

The Impact of Social Media Promotion on Purchase Intention: An Empirical Study of Sam's Club Consumers in China

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ABSTRACT

As social media platforms such as Douyin and Xiaohongshu continue to reshape consumer perceptions and purchasing behaviour, social media marketing has become an essential strategy for membership-based retailers to overcome the psychological barrier associated with the “pay first, consume later” business model. Focusing on Sam's Club in China, this study applies the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework to examine how social media promotion influences consumers' purchase intentions through the mediating roles of brand awareness and consumer trust. A quantitative research approach was employed, with 309 valid questionnaires collected via WeChat and Xiaohongshu and analyzed using SPSS through descriptive statistics, reliability and validity tests, correlation analysis, and multiple regression analysis. The findings reveal that social media promotion does not exert a strong direct influence on consumers' purchase intention. Instead, brand awareness and consumer trust serve as important psychological mediators that indirectly drive purchase decisions. These findings suggest that membership-based retailers should prioritize the development of high-quality and engaging social media content, encourage consumer interaction, and maintain consistent online communication to strengthen brand trust and improve conversion rates. Nevertheless, this study is limited by its cross-sectional design and its focus on consumers in China's first-tier and new first-tier cities which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Future research is encouraged to employ longitudinal research designs, include broader geographical regions and examine additional variables such as perceived value, consumer engagement, and electronic word-of-mouth to provide a more comprehensive understanding of consumer purchase behaviour in membership-based retailing.

Keywords: Social media promotion, brand awareness, consumer trust, purchase intention, membership-based retailing

Background Of Study

In the era of digital transformation, social media marketing (SMM) has fundamentally reshaped the way businesses communicate with consumers, shifting traditional marketing approaches toward greater interactivity, personalization, and consumer engagement. Popular social media platforms such as Douyin and Xiaohongshu have evolved beyond communication channels into influential marketing ecosystems that significantly affect consumers' information search, brand evaluation, and purchasing decisions (Ellitan, 2022). Consequently, organizations are increasingly leveraging social media to strengthen brand awareness, foster consumer trust, and enhance customer engagement in highly competitive retail markets.

Among various retail formats, membership-based warehouse retailers have experienced rapid growth by offering premium products, exclusive membership benefits, and differentiated shopping experiences. However, unlike conventional retailers, membership-based businesses face a unique psychological challenge whereby consumers are required to pay a membership fee before experiencing the full benefits of the retailer's products and services. This "pay first, consume later" business model creates a higher entry barrier and increases consumers' perceived purchase risk. As a result, social media marketing has become an essential strategic tool for communicating brand value, reducing uncertainty, and strengthening consumers' confidence in purchasing membership (Mamun et al., 2017).

Although previous studies have extensively examined the influence of social media marketing on consumer behaviour and purchase intention, most have focused on general retailing, e-commerce platforms, or online shopping contexts. Comparatively limited empirical research has investigated how social media promotion influences consumer purchase intention within membership-based retailing, particularly by considering the underlying psychological mechanisms through which marketing activities shape consumer decision-making. Specifically, the mediating roles of brand awareness and consumer trust remain underexplored in the context of warehouse membership retailers (Walean et al., 2025).

Therefore, this study focuses on Sam's Club in China to examine how social media promotion influences consumers' purchase intention through the mediating roles of brand awareness and consumer trust. Drawing upon the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the cognitive and emotional processes underlying consumers' purchase decisions in membership-based retailing. The findings are expected to contribute to the existing marketing literature by extending the application of the SOR framework within a membership retail context, while also offering practical insights for retailers seeking to develop more effective social media marketing strategies and strengthen long-term consumer relationships.

Problem Statement

The rapid growth of social media has transformed the marketing landscape of China's retail industry, enabling businesses to increase brand visibility, strengthen customer engagement, and influence consumers' purchasing decisions. Membership-based retailers such as Sam's Club have invested extensively in social media platforms, particularly Douyin and Xiaohongshu, to promote their products and membership programmes. However, despite the high level of online exposure, attracting consumers to purchase memberships remains a significant challenge because the membership model requires consumers to pay membership fees before experiencing the retailer's products and services. Consequently, high promotional visibility does not necessarily translate into higher purchase intention or membership conversion rates (Deng, 2024).

Previous studies have consistently demonstrated that social media marketing positively influences consumer behaviour and purchase intention across various retail and e-commerce settings. Nevertheless, these studies have primarily focused on conventional retailing or online shopping platforms, with comparatively limited attention given to membership-based warehouse retailers operating in the Chinese market (Azhar et al., 2023; Walean et al., 2025). As membership-based retailing involves a distinctive consumption model characterised by higher perceived financial risk and stronger psychological barriers, findings derived from conventional retail contexts may not be directly applicable.

