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From Posts to Preferences: The Mediating Role of Brand Image in KOL and Instagram Influence on Stay Decisions

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Abstract. This study aims to analyze the influence of key opinion leaders (KOL) and Instagram on the decision to stay through brand image. The population in this study was guests who stayed at the hotel from November 2024 to January 2025. The sampling technique used was accidental sampling, namely, guests who met directly with the researcher. data collection was carried out using a Google form and obtained 259 respondents. Data analysis used the structural equation model (SEM) method with the help of Smart PLS 3 software. The results showed that key opinion leaders and Instagram had a significant and positive influence on the decision to stay, both directly and indirectly. Likewise, key opinion leaders and Instagram had a significant and positive influence on brand image. Brand Image is a mediator between key opinion leaders and Instagram that influences the decision to stay. The implications in this study can be used by hotel owners as a reference to be able to analyze and determine hotel marketing strategies through the Instagram social media platform in the form of interesting content about hotel information, including information about hotel facilities, hotel prices, hotel locations and other interesting places around the hotel, packaged and presented by key opinion leaders with a wide target reach, especially to their followers who aim to be able to increase the visibility of the audience and strive to increase hotel revenue.

Keywords: Instagram, key opinion leader, brand image, purchase decision.

1. Introduction

The Indonesian hospitality industry has experienced significant growth in recent decades, particularly in the Tangerang area, where competition is quite high, with various local and international chains operating. Mature marketing strategies in the hospitality industry are increasingly focused on digital marketing, often favored as a marketing medium with excellent promotional impact, namely the KOL mediator model. Previous research has shown that KOLs can act as effective mediators in building emotional connections between brands and consumers, thereby increasing brand awareness and brand image. Furthermore, according to research conducted by Krisdayanti (2025), key opinion leaders have a positive and significant impact on

purchasing decisions. KOLs have unique characteristics where an identity or trait makes it easier for them to identify, including: Familiarity, namely the closeness or familiarity of KOLs with the audience, Trustworthiness, namely the ability to be trusted, expertise, namely the knowledge, experience, or skills possessed by KOLs (Li, 2023)

The development of the digital world is influenced by the rise of internet users, which has an impact on consumers in seeking information and selecting hotel services to the decision-making stage. Thus, it attracts the interest of business people in improving the marketing process through social media. According to Saputra et al. (2024), Social Media Marketing is a marketing strategy that utilizes social media platforms to build brand awareness, connect with audiences, and create interactions that can increase customer loyalty. The popularity of Instagram on wider social media is growing. Instagram media is often used to offer products and services by uploading images or short videos so that potential consumers can easily see what products are offered.

The influence of KOLs on the marketing process through Instagram social media is very significant in shaping perspectives and gaining a better understanding of a brand image, which ultimately leads consumers to make decisions about where to stay. Their expertise, relevant information, and ability to interact with their followers increase consumer purchases. Brand image can leverage the power of KOLs to improve marketing strategies and build a strong presence in the digital world. Meanwhile, according to Firmansyah (2019) brand image is what consumers think and feel when they hear or see a brand. If a brand is known for its integrity, reliability, and previous customer satisfaction, customers will choose a product or service that is high in value. To get products or services that are available through the brand's service because customers believe that they will get good value and a satisfying experience.

Through the above stages, it finally culminates in the decision-making stage, which aims to increase revenue in business through the marketing process using KOL on the Instagram social media platform. According to (Putri & Yuliana, 2023) The decision to stay is a stage in the decision-making process where guests choose a place to stay. Selective selection of a KOL who has credibility supported by skills in packaging product information and is more trustworthy because it is considered more honest based on personal experience, which has been felt, so that the KOL influences the decision to stay. In addition, according to Vindiazhari (2024) Key Opinion Leader (KOL) is a figure or organization that has a strong social status, so that they can provide recommendations and their opinions are widely listened to when making important decisions.

