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Examining the causal pathways: How electronic word-of-mouth and influencer marketing impact art toy purchase intentions through brand image among working professionals

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Abstract

Art toys have gained increasing popularity among working professionals in recent years. Thailand has been identified as the main art toy market in the Asia-Pacific region due to significant business growth driven by working adult collectors. The objectives of this research are to develop a causal relationship model of the antecedents of the intention to purchase art toys and use empirical data to validate a causal relationship model of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), influencer marketing (INF), and the intention to purchase art toys, mediated by brand image (IMG). This quantitative study collected data through stratified random sampling of 400 potential and existing consumers of art toys through an online questionnaire. Due to the exploratory and prediction-oriented nature of this research, the data were analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). Most of the respondents are females aged 30–39 years old, working as employees, and possessing a bachelor's degree. Labubu has the strongest brand awareness (45.04%), followed by Crybaby (20.35%), Molly (19.01%), Dimoo (6.20%), and Skullpanda (5.68%). The three most common reasons for purchasing art toys are (1) being influenced by popular trends (40.13%), (2) being considered a collectible item (35.14%), and (3) admiration for the artists/creators (7.38%). The PLS-SEM results reveal that this model has high goodness-of-fit (GOF: 0.546), considerable explanatory power (IMG R2: 0.463 and INT R2: 0.295), and significant predictive power (IMG Q2: 0.443 and INT Q2: 0.214). The path analysis found that e-WOM (β: 0.201) and influencer marketing (β: 0.220) significantly influence the intention to purchase art toys, mediated by brand image, with a statistical significance of less than 0.001. This finding suggests that art toy brand marketers should integrate e-WOM and influencer marketing into their communication campaigns to shape a favorable brand image to increase purchase intention.

Keywords: Art toys, Causal model, Electronic word-of-mouth, Influencer marketing, Intention to purchase art toys, Mediator analysis.

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1. Introduction

Art toys have gained increasing popularity among working adults in recent years, referring to collectible figures, sculptures, or dolls with a special combination of modern art and traditional toys. Several reasons drive the increasing value perception of art toys among collectors. First, art toys are designed or crafted by artists—prominently including Jeff Koons, Takashi Murakami, Ron English, Kasing Lung, Pucky, Kenny Wong, and Ayan Deng—who immerse their creative inspiration into the process, resulting in objects that reflect a balanced integration of craftsmanship, storytelling, aesthetics, playfulness, and entertainment value. Collectors are attracted to art toys based on their artistic appearance and the compelling stories communicated through them. Art toys have become more than simply toys as they also deliver cultural, social, or political stories to provoke the thoughts of collectors, thus creating strong bonds among artists, art toys, and collectors. Second, art toys come in many different forms, including vinyl, resin, wood, plastic, metal, and cloth, catering to the needs of collectors and potential customers. Third, art toy collections are normally produced as limited editions, which increases their rarity and thus drives demand among collectors. This is one of the main reasons why art toys have become global products, attracting new customer groups and boosting the purchase of existing collectors. Key players in the art toy market including Lego, Pop Mart, Mediacom Toy, Tokidoki, Toy2R, and Kidrobot have invested substantial budgets in research and development to predict trends and meet customer expectations [1, 2].

The global art toys market is expected to grow at a 16.8% compound annual growth rate (CAGR) from USD 20,896.0 million in 2022, reaching USD 63,131.8 million by 2030 [2]. The regions with the highest growth rates are Asia Pacific and Latin America. In particular, Asia Pacific has been regarded as the fastest growth engine for the art toy market due to the growing economy and diverse customer needs [1, 2]. This impressive growth is due to a combination of attracting new target customers and retaining existing ones. Whereas art toys previously targeted children and teenagers, they have now successfully expanded to working professionals aged 20 to 55 years old who collect art toys that are relevant to their personalities and passions, thus becoming a form of self-expression [2]. Working adults often carry art toys with them, attaching them to their bags and other everyday items. Some use art toys as a conversation starter to make new friends or introduce themselves to acquaintances, especially those with similar interests.