Furthermore, existing studies have predominantly examined the direct relationship between social media marketing and purchase intention, often treating social media marketing as a single independent construct. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to understanding the underlying psychological mechanisms through which social media promotion influences consumers' purchasing decisions. In particular, the mediating roles of brand awareness and consumer trust remain insufficiently explored within the context of membership-based retailing, despite growing evidence suggesting that consumers' cognitive and emotional responses play a crucial role in shaping purchase intention (Ellitan, 2022; Azhar et al., 2023).

Therefore, this study addresses these research gaps by examining how social media promotion influences consumers' purchase intention through the mediating roles of brand awareness and consumer trust in the context of Sam's Club in China. By investigating both the cognitive and emotional pathways underlying consumer decision-making, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of digital marketing effectiveness in membership-based retailing and provides practical insights for retailers seeking to enhance consumer engagement, strengthen brand trust, and improve membership conversion through strategic social media marketing.

Research Purpose

This study aims to examine the influence of social media promotion on consumers' purchase intention within the context of membership-based retailing in China. Specifically, it investigates the relationships among social media promotion, brand awareness, consumer trust, and purchase intention, while examining the mediating roles of brand awareness and consumer trust within the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework. By integrating cognitive and emotional mechanisms into a unified research model, this study contributes to a better understanding of how social media promotion influences consumers' membership purchase decisions and provides practical insights for retailers seeking to enhance the effectiveness of their digital marketing strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Purchase Intention

Purchase intention has long been recognised as one of the most important constructs in consumer behaviour research because it reflects consumers' willingness and readiness to purchase a particular product or service. It is generally regarded as a reliable predictor of actual purchasing behaviour, representing an individual's conscious plan or subjective probability of purchasing a specific brand in the future (Morwitz, 2014). According to the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), purchase intention serves as the most immediate antecedent of actual behaviour, suggesting that stronger purchase intentions are more likely to result in actual purchasing decisions (Pop et al., 2020). In the context of social media marketing, interactions with digital content can positively influence consumers' attitudes and motivations, gradually transforming initial interest into concrete purchase intentions (Mu, 2023; Pop et al., 2020). Therefore, purchase intention is adopted as the dependent variable in this study to evaluate the effectiveness of social media promotion within membership-based retailing.

Social Media Promotion Intensity

Social media promotion intensity represents the primary independent variable in this study. Traditionally, promotional intensity was measured by advertising frequency and message exposure. However, contemporary social media marketing extends beyond promotional frequency to encompass interactivity, entertainment,

informativeness, personalization, and consumer engagement (Alalwan et al., 2017). These multidimensional characteristics enable organisations to establish stronger relationships with consumers while simultaneously increasing brand visibility and communication effectiveness. Within the context of membership-based retailing, the intensity of social media promotion is particularly important because it helps retailers communicate membership value, reduce consumers' perceived uncertainty, and encourage greater engagement with the brand.

Brand Awareness

Brand awareness refers to consumers' ability to recognise and recall a particular brand during the purchasing decision-making process. It represents the initial stage of consumers' cognitive evaluation and significantly influences brand consideration and product selection. Consumers who possess higher levels of brand awareness are more likely to perceive a brand as familiar, reliable, and credible, thereby increasing the likelihood of including the brand in their purchase decisions. In membership-based retailing, where consumers are required to pay membership fees before experiencing the products and services, establishing strong brand awareness becomes particularly important because it reduces cognitive uncertainty and strengthens consumers' confidence in the retailer.

Consumer Trust

Consumer trust is widely recognised as a fundamental determinant of consumer decision-making, particularly in environments characterised by information asymmetry and perceived uncertainty. Trust reflects consumers' confidence that a retailer is reliable, honest, and capable of delivering its promised products and services. In digital marketing environments, consumers often rely on trust to reduce perceived risk before making purchasing decisions (Liu & Abbas Ali, 2024). Consequently, consumer trust functions as an important psychological mechanism that bridges the gap between consumers' initial interest and their eventual purchase intention. This role becomes even more critical in membership-based retailing, where consumers must commit financially before fully experiencing the retailer's offerings.

Relationships among Social Media Promotion, Brand Awareness, Consumer Trust, and Purchase Intention

Existing studies suggest that the influence of social media promotion on consumers' purchase intention is often indirect, operating through consumers' cognitive and emotional responses rather than through direct behavioural effects. In particular, brand awareness and consumer trust have been widely recognised as important psychological mechanisms that explain how marketing activities shape consumers' purchase decisions. Building upon the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework, the following sections synthesise previous empirical findings to examine the relationships among social media promotion, brand awareness, consumer trust, and purchase intention, thereby providing the theoretical foundation for the proposed hypotheses.

Social Media Promotion and Brand Awareness

According to the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework, consumers first respond to external marketing stimuli through cognitive processing. Social media promotion therefore serves as an important stimulus that enhances consumers' awareness and recognition of a brand. Artha and Piartrini (2025) argued that intensive digital marketing functions as an information hub that continuously reinforces consumers' awareness

of a brand. Their findings indicate that frequent and consistent communication through social media platforms significantly improves consumers' brand recall and recognition (Aji et al., 2020; Artha & Piartrini, 2025).

