

FROM CONTENT TO CHOICES: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF BRAND AWARENESS IN CONTENT
MARKETING AND PURCHASE DECISIONS AMONG GRAB USERS

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Abstract

This study examines whether brand awareness mediates the relationship between content marketing and purchase decision among Management students at Sam Ratulangi University Manado who use Grab digital transportation services, grounded in the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework. Using a quantitative approach with Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) on data from 110 respondents, the findings show that content marketing has a significant positive effect on brand awareness ($B = 0.626$), brand awareness has a significant positive effect on purchase decision ($B = 0.432$), and content marketing also has a significant direct effect on purchase decision ($B = 0.418$). Brand awareness partially mediates the relationship between content marketing and purchase decision, accounting for approximately 39.2 percent of the total effect. This suggests that Grab's content shapes student purchase decisions through two pathways of comparable strength, one gradual through brand awareness and one direct. The study contributes to the ride-hailing literature and offers practical insight for Grab's digital content strategy.

Keywords: Content Marketing, Brand Awareness, Purchase Decision, Grab, PLS-SEM.

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1. Introduction

The growth of internet access and mobile applications has changed how university students engage with brands, including in their choice of daily transportation. Grab, as one of the digital transportation platforms operating in Indonesia alongside competitors such as Gojek and Maxim, actively publishes promotional content through social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, the two platforms students report using most frequently. However, not all students who are exposed to this content respond in the same way; some consistently open the Grab application whenever a transportation need arises, while others switch between platforms depending on ongoing promotions. This inconsistency raises the question of how content marketing translates into a purchase decision, and whether brand awareness serves as the connecting mechanism between the two.

Hariyanti et al. (2024) reported that brand awareness positively predicts purchasing decisions among online store consumers in Indonesia. These findings confirm that both constructs matter

for digital purchase behavior, yet they were typically tested as parallel, unconnected predictors rather than as a sequence in which one stimulus operates through the other, leaving open the question of whether brand awareness is the mechanism that links content exposure to an eventual purchase decision.

Most prior research on Grab and comparable ride-hailing platforms has examined content marketing or brand awareness in isolation, treating them as separate predictors without exploring how one might work through the other, and studies that included both variables were typically conducted in different contexts, such as e-commerce platforms, fast-moving consumer goods, or metropolitan markets, rather than in the digital transportation sector. Studies on ride-hailing platforms comparable to Grab, such as Maulana and Asnawati (2022) on Grab, included content marketing as one variable among several without examining how it might operate through brand awareness, while studies on brand awareness in ride hailing contexts, such as Ndraha et al. (2025) on Maxim, did not incorporate content marketing at all.

The mediating role of brand awareness in the relationship between content marketing and purchase decisions, particularly among university students in a regional Indonesian city using a ride-hailing platform, has not yet been clearly established. This gap matters practically as well, since ride-hailing operators invest heavily in short-form video content without a clear model of whether that investment builds long-term brand equity, drives immediate bookings, or both. This gap is what the present study is designed to fill, using the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework developed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974), in which content marketing functions as the external stimulus, brand awareness as the internal cognitive state, and purchase decision as the resulting behavioral response.

Grounded in this framework, the study aims to determine: (1) whether content marketing significantly affects brand awareness among Management students at Sam Ratulangi University Manado who use Grab digital services; (2) whether brand awareness significantly affects purchase decision in Grab digital services among these students; (3) whether content marketing significantly affects purchase decision directly; and (4) whether brand awareness significantly mediates the effect of content marketing on purchase decision among Management students at Sam Ratulangi University Manado who use Grab digital services. The findings are expected to contribute to the digital marketing literature by clarifying how content-driven stimuli reach a purchase decision in a ride-hailing context, and to offer Grab practical insight for allocating its content strategy between brand-building and performance-oriented objectives, particularly in deciding how content budgets should be split between long-term brand campaigns and short-term promotional pushes.

2. Literature Review

Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) Framework

The S-O-R framework, developed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974), proposes that external stimuli (S) influence an individual's internal cognitive and affective states, the organism (O), which subsequently drive a behavioral response (R). In this study, content marketing is positioned as the stimulus, brand awareness as the organism, and purchase decision as the response, allowing the model to capture not only whether content marketing and brand awareness relate to purchase decisions, but the sequence through which that influence occurs.