In today's digital era, appropriate and relevant marketing strategies are crucial, given that consumers are increasingly critical in assessing the quality of products and services. Social media, particularly Instagram, has become a key channel for influencing consumer perceptions and decisions through content delivered by KOLs (Sudha & Sheena, 2017). Most research on the influence of KOLs and social media on consumer decisions still focuses on the retail, fashion, cosmetics, or F&B industries. There are not many studies that specifically investigate the influence of Instagram and KOLs on hotel stay decisions, especially at three-star hotels. This study aims to identify and analyze the role of Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) in enhancing brand image and influencing stay decisions through Instagram.

2. Hypothesis Development Key Opinion Leader (KOL)

A Key Opinion Leader (KOL) is someone who possesses the knowledge and skills to make their opinions heard well by the wider community. It can be said that KOLs are recognized and valued by the community (Tuti, 2025). KOL access to data possessed by a KOL is crucial for marketers seeking to connect with their followers, since this data provides significant insights into audience preferences, requirements, and behaviors. KOLs are frequently perceived as impartial in product evaluations, hence augmenting their credibility. Their capacity to deliver captivating information and suggestions establishes them as knowledgeable individuals who stay attuned to current trends and advancements (Novitasari & Tuti, 2025).

Interactions conducted by KOLs contribute to positive brand perceptions. Alshreef (2023) Revealed that love for a brand depends on the possibility that consumers choose something brand when they feel a strong emotional connection with the brand. According to Frenredy & Dharmawan (2020) Brand image is the perception of a brand reflected by the association of a brand in a customer's memory that contains meaning for the customer, namely the customer's trust in a particular brand. Meanwhile, brand love is a unique type of relationship between consumers and brands, which is characterized by certain attributes.

Li (2023) Emphasized that KOLs act as third-party experts who have a good reputation and have the appeal and credibility in their domain, which allows them to influence their followers' decisions. Therefore, the information, recommendations, and opinions expressed by a KOL are widely listened to and influence followers when making important decisions. An influencer is practically known as a KOL. The ability of a KOL to influence their followers is shaped by several factors, including their center of influence on social networks, the number and quality of interactions with followers, credibility and expertise in a particular field, influence on consumer behavior, sustainability, and consistency in campaigns (Tuti, 2025) . Meanwhile, according to Kotler and Keller (2023) Purchasing decisions are the consumer evaluation stage in forming preferences for brands. In a collection of various behaviors, consumers may also form an intention to purchase the most preferred product.

Thus, the opinion of marketing researchers using "KOL" can reach a wider and more specific audience, which, of course, requires understanding the key aspects in determining a KOL so that the product offered is appropriate. Marketing strategies using KOL can influence consumer purchasing decisions. Based on this discussion, the following hypothesis can be proposed:

H1: There is an influence of Key Opinion Leaders on Brand Image.

H2: There is an influence of the Key Opinion Leader on the Stay Decision.

Instagram

Nowadays, marketing through Instagram social media has become a popular platform for marketing, aiming to increase brand visibility and drive increased purchasing decisions. Meanwhile, according to Gunelius, (2011) Instagram is part of the Facebook ecosystem, where advertisers can use Facebook Ads Manager as a tool to create, manage, and optimize their ads on Instagram. One of the advantages of advertising on Instagram is the ability to target audiences

based on demographic data, age, gender, interests, and behavior, as well as various ad formats tailored to campaign focus and business needs. In addition, Instagram also offers analytical tools to track the performance of the advertising process, so advertisers can optimize their campaign process more effectively (Tuti, 2025). Instagram indicators are follows, likes, and comments (Miles, 2008)

Based on the explanation above, it can be concluded that Instagram can be used by a brand as a brand tool with consumers. According to Rangkuti (2009), Brand image is a brand perception that is connected to brand associations that are attached to consumer memory. Some marketing tools that can be used to create a brand image are the product itself, packaging/label, brand name, logo, colors used, point of purchase promotion, retailers, advertising, and all other types of promotions, price, brand owner, country of origin, even target market, and product use.