The effectiveness of social media promotion is further strengthened by platform-specific characteristics such as visual storytelling and algorithm-driven content recommendations. Bharat et al. (2025) reported that platforms including TikTok and Instagram substantially improve brand awareness because visual content is more engaging and memorable. Similarly, Setiawan et al. (2024) demonstrated a significant positive relationship between social media marketing and brand awareness, reporting a path coefficient of 0.711. Collectively, these findings suggest that sustained social media promotion plays a critical role in strengthening consumers' awareness of membership-based retailers and reinforcing their understanding of the brand's unique value proposition.

Social Media Promotion and Consumer Trust

While social media promotion enhances consumers' awareness of a brand, developing consumer trust requires more than repeated exposure. Trust is established through meaningful interactions, perceived authenticity, and consistent communication. Al-Hujri et al. (2025) found that marketing responsiveness and interactive communication significantly improve customer satisfaction, which subsequently contributes to the development of consumer trust. Their findings suggest that two-way communication reduces consumers' perceived risk and strengthens confidence in online purchasing environments.

Authenticity also plays an essential role in trust formation. According to Ali et al. (2025), intensive promotional activities contribute to consumer trust only when the promotional content is perceived as credible, transparent, and valuable. Similarly, Achmadi et al. (2024) demonstrated that integrating social media marketing with user-generated content significantly strengthens consumer trust. These findings are particularly relevant to membership-based retailers because consumers often perceive greater financial risk when required to pay membership fees in advance. Consequently, retailers must combine active social media promotion with credible social proof to reduce consumers' uncertainty and encourage membership adoption (Achmadi et al., 2024; Sanny et al., 2020).

The Mediating Roles of Brand Awareness and Consumer Trust

Previous studies suggest that the effectiveness of social media marketing is largely explained through consumers' internal psychological processes rather than direct behavioural responses. Prasetyo et al. (2025) confirmed that brand trust serves as an important mediator between social media marketing and purchase intention. Their findings indicate that marketing activities influence purchase intention primarily by strengthening consumers' trust in the brand rather than directly stimulating purchasing behaviour. Furthermore, the credibility of social media content and influencers has been identified as a crucial determinant of trust formation (Nafees et al., 2021).

In addition to trust, brand awareness provides the cognitive foundation upon which consumer trust is established. Artha and Piartrini (2025) reported that brand awareness partially mediates the relationship between social media marketing and purchase intention by increasing consumers' familiarity with the brand before trust is developed. Likewise, Mukhsoni et al. (2022) and Saputra and Wardana (2023) argued that brand awareness and consumer trust function as complementary psychological mechanisms that collectively transform social media exposure into consumers' purchase intention. Together, these findings suggest that consumers' cognitive evaluation and emotional responses jointly explain how social media promotion influences purchasing behaviour within membership-based retailing.

Underpinning Theories

This study constructed a theoretical framework by analyzing the relationship between social media marketing and member purchasing behaviour. This framework is based on the SOR model and the TPB. The former primarily explains how external information influences an individual's internal psychological changes, while the latter further explains how these psychological changes affect the formation of purchase intentions.

Stimulus Organism Response (SOR) Model

The SOR model originates from the field of environmental psychology. Its core logic lies in the fact that information provided by the external environment constitutes a "stimulus." Upon receiving these signals, individuals undergo corresponding psychological and cognitive changes; this psychological process is the "subject." Through this internal psychological adjustment, individuals ultimately exhibit specific behaviours, namely "responses," including choosing to approach or avoid external stimuli (Anderson, 1995).

Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), proposed by Ajzen (1991), explains that behavioural intention is the most immediate predictor of actual behaviour and is influenced by three key components: attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. According to the theory, consumers are more likely to perform a behaviour when they hold favourable attitudes, perceive social support, and believe they have sufficient control over their decisions. In this study, TPB complements the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) model by explaining how consumers' cognitive evaluations and emotional responses, developed through social media promotion, are translated into purchase intention. Therefore, TPB provides additional theoretical support for understanding consumers' membership purchase decisions within the context of social media marketing (Ajzen, 1991).

Integration and Applicability

The present study integrates the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) model and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) to provide a comprehensive explanation of consumers' purchase intention in the context of membership-based retailing. The SOR model explains how social media promotion, as an external stimulus, influences consumers' internal psychological responses, represented by brand awareness and consumer trust, before leading to behavioural outcomes. Complementing this perspective, TPB explains how these cognitive and emotional evaluations shape consumers' behavioural intention through the formation of favourable attitudes and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991). By integrating these two theoretical perspectives, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how social media promotion influences consumers' membership purchase decisions and strengthens the theoretical foundation of the proposed research framework.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Based on the critical synthesis of the SOR model (Anderson, 1995) and the TPB (Ajzen, 1991), this study proposes a multi layered integrated theoretical framework. This framework is a "black box" analysis framework specifically designed to explain the consumer decision making mechanism in China's membership-based retail industry, a high barrier environment.