Several key factors are driving the increased global growth of art toys. First, collectors or customers have formed a community, developing their own networks in the form of conventions and online social media platforms, including Facebook and Instagram. These act as the main discussion channels among collectors and serve to recruit new customers by generating a positive atmosphere among collectors and enthusiasts [3]. This automatically forms electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) communication, promoting art toys' popularity [2, 3]. Second, online marketing through social media presence, e-commerce, and influencer marketing have brought art toys to broader target customers [3]. Moreover, some local and global celebrities have become art toy influencers. For example, whenever Lisa Blackpink carries collections of art toys or posts about them on her social media, they become so popular that they frequently go out of stock [4]. This integration of word-of-mouth communication and influencer marketing on online platforms helps to evaluate the art toy market's growth by reaching a larger group of potential customers and enhancing the accessibility of art toys [2, 3].

Thailand has been identified as the main art toy market in the Asia-Pacific region due to significant growth driven by working adult collectors. In 2023, the art toy market's value reached USD 5,628 million, with a profit of USD 13.4 million. The popularity of art toys can be linked to several reasons. First, Thai consumers or collectors enjoy sharing their unboxing experiences on social media, with this word-of-mouth virality attracting new enthusiasts. Some Thai artists are among the famous creators of Popmart's art toys, including Nisa Srikhadee (creator of Cry Baby), Patcharapol Tangrim (Mardi), and Sirinya Suwan (Fenni). These well-known Thai artists resonate well with Thai consumers through their craftsmanship [5]. Second, art toys play a crucial role beyond simply being collectible items, as they are daily accessories reflecting individuals' personalities and interests. Third, due to art toys' high monetary value, some collectors have become part-time resellers. Every new launch of art toys attracts a large number of collectors queuing up at shopping malls, often arriving at 5–6 am despite the fact that the shops only open at 10 am. Reseller prices can be one to two times higher than the original price. Thai consumers are in favor of surprise boxes containing multiple series, which offer opportunities to obtain unspecified items [6]. Finally, social media propels the growth of art toy awareness and purchases, with more than 1,350 million engagements through views, comments, likes, and shares on TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, X, and Facebook. Zanroo—a Thai social listening provider—reported the five most popular art toys among Thai consumers as being Labubu with 1,056 million engagements, Crybaby with 390 million engagements, Molly with 383 million engagements, Skullpanda with 66 million engagements, and Hirono with 33 million engagements [7].

Research reveals that several factors influence the purchase of art toys, including emotional and affective factors Chen [8] aesthetic and design considerations Li and Chung [9] social and cultural influences Spee et al. [10] and the effective use of online marketing strategies, especially e-WOM communication [11]. e-WOM influences the intention to purchase through a product's brand image by enhancing the perception of its quality and credibility [12]. However, the mediating effect of brand image in the relationship between e-WOM and intention to purchase has not previously been investigated in the context of art toys. Furthermore, several art toy producers leverage influencer marketing involving celebrities, social media stars, popular YouTubers or bloggers. Indeed, influencer marketing has emerged as one of the main strategies in shaping consumer decision-making, especially for working adults and younger generations [13]. These target consumer groups tend to have

stronger emotional connections with and trust in influencers whom they follow, hence enhancing brand awareness and perceptions towards the products that they promote [14]. However, existing research has not explored the impact of influencer marketing on the intention to purchase art toys mediated by brand image. Therefore, e-WOM and influencer marketing are identified as potential determinants of the intention to purchase art toys through brand image to explore in this paper. As a result, the objectives of this research are to develop a causal relationship model of the antecedents of intention to purchase art toys and subsequently validate the model with empirical data.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

Decision-making is the result of a psychological process that consumers use to evaluate different options and make final decisions concerning whether to purchase specific products or services. It is influenced by internal factors including motivation, attitude, perception, learning, and personality, as well as external factors comprising the political, economic, social, technological, environmental, and legal environments and marketing activities initiated by the organization [15]. A purchase decision can be measured by the intention to purchase based on the theory of planned behavior (TPB), in which [16] mentions that purchase intention is a direct predictor of actual purchase behavior. As a result, the dependent variable of this study is the intention to purchase art toys, as suggested by TPB theory. Due to the complex nature of consumer decision-making, a product's brand image plays a critical role in the consumer decision process. Chen et al. [17] mention that the brand image perception of toys significantly influences purchase intentions by fostering consumers' preferences, credibility, and trust towards art toys. Therefore, brand image has been investigated as playing a mediating role between marketing efforts and intention to purchase [18, 19]. Brand image refers to the perception and attitudes of consumers towards the brand, resulting from their experiences, marketing communications, and interaction with the brand [20]. Therefore, the brand image of art toys refers to the perception, feelings, and meanings associated with art toy brands related to their design, artistic value, rarity, trendiness, and the personality of their creators [21]. Brand image can be measured through attributes, benefits, and attitudes [22].