Thus, it can be concluded that selecting Instagram as a marketing strategy platform can influence and enhance brand image among consumers, which in turn will influence consumer accommodation choices. According to Peter & Olson (2023) A decision involves choosing between two or more alternative actions (or behaviors). Based on the theory presented above, the following hypothesis can be proposed:

H3: There is an influence of Instagram on Brand Image.

H4: There is an influence of Instagram on Stay Decision.

Brand Image

Consumers have various brands of products or services that meet a need, which they desire and are confident in using. However, not all consumer needs and desires can be met due to purchasing power and limited product or service availability. According to Keller, (2013) Explains the definition of brand image, that brand image is a set of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has of an object. In addition, a brand image according to Ikhsan & Satria (2023) It is a perception that arises in the minds of consumers when they recall a particular brand of product. Therefore, the quality of a product has a significant influence on whether consumers remain loyal to that product.

Kotler and Armstrong (2018) Explain the definition of purchasing decisions. Purchasing decisions involve buying the most preferred brand, but two factors can be present between purchase intention and purchasing decision. Based on the opinions of the experts above, it can be concluded that the definition of brand image is a set of beliefs about a name, symbol, design, and impression that consumers have of a brand obtained from factual information, and then consumers use the brand. With brand image indicators such as brand strength, uniqueness, and favorableness (Keller, 2013). This is supported by the results of previous research that partially brand image influences purchasing decisions, in line with the initial assumption of the study that consumers will always try to fulfill their lifestyle (Marisa & Rowena, 2019). The results of the study showed that there is a significant influence and an important role of product image, user image and manufacturer image on consumer purchasing decisions, and brand image has a dominant influence on purchasing decisions.

Thus, the conclusion from the description above is that brand image recognition can create a lasting impression in consumers' minds and become a major factor in purchasing decisions. Therefore, based on this description, the author proposes the following hypothesis:
H5: There is an influence of Brand Image on Stay Decision.

Decision to Stay

A consumer's decision to purchase a particular product or service can be interpreted as the result of the consumer's mental process of evaluating choices for a product or service offered. According to Devi & Fadli (2023) Stated that price is a determining factor in brand selection related to consumer purchasing decisions. When choosing among existing brands, consumers will indirectly evaluate price by comparing several price standards as a reference for making a purchase. According to Karimi et al. (2015), the indicators used in this study are problem recognition, information search, alternative evaluation, purchase decision, and post-purchase behavior. Therefore, it can be concluded from the results of this study that researchers can use the decision to stay as a key indicator to predict consumer behavior. A customer's decision to stay demonstrates a positive and positive commitment to the brand image. This will influence the repurchase process and post-purchase behavior regarding a company's chosen product or service. According to Tapparan et al. (2021), the decision to stay means that a person's behavior is based on belief and self-confidence in making a purchase decision for a product or service, and believes the decision made is the right one.

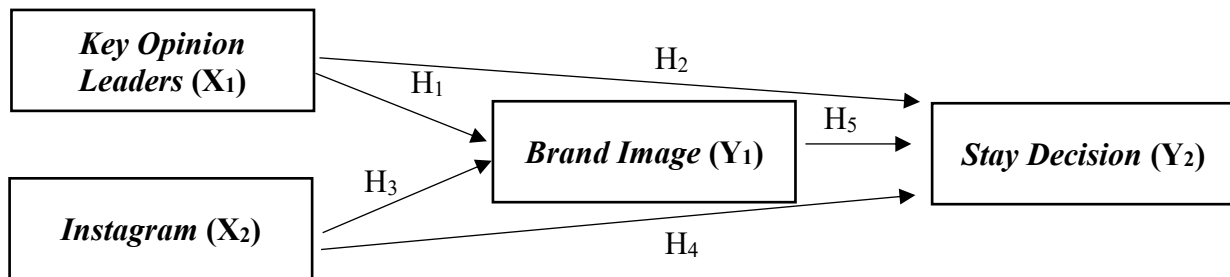


Figure 1: Framework of thinking

Research methods

The research method used in this study is a quantitative research method, by conducting a direct survey on respondents to obtain responses to questions asked by researchers through a Google form questionnaire. Respondent questionnaire data was analyzed using the Structural Equation Model (SEM) method with the help of Smart PLS 3 software. The research was conducted at the Fame Hotel Gading Serpong. Respondents in this study were guests who stayed in the period from November 2024 to January 2025. The sampling technique used was Accidental Sampling and a sample of 259 respondents.