From the above conclusions, the logical structure of this theory follows a continuous chain pattern: Stimulus (Promotion Intensity) → Organism (Cognitive Awareness + Consumer trust) → Response (Purchase Intention). More importantly the framework argues that social media promotion cannot directly determine purchase intentions, its effectiveness depends entirely on the consumer's psychological state. This "intermediary driven" logic provides a practical tool for analyzing digital marketing in the new retail era. It can explain why high traffic does not necessarily lead to high purchase rates, and it also shows that only by building trust can effective conversion be achieved (Astuti & Suratman, 2025; Gong & Seo, 2025; Wang, 2025).

Hypotheses Development

Drawing upon the integrated SOR model and TPB, this study proposes seven hypotheses to explain how social media promotion influences consumers' purchase intention through cognitive and emotional mechanisms.

Social media promotion enhances consumers' cognitive processing by increasing exposure to brand-related information. Ben Ameer and Ben Rached (2024) found that repeated exposure to entertaining and informative content significantly improves consumers' brand recognition and long-term recall. In the context of membership-based retailing, Sam's Club employs similar promotional strategies through Douyin by disseminating product unboxing videos, lifestyle content, and user-generated experiences that reinforce brand familiarity (Wang, 2025). Consistent with these findings, Artha and Piartrini (2025) reported that intensive social media promotion significantly improves brand awareness ($\beta = 0.711$).

H1: Social Media Promotion Intensity positively influences Brand Awareness.

Social media promotion also strengthens consumer trust through interactive and credible communication. Makmor et al. (2024) demonstrated that real-time interactions in live-streaming commerce reduce social distance and enhance consumer trust, while Alnaser et al. (2024) argued that consistent social media activities signal a firm's benevolence and competence. In membership-based retailing, user-generated reviews, likes, and shares function as digital endorsements that reduce information asymmetry and reinforce consumers' confidence in the retailer (Wang, 2025; Prasetyo et al., 2025).

H2: Social Media Promotion Intensity positively influences Consumer Trust.

Brand awareness is widely recognised as an important cognitive heuristic that reduces uncertainty and increases consumers' confidence in purchasing decisions. Alnaser et al. (2024) suggested that well-known brands serve as substitute cues for product quality, while Ben Ameer and Ben Rached (2024) found that stronger brand awareness enhances consumers' self-brand connection and purchase likelihood. Within the context of Sam's Club, greater awareness of its flagship products strengthens consumers' understanding of the retailer's value proposition and reduces perceived search costs, thereby encouraging membership purchase (Wang, 2025).

H3: Brand Awareness positively influences Purchase Intention.

Consumer trust is a key determinant of purchase intention, particularly in situations involving perceived financial risk. Makmor et al. (2024) found that trust transforms consumers' initial interest into purchase intention by reducing uncertainty, while Prasetyo et al. (2025) confirmed that brand trust significantly influences purchase intention ($\beta = 0.461$). Since consumers must pay membership fees before enjoying the benefits offered by Sam's

Club, trust in the retailer's product quality, service reliability, and brand credibility is expected to encourage membership purchase decisions (Wang, 2025).

H4: Consumer Trust positively influences Purchase Intention.

Brand awareness provides the cognitive foundation for consumer trust because familiarity with a brand reduces uncertainty and strengthens perceptions of credibility. Artha and Piartrini (2025) argued that greater brand familiarity increases consumer confidence, while Prasetyo et al. (2025) reported a positive relationship between brand awareness and consumer trust. Consistent exposure to high-quality social media content enables consumers to become more familiar with Sam's Club, thereby strengthening brand credibility and trust (Wang, 2025).