Recent marketing efforts in driving brand image and the purchase of art toys among target consumers include e-WOM and influencer marketing. e-WOM refers to the digital version of traditional word-of-mouth communication, involving an online community where consumers share their opinions, experiences, and recommendations about products and services [23]. e-WOM has strong potential as a marketing tool to reach a wide audience quickly and can have a strong impact on brand perceptions. Given that e-WOM is found to positively affect consumers' purchase intention by shaping brand image associations, Sharifpour et al. [24] and Ngo et al. [25], it serves as the independent variable for this study [44]. propose measuring
e-WOM based on the dimensions of credibility, usefulness, and adoption, which were used to create the questionnaire for this study.

Influencer marketing can be defined as leveraging celebrities and social media influencers to promote brands and products. This method enables businesses to connect with target consumers more authentically and engagingly because followers of celebrities and social media influencers tend to trust them due to their expertise in certain areas [26]. Influencers can be categorized based on their number of followers and content type. In terms of follower numbers, influencers are divided into mega (more than 1 million followers), macro (100,000 to 1 million followers), mid-tier (10,000 to 100,000 followers), micro (1,000 to 10,000 followers), and nano influencers (fewer than 1,000 followers) [27]. Regarding content type, they can be categorized into celebrity influencers, key opinion leaders (KOLs)/experts, content creators, and virtual influencers (AI). Influencer marketing is different from e-WOM as it leverages individuals with many social media followers, while e-WOM typically involves the online sharing of product opinions and experiences among consumers. Influencer marketing influences brand trust by increasing purchase intention based on influencers' unique characteristics, such as expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness [28]. Marketers are required to carefully select influencers who have an image aligned with the product's brand image [29, 30]. As a result, influencer marketing is another dependent variable in this study because it has been proven to influence the intention to purchase through brand image.

Based on the comprehensive review of relevant literature on consumer decision-making, brand image, e-WOM, and influencer marketing, the three research hypotheses aim to provide direction to this investigation:

$H_{1:}$ e-WOM and influencer marketing have a positive influence on the brand image of art toys.

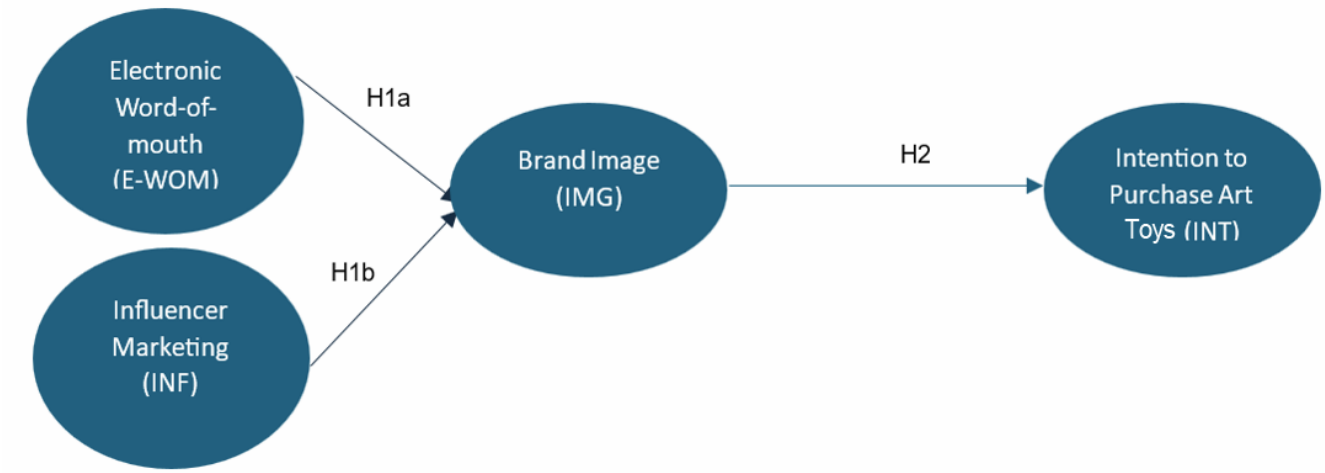
$H_{2:}$ The brand image of art toys has a positive influence on the intention to purchase them.