The data analysis method uses the Structural Equation Model (SEM) with the help of SmartPLS1. Exogenous variables are equivalent to independent variables, namely, variables that can influence other variables in the model. The exogenous variables in this study are specifically KOL (X1), Instagram (X2), Brand Image (X3), and Purchase Decision. The term "endogenous

variable" is the same as "dependent variable". Endogenous variables can also refer to variables that are influenced by exogenous factors in the model, either directly or indirectly. These variables include all intermediate and dependent variables. The endogenous variables in this study are Brand Image (Y1) and Purchase Decision (Y2). Measurements are carried out using a 5-point Likert scale consisting of: 1 - strongly disagree, 2 - disagree, 3 - neutral, 4 - agree, and 5 - strongly agree. The initial steps involve assessing the validity and reliability of the model, followed by discriminant validity tests, multicollinearity, F-test, R-test (R-squared), Q²-test, and ending with hypothesis testing, where each variable is examined for a t-value exceeding 1.96 and a probability value below 0.05, which indicates a significant effect.

Research results and discussion results

Respondents in this study were individuals who actively use social media and have experience with brands reviewed by Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs). They were also consumers interested in products or services related to the categories studied in this study. Respondent characteristics are presented below.

Table 1. Respondent Description

| Information | Frequency | Percentage |
|--|------------------|-------------------|
| Gender | | |
| Man | 164 | 63% |
| Woman | 95 | 37% |
| Age | | |
| 17 – 25 years old | 48 | 19% |
| 26 – 35 years old | 96 | 36% |
| 36 – 45 years old | 62 | 24% |
| 46 – 55 years old | 47 | 18% |
| > 55 years | 6 | 3% |
| Do you have an Instagram account? | | |
| Yes | 253 | 98% |
| No | 6 | 2% |
| Amount | 259 | 100% |

Source: Researcher data processing

Table 1 shows that the majority of respondents were male, 164 (63%). The largest age group in the data was 26-35 years old. Finally, 253 respondents (98%) reported using Instagram.

Structural Model and Hypothesis

The significance of the estimated parameters can provide useful information to determine the existence of a relationship. Between variables in this research. The hypothesis of this research can be seen in the possibility value and its t-statistic. The acceptance criteria for the hypothesis are when the t-statistic value > the t-table value. Hypothesis testing using the Smart PLS 3 method is carried out by conducting a bootstrapping process, so it is known to exist a connection between the influence of exogenous variables on endogenous variables.