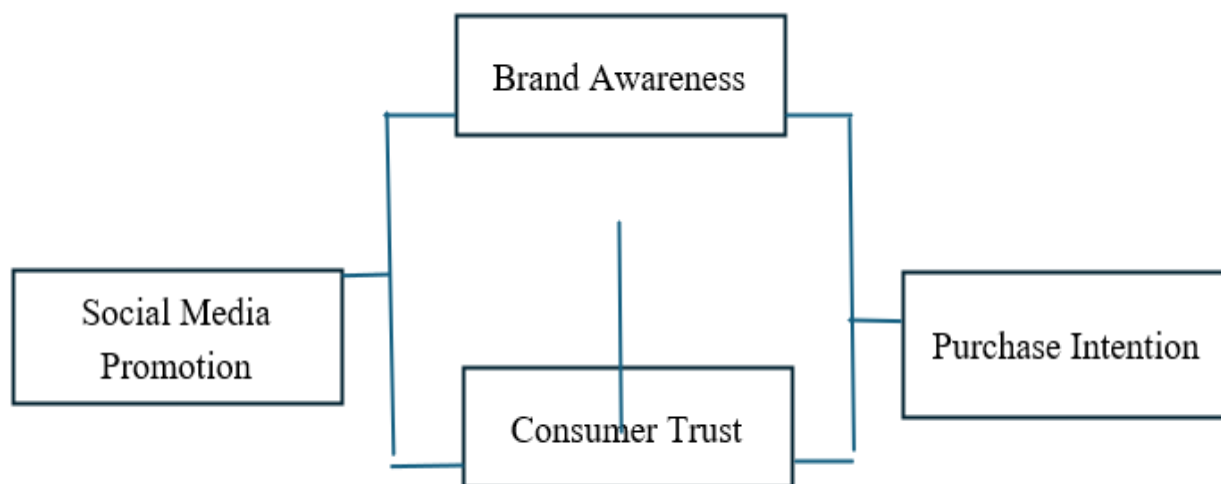
H5: Brand Awareness positively influences Consumer Trust.

The SOR framework suggests that marketing stimuli influence behavioural responses through consumers' internal psychological processes. Brand awareness functions as an important cognitive mechanism that transforms consumers' exposure to social media promotion into favourable evaluations of a brand. Ben Ameer and Ben Rached (2024) argued that repeated promotional activities enhance brand awareness, which subsequently strengthens consumers' purchase intention. Therefore, brand awareness is expected to mediate the relationship between social media promotion intensity and purchase intention.

H6: Brand Awareness mediates the relationship between Social Media Promotion Intensity and Purchase Intention.

Similarly, consumer trust represents the affective mechanism through which social media promotion influences behavioural intention. Makmor et al. (2024) suggested that meaningful digital interactions enhance consumer trust, while Prasetyo et al. (2025) demonstrated that brand trust mediates the relationship between social media marketing and purchase intention. Consequently, consumer trust is expected to mediate the relationship between social media promotion intensity and consumers' purchase intention.

H7: Consumer Trust mediates the relationship between Social Media Promotion Intensity and Purchase Intention.



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a quantitative research approach based on the positivist paradigm to examine the relationships among social media promotion intensity, brand awareness, consumer trust, and purchase intention within the context of membership-based retailing. A cross-sectional survey design was employed to collect empirical data and validate the proposed conceptual framework. As noted by Wang and Shahzad (2024), a rigorous research design provides a systematic approach for explaining consumer purchase intentions within digital marketing environments and ensures the validity of empirical findings.

A structured questionnaire was developed using measurement scales adapted from established studies. All measurement items were assessed using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire consisted of 24 measurement items covering the four research constructs: social media promotion intensity, brand awareness, consumer trust, and purchase intention. The detailed measurement items and their corresponding sources are presented in Table 1.

The target population comprised consumers who were familiar with Sam's Club and had been exposed to its social media promotional activities. A combination of purposive sampling and convenience sampling was employed. Purposive sampling ensured that respondents possessed the characteristics required for the study, while convenience sampling facilitated efficient data collection from accessible respondents who satisfied the research criteria (Memon et al., 2025; Stratton, 2021).

The minimum sample size was determined using Hair et al.'s (2017) widely adopted 10-times rule, which recommends that the minimum sample should be at least ten times the number of measurement items for multivariate analysis. Since the questionnaire contained 24 indicators, the minimum required sample size was 240 respondents. To improve statistical reliability and compensate for incomplete or invalid responses, this study targeted 309 valid questionnaires, which exceeded the recommended minimum sample size.

To ensure the quality of the research instrument, both validity and reliability were carefully assessed. Content validity was established by adapting measurement scales from previous studies (Artha & Piartrini, 2025; Wang, 2025), while face validity was verified through supervisory review to ensure that the questionnaire items were clear, logically structured, and appropriate for the research context. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with values above 0.70 considered acceptable indicators of internal consistency (Taherdoost, 2016; Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

Prior to the main survey, a pilot study involving 54 respondents was conducted to evaluate the clarity and reliability of the questionnaire. The pilot-test results demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency for all constructs, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating that the questionnaire was suitable for full-scale data collection (Johanson & Brooks, 2010).

The collected data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics. Descriptive statistics were employed to summarise respondents' demographic characteristics and the distribution of the study variables. Reliability analysis was performed using Cronbach's alpha to assess internal consistency, while Pearson correlation analysis examined the relationships among the research variables and provided an initial assessment of potential multicollinearity. Finally, multiple regression analysis was conducted to test the proposed hypotheses by examining the explanatory power of the independent variables on purchase intention. The coefficient of determination (R^2) was

used to evaluate the proportion of variance explained by the regression model, and statistical significance was determined using the conventional threshold of $p < 0.05$ (Hair et al., 2023; Uyanık & Güler, 2013).