Content Marketing

Content marketing is defined by Pulizzi (2014) as the practice of creating and distributing relevant and valuable content to attract, acquire, and engage a clearly defined audience, with the objective of driving profitable customer action. In this study, content marketing is measured through content quality, content consistency, and content informativeness (Ijan & Ellyawati, 2023).

Brand Awareness

Brand awareness refers to a consumer's ability to recognize and recall a brand under different conditions (Keller, 1993; Aaker, 1996). It is measured in this study through brand recall, brand association, and brand knowledge (adapted from Keller, 1993; Aaker, 1996; Yoo & Donthu, 2001).

Purchase Decision

Purchase decision is the stage in the consumer decision-making process at which a consumer selects one product or service among available alternatives (Kotler & Keller, 2016). It is measured through choice of Grab, purchase conviction, and willingness to pay (adapted from Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2019; Kotler & Keller, 2016; Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard, 1995).

Empirical Studies

Permata et al. (2023) investigated how brand awareness affects purchase decisions within the Tokopedia marketplace, using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM- AMOS) with 335 respondents. The results confirmed that brand awareness has a positive and statistically significant influence on purchase decisions, affirming the strategic importance of brand recognition in online marketplace settings.

Hariyanti et al. (2024) investigated internet marketing, word-of-mouth communication, and brand awareness as predictors of purchasing decisions among online store consumers in Indonesia. Their regression analysis found that brand awareness had a positive and significant effect on purchasing decisions, reinforcing brand awareness's role as a proximate driver of purchase behavior, though their model did not examine what builds that awareness in the first place or whether a marketing stimulus operates through it. Ndraha et al. (2025) addressed a closer empirical setting, examining how service attributes and brand awareness shape the decision to use the Maxim ride-hailing platform in Gunungsitoli City; brand awareness again emerged as a significant predictor, lending support to extending a similar logic to Grab.

Ijan and Ellyawati (2023) demonstrated that content marketing and electronic word-of-mouth significantly shape purchasing decisions on TikTok, the same platform most respondents in the present study reported using most frequently, indicating that content-driven purchase pathways are already active among the same audience segment examined here. Evania et al. (2023) went a step further methodologically, testing content marketing and influencer marketing as antecedents of purchase decision with customer engagement modeled as a mediating internal state; their finding that the mediated pathway was statistically significant provides a direct methodological precedent for treating brand awareness as a mediator rather than a co-equal predictor in the present study.

Closer still to the research context, Maulana and Asnawati (2022) found that content marketing, integrated digital marketing, and mobile marketing positively and significantly influenced the decision to use Grab's services in Samarinda, though brand awareness was not included as a

variable in their model. Erika and Trimarjono (2026) subsequently confirmed that content marketing significantly and partially affects the decision to use a ride-hailing application (inDrive), alongside brand image and online customer reviews. Taken together, these studies confirm that content marketing shapes purchase-related outcomes for Grab and comparable platforms, and that brand awareness independently predicts purchase decisions in adjacent ride-hailing and e-commerce contexts but none has tested whether brand awareness is the mechanism through which Grab's content marketing reaches a purchase decision, which is the specific gap this study addresses.