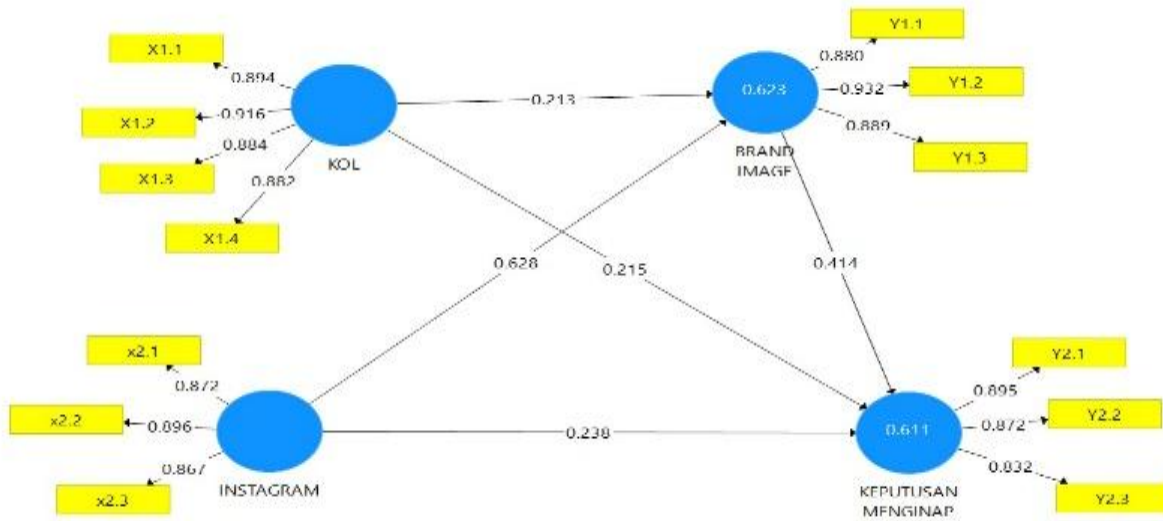


Figure 2. Structural Model

Validity and Reliability Test

Table 2. Validity & Reliability Test

| Variable | Indicator | Item | Loading Factor | Realibility | AVE |
|-------------|---|------|----------------|-------------|-------|
| KOLs | 1. Center of Influence on Social Networks | X1 | 0.872 | 0.941 | 0.799 |
| | 2. Credibility and expertise in a particular field | X2 | 0.896 | | |
| | 3. Influence on consumer behavior | X3 | 0.897 | | |
| | 4. Sustainability and consistency in campaigns | | | | |
| | 5. Number and quality of interactions with followers (Tuti, 2025) | | | | |
| Instagram | 1. Follow | X2.1 | 0.894 | 0.910 | 0.722 |
| | 2. Like | X2.2 | 0.916 | | |
| | 3. Comment (Miles, 2008) | X2.3 | 0.884 | | |
| | | X2.4 | 0.882 | | |
| Brand-Image | 1. Strengths | Y1.1 | 0.880 | 0.928 | 0.811 |
| | 2. Uniqueness | Y1.2 | 0.932 | | |
| | 3. Favorable (Keller, 2013) | Y1.3 | 0.889 | | |
| Purchase | 1. Problem Introduction | Y2.1 | 0.895 | | |
| | 2. Information Search | Y2.2 | 0.872 | | |

| | | | | | |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|------|-------|-------|-------|
| Decision | 3. Alternative Evaluation | Y2.3 | 0.832 | 0.900 | 0.751 |
| | 4. Buying decision | | | | |
| | 5. Post-purchase behavior | | | | |
| (Karimi et al., 2015) | | | | | |

In construct reliability, the value must be above 0.70 to be considered good, while in the extracted variable, the value must be above 0.50 to be considered a valid value. The standard of the Outer Loading value is declared Valid with a value ≥ 0.70 and an AVE value ≥ 0.50 . A total of 13 items are used in the measurement model as seen in table 2, based on the results of this study, it was found that all variables were said to be valid because each indicator had a loading factor value and AVE ≥ 0.50 where from the research data the value obtained from the loading factor measurement ranged from 0.83 to 0.92 and the AVE value was in the range of 0.75 to 0.81. In addition, all variables were also said to be reliable from the results of the CR value obtained ≥ 0.70 ; the CR value from the research results was obtained ranging from 0.90 to 0.94.

Table 3. Discriminant Validity-Fornell Lacker

| Variable | Brand Image | Instagram | Stay Decision | KOLS |
|---------------|-------------|-----------|---------------|-------|
| Brand Image | 0.901 | | | |
| Instagram | 0.774 | 0.878 | | |
| Stay Decision | 0.736 | 0.705 | 0.867 | |
| KOLS | 0.644 | 0.686 | 0.644 | 0.894 |

The highest variable values determined based on the research results in Table 3 are brand image (0.901), Instagram (0.878), Stay Decision (0.867), and KOL (0.894). Based on the results obtained, each indicator statement has the highest loading factor value for each component. This condition must be met for the discriminant validity results to be declared valid. Furthermore, discriminant validity is demonstrated, as the square root of each AVE value is greater than the correlation with other indicators (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table 4. Multicollinearity

| Variable | Brand Image | Decision to Stay |
|---------------|-------------|------------------|
| Brand Image | | 2,654 |
| Instagram | 1,887 | 2,934 |
| Stay Decision | | |
| KOLS | 1,887 | 2,008 |