Table 1 Measurement Items and Sources

Variable	Code	Measurement Items (Items)	Source
Social Media Promotion (SMP)	SMP1	I frequently see Sam's Club promotional content on social media (such as, Douyin, Xiaohongshu).	Yadav & Rahman (2017);
	SMP2	The social media content related to Sam's Club is usually fun and entertaining.	Godey et al. (2016)
	SMP3	It is easy to deliver my opinion or exchange information with others on Sam's Club's social media.	
	SMP4	Content on Sam's Club's social media provides the latest information about products/services.	
	SMP5	Sam's Club social media provides customized information I am interested in.	
	SMP6	I would like to pass along information about Sam's Club from social media to my friends.	
Brand Awareness (BA)	BA1	When thinking of membership clubs, Sam's Club is the first brand that comes to mind.	Bilgin, Y. (2018).
	BA2	I can recognize Sam's Club among other competing retail brands.	Seo, E. J., & Park, J. W. (2018)
	BA3	I am aware of Sam's Club even if I don't see its advertisement.	
	BA4	I can quickly recall the symbol or logo of Sam's Club.	
	BA5	I have a clear image of Sam's Club's private label (e.g., Member's Mark).	
	BA6	I am very familiar with Sam's Club through its digital presence.	
Consumer Trust (CT)	CT1	I trust the quality of products provided by Sam's Club.	Prasetyo et al. (2025)
	CT2	Sam's Club is a brand that meets my expectations.	Morgan & Hunt (1994)
	CT3	I believe Sam's Club would be honest and sincere in its dealings with members.	
	CT4	I rely on Sam's Club to solve any problem I might have with their services.	
	CT5	I feel safe making a transaction (paying membership fee) with Sam's Club.	

	CT6	Even with negative reviews, I still believe in Sam's Club's reputation.	
Purchase Intention (PI)	PI1	I intend to buy Sam's Club membership in the near future.	Hajli (2015);
	PI2	I will make Sam's Club my first choice for bulk shopping.	Lou, C., & Yuan, S. (2019)
	PI3	I am likely to renew my Sam's Club membership when it expires.	
	PI4	I would recommend Sam's Club to other people.	
	PI5	My willingness to shop at Sam's Club is very high.	
	PI6	I will continue to follow Sam's Club's social media for future purchases.	

Data Analysis Method

The collected data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were employed to summarise respondents' demographic characteristics and examine the distribution of the study variables (Hair et al., 2023). The internal consistency of each construct was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with values of 0.70 or above indicating acceptable reliability (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Pearson correlation analysis was subsequently performed to examine the direction and strength of the relationships among the research variables and to provide a preliminary assessment of potential multicollinearity. Finally, multiple regression analysis was conducted to test the proposed hypotheses by evaluating the effects of the independent variables on purchase intention. The explanatory power of the regression model was assessed using the coefficient of determination (R^2), while statistical significance was determined using the conventional threshold of $p < 0.05$, as recommended by Uyanık and Güler (2013).

DATA AND FINDINGS

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 2 summarizes the basic information of the 309 valid respondents. Overall, these sample characteristics are quite similar to those of consumers in Chinese warehouse clubs.

Table 2 Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 309)

Demographic Variables	Categories	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	136	44.0%
	Female	173	56.0%
Age	18 - 25	29	9.4%
	26 - 35	104	33.7%
	36 - 45	135	43.7%
	45+	41	13.3%

Location	Tier 1 & New Tier 1	309	100.0%
	Others	0	0.0%
Monthly Income	< 8,000 RMB	0	0.0%
	8,000 - 15,000 RMB	136	44.0%
	15,001 - 25,000 RMB	110	35.6%
	> 25,000 RMB	63	20.4%

Descriptive Statistics

This study conducted descriptive statistical analysis on 24 measurement items, all measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The mean for each item ranged from approximately 3.55 to 3.81. Furthermore, the standard deviation for each item was within the normal range, indicating that respondents' responses were relatively concentrated and there was no significant disagreement (Field, 2018). The mean scores for each item ranged from 3.55 to 3.81, with a normal standard deviation distribution, indicating that respondents generally held a moderately positive attitude towards Sam's social media promotions and their own willingness to purchase.

Reliability and Validity Analysis

Reliability Analysis

This study used Cronbach's alpha coefficient to test the reliability of the formal questionnaire. Data showed that all values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70. This indicates that the measurement tool has good internal consistency and is suitable for further statistical analysis.

Table 3 Reliability Analysis of the Formal Study (N = 309)

Variables	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Social Media Promotion (SMP)	6	0.784
Brand Awareness (BA)	6	0.799
Consumer Trust (CT)	6	0.775
Purchase Intention (PI)	6	0.799

Validity Analysis

This study used exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to test the construct validity of the scale. Before formally extracting factors, two indicators were observed: first, the KMO test was performed to check whether the sample was sufficient, and then Bartlett's test of sphericity was used to determine whether there was a correlation between variables. The closer the KMO value is to 1, the more suitable the data is for factor analysis (Field, 2018; Shrestha, 2021).