$H_{3:}$ e-WOM and influencer marketing have a positive influence on the intention to purchase art toys, mediated by brand image.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Methodology

Figure 1 presents the proposed theoretical framework of the causal model comprising e-WOM, brand image, and the intention to purchase art toys. This model incorporates the three research hypotheses as depicted in Figure 1.



H3 (a, b): Mediated paths (E-WOM→IMG→INT and INF→IMG→INT)

Figure 1.
Proposed theoretical model.

3.2. Data Collection

The population for this study is working adults who are existing and interested potential buyers of art toys, for which the population size is infinite. Because partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) is used to analyse the model, the sample size was calculated by using G*Power program with a total of three predictors of e-WOM and influencer marketing, with an effect size of 0.15, an error probability of 0.05, and a power of test of 0.95, resulting in a minimum sample size of 119. However, this research study collected a total of 400 samples, which is higher than the recommendation from G*Power.

Data for this study were collected via an online survey from 15 October to 15 December 2024, focused on existing and potential buyers of art toys. Stratified random sampling was used to draw samples for this study. First, samples from four regions of Thailand were proportionally allocated, with 64 samples from the northern region, 120 samples from the northeastern region, 160 samples from the central region, and 56 samples from the southern region. Within each regional stratum, provinces were selected using probability proportional to size sampling, whereby provinces with larger populations would be selected. This resulted in the selection of Chiang Mai, Nakhon Ratchasima, Bangkok, and Nakhon Si Thammarat. Samples from each stratum were collected via systematic random sampling by distributing an online questionnaire in office areas and shopping malls.

3.3. Measurement of Constructs

All observed variables are measured by a five-point Likert scale. The questionnaire was created to fit the context of art toys, featuring five questions each for the e-WOM and influencer marketing constructs, totalling ten questions. The brand image of art toys was measured with four questions, while the intention to purchase art toys was measured with three questions. All questions were validated for content validity, leveraging the index of item-objective congruence (IOC), and all seventeen questions met the criterion with a score above 0.67. To ensure internal consistency, the online questionnaire was tested with 30 respondents of a similar profile and resulted in Cronbach's alpha coefficient scores ranging from 0.901 to 0.943, which were higher than the 0.9 score considered to be excellent [31].

3.4. Data Analysis

The proposed model was analyzed with PLS-SEM rather than covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM). PLS-SEM is used in exploratory studies because it requires a more careful and stricter interpretation of results than CB-SEM [32]. This study was analyzed with SmartPLS (version 4.1.1.1). First, confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to eliminate all items with a value below 0.7, before the internal consistency, reliability, and validity of the proposed model were assessed. Finally, the structural model was estimated, and the proposed model was investigated and verified. To measure reliability, Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability were tested together with convergent validity. The average variance extracted (AVE) was measured by leveraging the 0.5 threshold. Discriminant validity was investigated by comparing the correlation value of the latent variable and the square root of AVE to ensure that the square root of AVE was higher than the correlation values. Subsequently, the research hypotheses were tested using bootstrapping at 5,000 iterations with 95% significance in the PLS algorithm.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Respondent Profiles

Table 1.
Sample Demographic Characteristics.

Respondent Profile	Frequency (%)	Respondent Profile	Frequency (%)
Gender		Occupation	
Male	88 (21.9)	Government officer	123 (30.8)
Female	312 (78.1)	Employee	229 (57.2)
Age		Business owner	48 (12.0)
20–29	150 (37.5)		
30–39	161 (40.3)	Education Level	
40–49	76 (19.0)	Below bachelor's degree	53 (13.2)
50–59	9 (2.2)	Bachelor's degree	260 (65.0)
60 or older	4 (1.0)	Above bachelor's degree	87 (21.8)

Most of the respondents are females, working as employees and possessing a bachelor's degree, as shown in Table 1, while the most common age group was 30–39 years old. In terms of brand awareness, Labubu has the highest awareness (45.04%), followed by Crybaby (20.35%), Molly (19.01%), Dimoo (6.20%), and Skullpanda (5.68%). The main reasons for purchasing art toys are (1) being influenced by popular trends (40.13%), (2) being considered a collectible item (35.14%), (3) admiration for the artists/creators (7.38%), (4) reflecting personal taste (9.54%), (5) enjoying the unboxing experience (5.42%), and (6) pride in owning secret items (2.39%).