Conceptual Framework

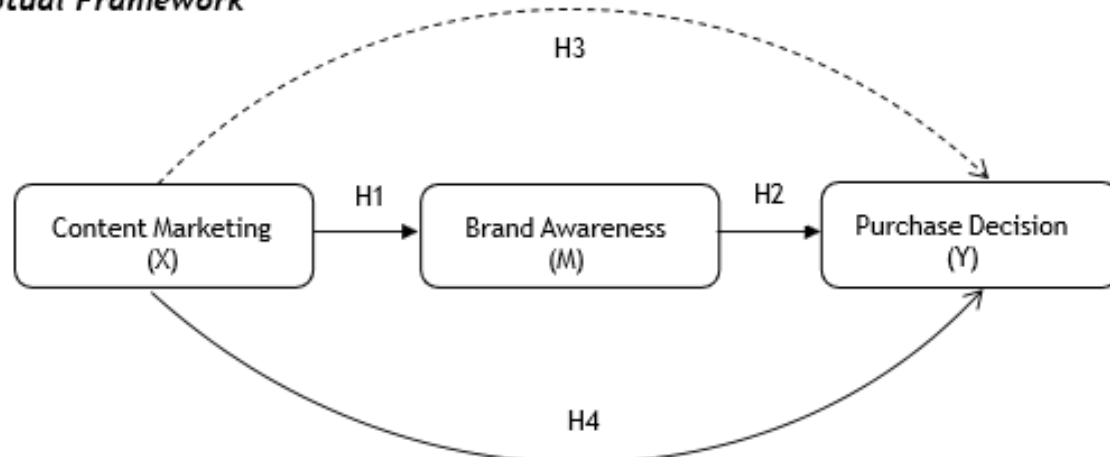


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework
Source: Literature Review

Research Hypothesis

H1: Content marketing significantly affects brand awareness among Management students at Sam Ratulangi University Manado who use Grab digital services.

H2: Brand awareness significantly affects purchase decision in Grab digital services among Management students at Sam Ratulangi University Manado.

H3: Content marketing significantly affects purchase decision in Grab digital services among Management students at Sam Ratulangi University Manado.

H4: Brand awareness significantly mediates the effect of content marketing on purchase decision in Grab digital services among Management students at Sam Ratulangi University Manado.

3. Research Method

Research Approach

This study adopts a quantitative, explanatory research design intended to test the hypothesized causal relationships among content marketing, brand awareness, and purchase decision (Sugiyono, 2014), using a structured questionnaire as the primary data collection instrument.

Population, Sample Size, and Sampling Technique

The population consists of active Management students at the Faculty of Economics and Business, Sam Ratulangi University Manado, who had used Grab's services at least once within

the three months prior to data collection. Following Hair et al. (2017), the minimum sample size for PLS-SEM is recommended at ten times the number of indicators; with 11 indicators in the model, this yields a minimum of 110 respondents, which was adopted as the study's sample size. Respondents were selected using purposive sampling based on three criteria: (1) active enrollment as a Management student, (2) exposure to Grab's content on at least one social media platform, and (3) having used Grab's services within the previous three months.

Data and Type of Data

This study relies on primary data, obtained directly from respondents through a structured questionnaire designed to capture their perceptions of Grab's content marketing, their level of brand awareness, and their purchase decision patterns.

Data Collection Method

Primary data were collected through a structured five-point Likert-scale questionnaire (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) distributed online via Google Forms. Each of the three variables was measured using three to four indicators, summarized in Table 1.

Research Instrument Testing

Validity and Reliability Tests

Validity testing ensures that the questionnaire accurately measures the intended constructs. Convergent validity is evaluated using outer loadings and Average Variance Extracted (AVE), while discriminant validity is assessed through the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio (Henseler et al., 2015). Reliability testing is evaluated through Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability, with a minimum acceptable value of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2019).

Data Analysis Method

Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS, which evaluates the outer (measurement) model and the inner (structural) model simultaneously and is well suited to smaller sample sizes and predictive research objectives (Hair et al., 2017).

Outer Model Assessment

The outer model was evaluated through convergent validity (outer loadings, AVE), internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability), and discriminant validity (HTMT ratio, threshold 0.90; Henseler et al., 2015).

Inner Model Assessment

The inner model was evaluated through the coefficient of determination (R^2), effect size (f^2 ; Cohen, 1988), predictive relevance (Q^2 ; Geisser, 1975), the variance inflation factor (VIF, also serving as a full collinearity check for common method bias; Kock, 2015), and model fit (SRMR).

Hypothesis Testing

All four hypotheses were tested through bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples at a 5 percent significance level (two-tailed). The mediating role of brand awareness was evaluated using the Variance Accounted For (VAF), following the classification of Hair et al. (2017): VAF below 20% indicates no mediation, 20-80% indicates partial mediation, and above 80% indicates full mediation.