Table 4 KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		0.959
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	2984.164
	df	276
	Sig.	0.000

Pearson Correlation Analysis

This study used Pearson correlation analysis to examine four main variables. The Pearson correlation coefficients (r) ranged from 0.70 to 0.89, indicating a strong positive correlation between the variables (Schober et al., 2018). As shown in Table 5, the correlation coefficients between all variables ranged from 0.757 to 0.810, and all were significant at the 0.01 level ($p < 0.01$).

Table 5 Pearson Correlation Matrix

Variables	1. SMP	2. BA	3. CT	4. PI
1. Social Media Promotion (SMP)	1			
2. Brand Awareness (BA)	0.810**	1		
3. Consumer Trust (CT)	0.776**	0.771**	1	
4. Purchase Intention (PI)	0.804**	0.786**	0.757**	1

Note: ** $p < 0.01$

Multiple Regression Analysis and Hypotheses Testing

Multicollinearity and Autocorrelation Test

Durbin Watson test was used to check the independence of errors (autocorrelation). According to Field (Field, 2018), a Durbin Watson statistic between 1.5 and 2.5 indicates that there is no severe autocorrelation in the data. Hence, the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) was used to check for multicollinearity among the independent variables. According to Daoud (Daoud, 2017), a VIF value less than 5 indicates that there is no serious multicollinearity problem.

Regression Results

To empirically verify the research hypotheses described in hypotheses development, this study conducted a three stage multiple linear regression analysis using the inclusion method. Table 4.6 summarizes the results of the regression model. Firstly, Model 1 verified the direct impact of SMP on BA. The results indicate that the model is highly significant ($F = 585.265$, $p < 0.001$). SMP has a strong and significant positive effect on brand awareness ($\beta = 0.810$, $t = 24.192$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, the hypothesis H1 can be considered valid. Secondly, Model 2 evaluated the influence of SMP on CT. The regression output shows that the model fits the data well ($F = 465.086$, $p < 0.001$). SMP exhibits a significant positive impact on consumer trust ($\beta = 0.776$, $t = 21.566$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, H2 is supported.

Finally, Model 3 represents the full model, testing the combined effects of SMP, BA, and CT on the ultimate dependent variable, purchase intention (PI). This overall model is highly significant ($F = 257.051, p < 0.001$) and possesses excellent explanatory power, accounting for 71.4% of the total variance in purchase intention ($Adjusted R^2 = 0.714$) within this comprehensive model, SMP ($\beta = 0.385, t = 6.761, p < 0.001$), BA

($\beta = 0.297, t = 5.284, p < 0.001$), and CT ($\beta = 0.230, t = 4.385, p < 0.001$) all the test data above show that each variable has a positive impact on purchase intention. These findings provide robust statistical evidence supporting H3 and H4.

Furthermore, following the existing mediation effect testing procedure (Memon et al., 2018), the significant relationships established in these three models confirm the existence of a mediation effect. Data analysis shows that social media marketing has a significant impact on both BA and CT the two mediating variables. Furthermore, even after controlling for the influence of social media marketing, these two variables still significantly affect purchase intention. Based on these two points, it can be concluded that brand awareness and consumer trust play a partial mediating role between social media promotion and purchase intention. This further supports hypotheses H6 and H7. Additionally, as demonstrated in the Pearson correlation analysis (Table 5), there is a strong and highly significant positive correlation between brand awareness and consumer trust ($r = 0.771, p < 0.01$) which provides robust statistical support for H5.

Table 6 Results of Multiple Regression Analysis

Variables	Model 1 (DV = BA)	Model 2 (DV = CT)	Model 3 (DV = PI)
	$\beta(t - value)$	$\beta(t - value)$	$\beta(t - value)$
Independent Variable			
Social Media Promotion (SMP)	0.810 (24.192)***	0.776 (21.566)***	0.385 (6.761)***
Mediating Variables			
Brand Awareness (BA)	-	-	0.297 (5.284)***
Consumer Trust (CT)	-	-	0.230 (4.385)***
Model Fit Summary			
Adjusted R^2	0.655	0.601	0.714
$F - value$	585.265***	465.086***	257.051***

Note: *** $p < 0.001$. VIF values for Model 3 are all below 3.5, indicating no multicollinearity.

Summary of Hypotheses

The research hypotheses were proposed through descriptive statistics, reliability tests and validity tests, correlation analysis, and three step multiple regression analysis. The final testing results for each hypothesis (H1 to H7) are consolidated in Table 7 below.