4.2. Measurement Model

Table 2 shows that all e-WOM indicators had a normal distribution according to skewness, while kurtosis statistics were close to zero and consistent with the criteria from Schumacker and Lomax [33].

specifying that skewness and kurtosis of normal distribution data should be between +/-1 and +/-1.5, respectively. This implies that the collected data was appropriate for parametric statistical analysis. The reliability of e-WOM constructs was evaluated by Cronbach's alpha (α), with the results revealing that the reliability coefficient of all constructs was 0.931, meeting the criterion of 0.7. The composite reliability values were measured by ρ_A , (0.933) and ρ_C (0.948), again meeting the threshold of 0.7 [34]. Convergent validity validated by AVE revealed that e-WOM constructs' AVE surpassed the criterion of 0.5 [34]. Thus, the e-WOM indicators were considered highly appropriate to explain the latent variables.

Table 2.
Evaluation of the Measurement Model: Electronic Word-of-Mouth.

Latent Variable	Indicators	Mean	S.D.	Skewness	Kurtosis	Loading	R-sq	Alpha	ρ_A	ρ_C	AVE
E-WOM								0.931	0.933	0.948	0.784
	WOM1	4.192	0.682	-0.311	-0.670	0.863	0.745				
	WOM2	4.315	0.613	-0.376	-0.296	0.877	0.769				
	WOM3	4.230	0.687	-0.52	-0.084	0.895	0.801				
	WOM4	4.235	0.583	-0.393	1.119	0.906	0.821				
	WOM6	4.247	0.567	-0.117	0.035	0.886	0.785				

Note: Alpha, Cronbach's alpha; AVE, average variance extracted.

Table 3 shows that all influencer marketing indicators had a normal distribution according to skewness, whereby kurtosis statistics were close to zero and consistent with the criteria from Schumacker and Lomax [33] specifying that the skewness and kurtosis of normal distribution data should be between +/-1 and +/-1.5, respectively. This implies that the collected data was appropriate for parametric statistical analysis. The reliability of the influencer marketing constructs was evaluated by Cronbach's alpha (α), and the results revealed that the reliability coefficient of all constructs was 0.929, meeting the criterion of 0.7. The composite reliability values were measured by ρ_A , (0.932) and ρ_C (0.946), and the results met the threshold of 0.7 [34]. Convergent validity validated by AVE revealed that influencer marketing constructs' AVE surpassed the criterion of 0.5 [34]. Thus, the influencer marketing indicators were considered highly appropriate to explain the latent variables.

Table 3.
Evaluation of the Measurement Model: Influencer Marketing.

Latent Variable	Indicators	Mean	S.D.	Skewness	Kurtosis	Loading	R-sq	Alpha	ρ_A	ρ_C	AVE
INF								0.929	0.932	0.946	0.778
	INF1	4.237	0.558	-0.246	1.052	0.829	0.687				
	INF2	4.105	0.659	-0.326	0.07	0.797	0.635				
	INF3	4.095	0.645	-0.204	-0.196	0.831	0.691				
	INF4	4.195	0.55	-0.206	1.266	0.801	0.642				
	INF5	4.205	0.522	0.201	-0.019	0.957	0.916				

Note: Alpha, Cronbach's alpha; AVE, average variance extracted.

Table 4 shows that brand image indicators had a normal distribution according to skewness, whereby kurtosis statistics were close to zero and consistent with the criteria from Schumacker and Lomax [33] specifying that the skewness and kurtosis of normal distribution data should be between +/-1 and +/-1.5, respectively. This implies that the collected data was appropriate for parametric statistical analysis. The reliability of brand image constructs was evaluated by Cronbach's alpha (α), and the results revealed that the reliability coefficient of the brand image constructs was 0.878, meeting the criterion of 0.7. Composite reliability values were measured by ρ_A (0.882) and ρ_C (0.916), and the results met the threshold of 0.7 [34]. Convergent validity validated by AVE revealed that brand image constructs' AVE was 0.731, surpassing the criterion of 0.5 [34]. Thus, all brand image indicators were considered highly appropriate to explain the latent variables.

Table 4.
Evaluation of the Measurement Model: Brand Image.