4. Result and Discussion

Respondent Profile

Tabel 1. Respondent Profile

Group	n	%
Gender		
Male	21	19.3%
Female	88	80.7%
Subtotal (n = 109)*	109	100%
Batch		
2022	74	67.3%
2023	23	20.9%
2024	13	11.8%
Total	110	100%
Social Media Platform Used (multiple selection)		
Instagram	71	64.5%
TikTok	74	67.3%
Facebook	7	6.4%
YouTube	12	10.9%
Monthly Grab App Usage		
1-2 times	22	20.0%
3-4 times	29	26.4%
6-10 times	21	19.1%
> 10 times	38	34.5%
Total	110	100%
Grab Service Most Used		
GrabCar	23	20.9%
GrabExpress	1	0.9%
GrabBike	72	65.5%
Others	14	12.7%
Total	110	100%

**One respondent did not report gender Source: Data Processed (2026).*

Of the 110 respondents, the majority are female (80.7%) compared to male (19.3%), consistent with prior evidence that female consumers engage more actively with visually oriented, narrative-style branded content on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok (Meyers-Levy & Loken, 2015; Putrevu, 2001). Respondents are concentrated in the 2022 (67.3%) and 2023 (20.9%) batches. TikTok (67.3%) and Instagram (64.5%) are the dominant social media platforms, overlapping directly with the channels where Grab concentrates its content distribution. More than half of respondents (53.6%) use the Grab application more than five times a month, indicating a largely habitual user base, and GrabBike is by far the most-used service (65.5%), consistent with its role as the faster, more affordable option for student mobility.

Research Result**Measurement Model (Outer Model)**

Convergent validity was assessed through outer loadings. Most indicators exceeded the 0.70 threshold; only content quality (X1.1 = 0.642) fell slightly below it but was retained since it exceeded 0.40 and its removal did not improve the construct's AVE (Hair et al., 2022).

Table 2. Outer Loadings

Indicator	Brand Awareness	Content Marketing	Purchase Decision
Z1.1	0.701	-	-
Z1.2	0.800	-	-
Z2.1	0.770	-	-
Z3.1	0.717	-	-
X1.1	-	0.642	-
X2.1	-	0.797	-
X3.1	-	0.735	-
X3.2	-	0.752	-
Y1.1	-	-	0.856
Y2.1	-	-	0.828
Y2.2	-	-	0.803
Y3.1	-	-	0.710

Source: Data Processed, PLS-SEM (2026)

Internal consistency reliability and convergent validity at the construct level were assessed through Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and AVE, all of which met the recommended thresholds of 0.70 (reliability) and 0.50 (AVE) (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 3. Construct Reliability and Validity

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_a	rho_c	AVE
Brand Awareness	0.737	0.738	0.835	0.642
Content Marketing	0.713	0.727	0.823	0.560
Purchase Decision	0.812	0.822	0.877	0.539

Source: Data Processed, PLS-SEM (2026)

Discriminant validity, assessed using the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio, showed all values below the 0.90 threshold (Henseler et al., 2015), confirming that the three constructs are empirically distinct.

Table 4. Heterotrait -Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

Construct	Brand Awareness	Content Marketing	Purchase Decision
Brand Awareness	-		
Content Marketing	0.860	-	
Purchase Decision	0.892	0.880	-

Source: Data Processed, PLS-SEM (2026)

Structural Model (Inner Model)

The model produced an SRMR value of 0.089, within the acceptable range of up to 0.10 (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Henseler et al., 2015), indicating a reasonably good model fit. Content marketing explained 39.2% of the variance in brand awareness ($R^2 = 0.392$), while content marketing and brand awareness jointly explained 58.6% of the variance in purchase decision ($R^2 = 0.586$).

Table 5. Coefficient of Determination (R^2), and Adjusted R^2

	R-square	R-square adjusted
Brand Awareness	0.392	0.387
Purchase Decision	0.586	0.579

Source: Data Processed, PLS-SEM (2026)

The predictive relevance (Q^2) results show that both endogenous constructs have values above zero, with 0.369 for Brand Awareness and 0.461 for Purchase Decision. These results indicate that the model has acceptable predictive capability for both constructs. In addition, the lower RMSE and MAE values for Purchase Decision suggest that the model predicts Purchase Decision slightly more accurately than Brand Awareness.

Table 6. Predictive Relevance

	$Q^2_{predict}$	RMSE	MAE
Brand Awareness	0.369	0.810	0.644
Purchase Decision	0.461	0.747	0.593

Source: Data Processed, PLS-SEM (2026)

Effect size (f^2) results show that content marketing has a large effect on brand awareness ($f^2 = 0.646$), while brand awareness's effect on purchase decision ($f^2 = 0.274$) and content marketing's direct effect on purchase decision ($f^2 = 0.256$) both fall into the medium category (Cohen, 1988).