Multicollinearity was tested using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) parameter, which in this study was limited to 5.0. Based on the results presented in Table 4, the VIF values in this study ranged from 1,887 to 2,934, with no VIF values exceeding 5.0. This finding indicates no multicollinearity problem, allowing the analysis to proceed

R-Squared

An indicator is considered to have convergent validity in the good category if the outer loading value is more than 0.5. Therefore, based on the data processing in Figure 2, it can be said that there are no variable indicators that produce an outer loading value of less than 0.5. Each indicator is considered feasible or valid so that the indicator can be used for further research and application. According to Usman (2017) This coefficient of determination is used to find out much percentage of the independent variable that is to the dependent variable. The R-squared value is said to be good if it is above 0.5 because the R-squared value ranges from 0 to 1.

Table 5. R-Squared

| R Square & R Square Adjusted | R Square | RSquare Adjusted |
|------------------------------|----------|------------------|
| Brand Image | 0.623 | 0.620 |
| Decision to Stay | 0.611 | 0.606 |

Based on the results of the data processed by the researcher, as seen in Table 5, the value of **R²** Brand Image is 0.620 and Purchase Decision is 0.606, where the results of the research show that the independent variable has a moderate influence on the dependent variable. Based on these findings, Key Opinion Leaders and Instagram have an influence of 62% on Brand Image and 60.6% on purchasing decisions.

Table 6. Prediction Accuracy Test (Q²)

| Variable | SSO | SSE | Q ² (=1-SSE/SSO) |
|------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------------------------|
| Brand Image | 777,000 | 394,033 | 0.493 |
| Instagram | 777,000 | 777,000 | |
| Decision to Stay | 777,000 | 432,600 | 0.443 |
| KOLS | 1,036,000 | 1,036,000 | |

The Q² value can be used to assess prediction accuracy. If the Q² value is greater than zero, the model is considered to have high prediction accuracy; if it is less than zero, the model is considered to have low prediction accuracy. As shown in Table 6, the Q² values in this study ranged from 0.443 to 0.493, indicating that all variables exhibited high prediction accuracy.

Table 7. F Square

| Variable | F Square |
|--|----------|
| Brand Image (Y ₁) -> Stay Decision (Y ₂) | 0.166 |
| Instagram (X ₂) -> Brand Image (Y ₁) | 0.554 |
| Instagram (X ₂) -> Stay Decision (Y ₂) | 0.049 |
| KOL (X ₁) -> Brand Image (Y ₁) | 0.064 |
| KOL (X ₁) -> Stay Decision (Y ₂) | 0.059 |

The F-square test is used to measure the strength of the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. According to standard guidelines, an F-square value greater than 0.02 indicates a small effect, a value above 0.15 indicates a medium effect, and a value above 0.35 indicates a large effect. Table 7 presents the results of the construct model, which shows small effect sizes for Instagram on stay decisions, KOLs on stay decisions, and KOLs on brand image, with F-square values of 0.049, 0.059, and 0.064, respectively. The relationship between Brand Image reviews and brand stay decisions reflects a medium effect, with an F-square value of 0.166. In contrast, the relationship between Instagram and Brand Image shows a large effect, with an F-square value of 0.554.

Table 8. Hypothesis Testing

| Path | Original Sample (O) | T Statistics (O/STDEV) | P Value | Result |
|--|---------------------|--------------------------|---------|----------|
| Brand Image (Y ₁) -> Stay Decision (Y ₂) | 0.414 | 5,559 | 0.000 | Accepted |
| Instagram (X ₂) -> Brand Image (Y ₁) | 0.628 | 7,200 | 0.000 | Accepted |
| Instagram (X ₂) -> Stay Decision (Y ₂) | 0.238 | 2,560 | 0.011 | Accepted |
| KOL (X ₁) -> Brand Image (Y ₁) | 0.213 | 2,409 | 0.016 | Accepted |
| KOL (X ₁) -> Stay Decision (Y ₂) | 0.215 | 2,464 | 0.014 | Accepted |