Latent Variable	Indicators	Mean	S.D.	Skewness	Kurtosis	Loading	R-sq	Alpha	ρ_A	ρ_C	AVE
IMG								0.878	0.882	0.916	0.731
	IMG1	4.117	0.578	-0.322	1.239	0.837	0.701				
	IMG2	4.135	0.554	0.049	0.062	0.826	0.682				
	IMG3	4.168	0.595	-0.073	-0.344	0.863	0.745				
	IMG4	4.192	0.553	0.053	-0.132	0.893	0.797				

Note: Alpha, Cronbach's alpha; AVE, average variance extracted.

Table 5 shows that all intention to purchase art toy indicators had a normal distribution according to skewness, whereby kurtosis statistics were close to zero and consistent with the criteria from Schumacker and Lomax [33] specifying that the skewness and kurtosis of normal distribution data should be between +/-1 and +/-1.5, respectively. This implies that the collected data was appropriate for parametric statistical analysis. The reliability of the intention to purchase art toy constructs was evaluated by Cronbach's alpha (α), and the results revealed that the reliability coefficient of all constructs was 0.917, meeting the criterion of 0.7. The composite reliability values were measured by ρ_A (0.919) and ρ_C (0.948), and the results met the threshold of 0.7 [34]. Convergent validity validated by AVE revealed that each construct's AVE was equal to 0.859, surpassing the criterion of 0.5 [34]. Thus, all intention to purchase art toy indicators were considered highly appropriate to explain the latent variables.

Table 5.
Evaluation of the Measurement Model: Intention to Purchase Art Toys

Latent Variable	Indicators	Mean	S.D.	Skewness	Kurtosis	Loading	R-sq	Alpha	ρ_A	ρ_C	AVE
INT								0.917	0.919	0.948	0.859
	INT2	4.192	0.609	-0.194	-0.165	0.896	0.803				
	INT3	4.152	0.565	-0.067	0.304	0.944	0.891				
	INT4	4.143	0.598	-0.132	-0.010	0.940	0.884				

Note: Alpha, Cronbach's alpha; AVE, average variance extracted.

Discriminant validity was evaluated using the Fornell-Lacker criterion [32]. The result revealed that the square root of the AVE for each latent factor exceeded the correlation coefficient between the two indicators, guaranteeing the discriminant validity of all factors, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6.
Discriminant Validity: Fornell-Lacker Criterion.

	E-WOM	INF	IMG	INT
Electronic Word-of-Mouth (E-WOM)	0.886			
Influencer Marketing (INF)	0.540	0.882		
Brand Image (IMG)	0.589	0.605	0.855	
Intention to Purchase Art Toys (INT)	0.340	0.503	0.543	0.927

4.3. Evaluation of the Structural Model

The main criteria to evaluate the structural model are multicollinearity, the coefficient of determination (R^2), effect size (f^2), predictive relevance (Q2), and model fit [32, 35]. The coefficient of determination (R^2) of the brand image and intention to purchase art toy were equal to 0.463 and 0.295, respectively, as shown in Table 7.

Table 7.
Explained Variance (R^2).

Construct	R^2	Adjusted R^2
Brand Image (IMG)	0.463	0.461
Intention to Purchase Art Toys (INT)	0.295	0.293

The F^2 effect sizes are used to assess the impact of the model, where f^2 values above 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 are considered small, medium, and large effects, respectively. The largest effect size was for IMG on INT (0.418), considered large, followed by INF on IMG (0.217) and E-WOM on IMG (0.180), which were both considered medium, as shown in Table 8.

Table 8.
F^2 Effect Sizes.

Construct	E-WOM	INF	IMG	INT
Electronic Word-of-Mouth (E-WOM)			0.180	
Influencer Marketing (INF)			0.217	
Brand Image (IMG)				0.418

The Q^2 value of this study is greater than 0 for the endogenous latent variable, indicating that the PLS path model possesses strong predictive relevance for the latent variable, as represented in Table 9. The predictive relevance based on the cross-validated redundancy for the latent variables IMG was classified as high (Q^2 >0.35), while INT was classified as medium (Q^2 >0.15), and the predictive power based on the cross-validated commonality of both latent variables was also considered high and medium, respectively. This implies that this model has significant predictive power.

Table 9.
Predictive Relevance (Q^2-value).