Table 7. Effect Size (f^2)

	Brand Awareness	Content Marketing	Purchase Decision
Brand Awareness			0.274
Content Marketing	0.646		0.256
Purchase Decision			

Source: Data Processed, PLS-SEM (2026)

All VIF values ranged from 1.204 to 2.005, well below the conservative threshold of 3.3, indicating no multicollinearity or common method bias concerns (Hair et al., 2019; Kock, 2015).

Table 8. The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF)

	VIF
Z1.1	1.346
Z1.2	1.652
Z2.1	1.409
Z3.1	1.348
X1.1	1.204
X2.1	1.432
X3.1	1.512
X3.2	1.450
Y1.1	2.005
Y2.1	1.848
Y2.2	1.681
Y3.1	1.408

Source: Data Processed, PLS-SEM (2026)

Hypothesis Testing

Hypotheses were tested through bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples at a 5% significance level (two-tailed). All three direct paths were statistically significant, supporting H1, H2, and H3.

Table 9. Direct Effects (Bootstrapping Results)

Path	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	STDEV	T Statistics	P Values	Result
Content Marketing → Brand Awareness	0.626	0.634	0.054	11.690	0.000	H1 Supported
Brand Awareness → Purchase Decision	0.432	0.436	0.076	5.677	0.000	H2 Supported
Content Marketing → Purchase Decision	0.418	0.416	0.076	5.488	0.000	H3 Supported

Source: Data Processed, PLS-SEM (2026)

The indirect effect of content marketing on purchase decision through brand awareness was 0.270 ($t = 5.327$, $p = 0.000$), confirming that brand awareness significantly mediates the relationship. Combined with the direct effect of 0.418, the total effect of content marketing on purchase decision is 0.688, giving a Variance Accounted For (VAF) of approximately 39.2%. Since this falls within the 20-80% range, brand awareness is confirmed as a partial mediator, supporting H4.

Table 10. Indirect Effect, Total Effect, and Mediation Test (H4)

Path	Indirect Effect	T Statistics	P Values	Direct Effect	Total Effect	VAF	Mediation Type
Content Marketing → Brand Awareness → Purchase Decision	0.270	5.327	0.000	0.418	0.688	≈ 39.2%	Partial mediation

Source: Data Processed, PLS-SEM (2026)

Discussion

Content Marketing towards Brand Awareness

The first hypothesis is accepted and represents the strongest relationship in the model ($\beta = 0.626$, $f^2 = 0.646$), indicating that the more frequently and consistently students are exposed to Grab's content, the stronger their awareness of the brand becomes. This is consistent with Pulizzi (2014), who explained that content marketing works through the sustained delivery of relevant and valuable content that gradually builds familiarity, and with Keller (1993), whose view that repeated exposure to brand-related stimuli strengthens recognition and recall is directly reflected here. Since TikTok and Instagram are both the platforms students use most and the channels where Grab concentrates its content, exposure is frequent and largely unavoidable, accelerating the brand-awareness-building process. The finding is in line with Ijan and Ellyawati (2023) and Evania et al. (2023), both of whom found that content marketing significantly strengthens brand-related cognitive outcomes in digital contexts. The comparatively lower loading of the content-quality indicator ($X1.1 = 0.642$) against the higher loadings of consistency and informativeness (0.75-0.80) further suggests that, for this respondent group, how often and how clearly Grab communicates matters more for building awareness than the polish of any single piece of content.

Brand Awareness toward Purchase Decision

The second hypothesis is accepted ($\beta = 0.432$, $f^2 = 0.274$), indicating that students who can more readily recall and associate Grab with clear attributes are more likely to choose the platform. This is consistent with Aaker (1996), who positioned brand awareness as the foundation of brand equity, and with Kotler and Keller (2016), who noted that brand familiarity reduces perceived risk in the consumer's consideration set. Purchase Decision recorded the highest overall agreement among the three variables, particularly on the Choice of Grab item, where no respondent disagreed. The finding aligns with Hariyanti et al. (2024), Permata et al. (2023), and Ndraha et al. (2025), who reported comparable effects of brand awareness on purchase or platform-usage decisions across different digital platforms and regional contexts. The effect, while significant, is more moderate than that of content marketing on brand awareness, suggesting that awareness alone narrows rather than fully determines the choice set: students who recognize and can describe Grab still appear to weigh it against situational factors such as price and driver availability before finalizing a decision, a nuance the present cross-sectional model does not capture directly.