Table 7 Summary of Hypotheses Testing Results

Hypothesis	Path Description	Results
H1	Social Media Promotion positively affects Brand Awareness.	Supported
H2	Social Media Promotion positively affects Consumer Trust.	Supported

H3	Brand Awareness positively affects Purchase Intention.	Supported
H4	Consumer Trust positively affects Purchase Intention.	Supported
H5	Brand Awareness positively affects Consumer Trust.	Supported
H6	Brand Awareness mediates the relationship between Social Media Promotion and Purchase Intention.	Supported
H7	Consumer Trust mediates the relationship between Social Media Promotion and Purchase Intention.	Supported

Note: H5 is supported based on the strong positive association verified in the Pearson correlation analysis.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Relationship between Social Media Promotion, Brand Awareness, and Consumer Trust

H1 indicates that social media promotion has a positive impact on increasing brand awareness. The study confirms that social media marketing campaigns are a key driver of increased brand awareness (Manzoor et al., 2020). H2 indicates that social media promotion can also have a positive impact on consumer trust. Positive social media engagement can reduce consumer uncertainty and build brand trust (Cheung et al., 2020).

Relationship between Brand Awareness, Consumer Trust, and Purchase Intention

H3 indicates that brand awareness does indeed have a positive impact on consumers' purchase intentions. Higher brand awareness can systematically reduce consumers' cognitive load during purchase decisions, thereby increasing their purchase intentions (Chen, 2024). H4 indicates that consumer trust has a positive impact on purchase intention. This study confirms that trust is the most critical prerequisite for reducing perceived risk in transactions (Mou & Benyoucef, 2021).

Relationship between Brand Awareness and Consumer Trust

The H5 page confirms that brand awareness has a significant positive impact on consumer trust. Higher brand familiarity naturally reduces consumer scepticism and enhances their trust in the brand (Ling et al., 2023).

The Mediating Effects of Brand Awareness and Consumer Trust

H6 and H7 indicate that for social media promotion to influence purchase intention, it must go through two intermediate steps: brand awareness and consumer trust, both of which play a partial mediating role. Previous studies using the SOR model have emphasized that external marketing stimuli alone cannot generate actual purchase behaviour; they must be processed through consumers' internal cognitive and emotional assessments (Bushara et al., 2023).

Implications of the Study

In theoretical significance, this study extends the application of Social Response Relationship Theory (SOR) to the prepaid membership retail sector. Furthermore, it elucidates the psychological shift consumers undergo from information exposure to the formation of purchase intention. It emphasizes the importance of brand awareness and trust as key psychological links connecting marketing stimuli and ultimate behavioural responses. Based on

the practical significance, this study provides valuable suggestions for Sam's Club's social media marketing. Businesses should not merely view social media platforms as information dissemination or advertising channels, but rather as crucial platforms for building consumer trust. Content promotion should showcase authentic user experiences, product origins, and relevant behind-the-scenes stories to enhance transparency and credibility, thereby strengthening consumer trust (Nosi et al., 2022).

Marketing and Management Recommendations

This study provides several practical suggestions for Sam's Club to optimize its marketing strategy in China and increase membership growth. By clearly showcasing its supply chain advantages and high-quality private-label products, Sam's Club can effectively reduce consumers' economic concerns about prepaid membership fees (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016). In addition, since brand awareness can significantly enhance consumer trust and purchase intention, Sam's Club needs to maintain continuous and highly interactive social media exposure.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its theoretical and practical contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the respondents were primarily drawn from China's first-tier and new first-tier cities. Although these regions represent major consumer markets with high social media penetration and strong purchasing power, the findings may not be fully generalisable to consumers residing in second-tier, third-tier, or rural areas, where differences in digital adoption, purchasing behaviour, and membership retail acceptance may exist. Second, this study employed a cross-sectional research design, which captures consumer perceptions and purchase intentions at a single point in time. Consequently, the study is unable to examine how consumers' attitudes, trust, and purchase intentions may evolve as social media marketing strategies and market conditions change over time. Future research is therefore encouraged to employ longitudinal research designs and expand the geographical scope of the sample to improve the generalisability of the findings. Additionally, future studies may incorporate other influential variables, such as perceived value, electronic word-of-mouth, or consumer engagement, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of consumer purchase behaviour in membership-based retailing.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the influence of social media promotion on consumers' purchase intention within the context of membership-based retailing by integrating the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). Based on data collected from 309 valid respondents, the findings indicate that social media promotion does not directly influence consumers' purchase intention; instead, its effects are realised indirectly through the mediating roles of brand awareness and consumer trust. These findings highlight the importance of consumers' cognitive and emotional responses in translating marketing stimuli into purchase intention. From a theoretical perspective, this study extends the application of the SOR framework to membership-based retailing by demonstrating the complementary roles of brand awareness and consumer trust in explaining consumers' decision-making processes. Practically, the findings suggest that membership-based retailers should prioritise high-quality social media content, encourage meaningful consumer engagement, and strengthen brand credibility to enhance consumer trust and increase membership conversion. Overall, this study provides valuable insights for both researchers and practitioners seeking to understand the effectiveness of social media marketing in membership-based retail environments.

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