	Cross-validated redundancy		Cross-validated commonality	
	Q^2	Prediction Capability	Q^2	Prediction Capability
Brand Image Perception (IMG)	0.443	0.443	0.503	0.503
Intention to Purchase Art Toys (INT)	0.214	0.214	0.326	0.326
Electronic Word-of-Mouth (E-WOM)			0.379	0.379
Influencer Marketing (INF)			0.445	0.445

The overall goodness-of-fit (GOF) of the structural model is assessed by calculating the square root of the product of the mean coefficient of determination (R^2) and the mean commonality (AVE value), obtaining a GOF value of 0.546. As this value is higher than 0.36, it demonstrates a high model fit, Tenenhaus [36], as shown in Table 10.

Table 10.
Goodness-of-Fit (GOF) Results.

Construct	AVE	R^2
Electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM)	0.784	-
Influencer Marketing (INF)	0.778	-
Brand Image (IMG)	0.731	0.463
Intention to Purchase Art Toys (INT)	0.859	0.295
Average values	0.788	0.379
AVE x R^2	0.299	
GOF = $\sqrt{(AVE \times R2)}$	0.546	

As displayed in Tables 11 and 12, e-WOM and influencer marketing directly influence the intention to purchase art toys with a statistical significance of 0.001, while brand image directly affects the intention to purchase art toys with a statistical significance of 0.001. As a result, hypotheses H1a, H1b, and H2 are supported. In terms of indirect effects, e-WOM and influencer marketing have an indirect influence on the intention to purchase art toys, mediated by brand image, with a statistical significance of 0.001. This means that hypotheses H3a and H3b are supported. Figure 2 shows the structural model with statistically significant paths.

Table 11.
Structural Model Results.

Direct Effect Testing	β	S.D.	t-test	P Values	f-sq	Results
E-WOM→IMG (H1a)	0.369	0.075	4.943	0.000	0.418	Supported
INF→IMG (H1b)	0.406	0.080	5.102	0.000	0.217	Supported
IMG→INT (H2)	0.543	0.050	10.955	0.000	0.180	Supported
Indirect Effect Testing	β	S.D.	t-test	P Values	f-sq	Results
E-WOM→IMG→INT (H3a)	0.201	0.044	4.544	0.000	-	Supported
INF→IMG→INT (H3b)	0.220	0.051	4.321	0.000	-	Supported

Table 12.
Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects.

	Brand Image (IMG) R^2 =0.463			Intention to Purchase Art Toys (INT) R^2 =0.295		
	DE	IE	TE	DE	IE	TE
Electronic Word-of-Mouth (E-WOM)	0.369***	-	0.369***	-	0.201***	0.201***
Influencer Marketing (INF)	0.406***	-	0.406***	-	0.220***	0.220***
Brand Image (IMG)				0.543***	-	0.543***

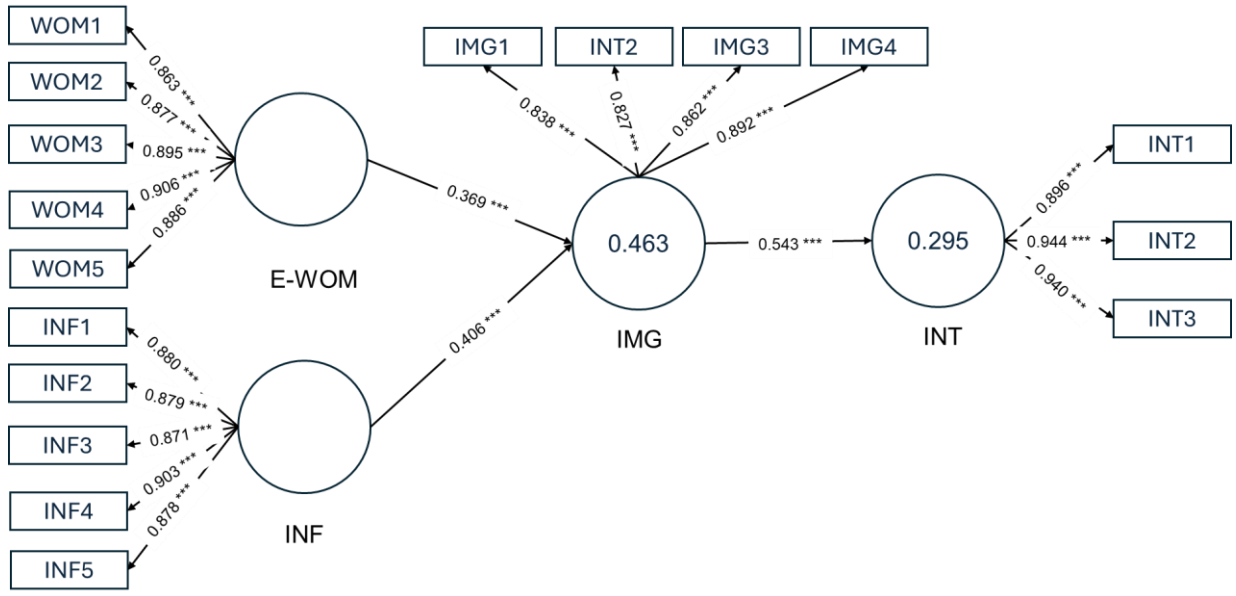


Figure 2.
Structural Model.