Content Marketing towards Purchase Decision

The third hypothesis is accepted ($\beta = 0.418$, $f^2 = 0.256$), and importantly, this direct effect remains significant even after accounting for brand awareness, indicating that content marketing can move students toward choosing Grab immediately, without first passing through a fully developed state of brand familiarity. This supports Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019), who noted that content with a clear and immediate value proposition, such as time-limited promotions, can prompt quick consumer action, and is consistent with Alkharabsheh and Zhen (2021) and Erika and Trimarjono (2026), who found comparable direct effects of content marketing in similar digital service contexts. Practically, this means Grab's content is not only building a reservoir of brand familiarity for later use but is also, for some students, functioning as a proximate trigger in its own right a promotional post seen minutes before a transportation need arises can plausibly convert into a booking without any deliberate recall step in between.

Brand Awareness Mediating Content Marketing towards Purchase Decision

The fourth and central hypothesis is supported, with brand awareness found to partially mediate the relationship between content marketing and purchase decision (indirect effect = 0.270, $t = 5.327$, $p = 0.000$, $VAF \approx 39.2\%$). Following Hair et al.'s (2017) classification, this value falls within the 20-80% range, confirming brand awareness as a partial rather than a full mediator. This result directly supports the S-O-R framework (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974): content marketing operates through two coexisting pathways, one gradual through brand awareness as the organism state, and one more immediate and direct that bypasses it entirely. The persistence of a significant direct effect (H3) alongside the significant indirect effect indicates that Grab's content does not rely solely on building brand familiarity to convert exposure into a purchase decision, distinguishing this setting from contexts where brand awareness operates as a near-complete mechanism.

The finding aligns with Ali et al. (2026) and Mushtaq et al. (2024), who identified brand awareness as a mediating mechanism between digital marketing stimuli and purchase behavior in other consumer contexts.

Theoretical and Managerial Implications

Theoretically, the partial rather than full mediation observed here refines the direct application of the S-O-R framework to digital transportation services: the organism state (brand awareness) is a genuine and statistically necessary link, but it does not fully absorb the stimulus's effect, implying that at least one additional pathway – plausibly habitual usage or situational convenience, neither measured in this study – also connects Grab's content to a booking decision. Managerially, the coexistence of a strong indirect path and a comparably sized direct path means Grab's marketing team need not choose between brand-building and performance content: sustained, informative content on TikTok and Instagram builds the awareness reservoir that supports long-run preference, while the same content, when paired with a clear and time-bound offer, can convert attention into a booking without waiting for that reservoir to fill.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

Conclusion

Based on the PLS-SEM analysis of data from 110 Management students at Sam Ratulangi University Manado who use Grab's digital transportation services, this study concludes that:

1. Content marketing has a significant positive effect on brand awareness ($B = 0.626$), the strongest relationship in the model.
2. Brand awareness has a significant positive effect on purchase decision ($B = 0.432$).
3. Content marketing has a significant direct effect on purchase decision ($B = 0.418$), independent of brand awareness.
4. Brand awareness partially mediates the relationship between content marketing and purchase decision ($VAF \approx 39.2\%$).

All four hypotheses proposed in this study are supported, confirming that content marketing influences students' purchasing behavior through two channels of comparable importance, a gradual pathway through brand awareness and a direct pathway, and supporting the

applicability of the Stimulus-Organism-Response framework in a digital, service-based transportation context.

Recommendation

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Grab should prioritize content distribution on TikTok and Instagram, given the dominant use of these platforms among students, and increase informative content explaining how the service works, since content informativeness and consistency were rated highly and are strongly linked to brand awareness.
2. Because content marketing also has a significant direct effect on purchase decision, Grab should continue presenting timely, relevant promotions that can prompt an immediate decision, working alongside rather than replacing longer-term brand-building efforts.
3. For future research, it is recommended to extend the scope beyond Manado, incorporate additional variables such as price sensitivity or brand trust, and consider a two-wave research design to observe changes in brand awareness over time.

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