The hypothesis is accepted if the p-value is less than 0.05 and the t-statistic of the path coefficient exceeds 1.96. As shown in Table 8, all hypotheses tested in this study have met the criteria. The relationship between brand image and stay decisions, with a p-value of 0.000 (<0.05) and a t-statistic of 5.559 (>1.96), the data results show a strong and significant influence. Similarly, Instagram social media significantly influences brand image, as evidenced by a t-statistic of 7.200 (>1.96) and a p-value of 0.000 (<0.05). The hypothesis linking Instagram social media with stay decisions is also accepted, supported by a p-value of 0.011 (<0.05) and a t-statistic of 2.560 (>1.96), which confirms a positive relationship. Furthermore, KOL reviews were shown to significantly influence brand image, as indicated by a p-value of 0.016 (<0.05) and a t-statistic of 2.409 (>1.96). Finally, KOLs had a strong and positive influence on stay decisions, as indicated by a p-value of 0.014 (<0.05) and a t-statistic of 2.464 (>1.96). Collectively, these results confirm that all hypothesized relationships are statistically significant and contribute positively to the proposed model.

Discussion

The distinctive characteristics of key opinion leaders (KOLs), along with credible, informative, and authentic skills and knowledge, can strengthen the emotional connection between consumers and a brand. Reviews from KOLs play a crucial role in enhancing brand image. Recommendations from well-known, influential, and relevant KOLs are more likely to gain consumer trust. This is supported by expert Fauziridwan (2024), who stated that Branding is also carried out to build a positive image and reputation for the company, ensuring it remains positive in the eyes of the general public or consumers. This branding is generally done to build consumer trust in the company's products and also serves as a way to increase brand awareness. Similarly, Sari & Rahardani (2024) found that brand experience can be a construct that influences brand

loyalty. In this context, reviews shared by KOLs not only influence but also enhance their emotional attachment to the brand image.

Furthermore, besides influencing the brand image created, KOL preferences have a significant impact on stay decisions. Consumers tend to be more loyal to a brand that consistently meets their expectations. This is supported by statements. Therefore, based on previous research, it can be said that KOLs have a significant contribution to building deeper emotional connections through the trust they offer, which ultimately influences their followers to stay. Meanwhile, according to Ki et al., (2020) One reason why influencer marketing is so effective is that audiences tend to trust recommendations given by influencers more than traditional advertising or direct brand promotions.

This study also revealed that the influence of KOL on brand image through social media Instagram has a significant positive relationship with the decision to stay. According to research by Lee and Hsieh (2013) Strong and positive brand associations can increase brand equity and influence consumer purchasing decisions. Consumers with deep affection for a brand are more likely to make repeat purchases and overlook minor flaws in the product or service. Finally, the relationship between brand image and the decision to stay was also found to be significant. This is supported by previous research, which found that affection for a brand increases consumer loyalty and strengthens relationships with the brand, which ultimately contributes to overall satisfaction (Merunka, 2013).

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that reviews uploaded by KOLs and Instagram preferences significantly influence brand image, which ultimately has a positive impact on stay decisions. The findings conclude that KOL reviews via Instagram social media serve as a strategic component of the marketing process in fostering emotional connections with followers or consumers, with their skills and credibility serving as key mediators that strengthen trust in the brand image.

The implications of this study can be used by hotel owners as a reference to analyze and determine hotel marketing strategies through the Instagram social media platform in the form of interesting content about hotel information, including information about hotel facilities, hotel prices, hotel locations, and other interesting places around the hotel, which are packaged and presented by key opinion leaders with a wide target reach, especially to their followers, which aims to increase the visibility of the audience and strive to increase hotel revenue.

This study refines the theory of KOLs' impact on brand image and stay decisions through Instagram by incorporating KOL reviews and experiences as important factors influencing consumer-brand relationships. Thus, this study provides a new conceptual framework that can be used in future research on tactics to create emotional bonds with customers that ultimately aim to increase company revenue.

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