling for model complexity. The extent of the contribution by consumer trust to the effect of each channel indicates its importance as a mediator of the platform level rather than of any channel level in particular. This means that both inter-channel consistency of touchpoints and credibility cues in channels low on interaction deserve a larger role in the allocation decision than high channel intensity alone. There are four limitations of these findings, but the design-related ones carry the greatest relevance. Cross-sectional observation cannot demonstrate causality since exposure and engagement were assessed simultaneously, and self-reports collected from only one source leave potential common method bias even in light of the controls provided for it. The other two limitations relate to scope. The evidence derives from a single national market environment and from a single platform ecosystem where the search, social and messaging infrastructure is distinct from others, and integration has been specified rather than measured as such in terms of quality of integration. The next steps in research should focus first on overcoming the design limitations as they impose an upper limit to what scope can tell us. Longitudinal or experimental research design coupled with objective measures of exposure across touchpoints will help establish the order and complement perceptual measures. Replications in different platform ecologies and markets will show to what degree the rankings of the channels hold. Finally, a measured construct of integration including interaction terms between the channels will test whether complementarity can be shown directly rather than deduced from added incremental explanatory power. Overcoming these challenges will allow the current finding to evolve into a defensible causal claim.

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