4.4. Discussion

The study aims to develop and validate a causal relationship model of antecedents of the intention to purchase art toys with empirical data. The results reveal that this model has high GOF quality, considerable explanatory power, and significant predictive power. This structural equation model is the first to incorporate both e-WOM and influencer marketing as determinants of the purchase intention of art toys, mediated by brand image. In this section, direct and indirect effects will be discussed in detail.

In terms of direct effects, e-WOM and influencer marketing influence the brand image of art toys, which in turn positively influences the intention to purchase art toys. First, e-WOM significantly influences the brand image of art toys by creating consumer perceptions and credibility towards the brand through online consumer reviews, ratings, comments, and recommendations. Because sources of e-WOM are real consumers, potential and existing customers tend to trust such sources since they believe that they are not influenced by the producer. The community usually shares aspects such as excitement about opening a surprise box and receiving secret items. As a result, e-WOM can positively affect brand image through credibility and trust in the information source Siddiqui et al. [12], forming an emotional connection with other consumers Lee et al. [37] and strengthening brand association due to positive reviews [24]. However, negative e-WOM can also jeopardize a brand, with Lee et al. [37] finding that negative e-WOM can limit brand extension initiatives. Marketers of art toys should carefully monitor e-WOM on social media platforms through social listening and prepare crisis management measures to tackle unfavorable situations arising from negative e-WOM.

Influencer marketing has a positive impact on the brand image of art toys because influencers are opinion leaders whose unique positioning and expertise help them to emotionally engage with consumers. The opinions and commentary of influencers shape consumers' perceptions of a brand. Influencers of art toys can include their creators/designers, celebrities, and content creators on social media. Since the art toy concept is a mix of artistic craftsmanship and toys, a variety of influencers can participate in promoting art toys, ranging from famous singers, movie stars, and artists to toy, travel, and

beauty content creators. An example of a global influencer of art toys is Lisa from Blackpink, who regularly posts about new collections or limited editions on her Instagram account and not only collects them as a hobby but also carries some art toys with her in her handbag [4]. This shows that art toys are not only collectible items but also an expression of collectors' own identities. The content created by influencers mostly focuses on the aesthetic look of art toys and how they fit into their daily life activities. The unique positioning and credibility of influencers are transferred to the brand image of art toys, reflecting the trust transfer concept [38]. This applies to the role of influencer marketing, which can shape consumers' perceptions of the brand image of art toys through influencers' positioning and credibility. Wang and Chan-Olmsted [30] mention that the power of influencer marketing can be enhanced by selecting influencers who align well with the brand image and values. As a result, marketers of art toys should carefully choose appropriate influencers who have a strong alignment with the brand image, and they should not be overloaded with brand influencer tasks, especially if they endorse rival or substitute products. One of the major risks in leveraging influencer marketing is authenticity since consumers might be skeptical that the art toy producers hire influencers to promote their products and brands. Arturo and Sophie [39] propose that influencers should strike a balance between commerciality and authenticity.

Brand image has a significant influence on the intention to purchase art toys through shaping consumer perceptions and intentions. Brand images affect consumers' brand choice and loyalty through emotional connection and symbolic representation. Therefore, consumers tend to purchase art toys aligned with their personal identity and aesthetic preferences. This is consistent with Chen et al. [17] mentioning symbolic representation, self-image congruence, and emotional value as three elements of brand image that exert a positive effect on purchase intention. Furthermore, the association of brands with multiple attributes could increase the intention to purchase. Marketers of art toys should plan the brand image positioning and corporate branding as the guiding principles for seeding messages through e-WOM and select the best-fitting influencers aligned with the planned brand positioning to ultimately influence the intention to purchase art toys.

In terms of indirect effects, e-WOM and influencer marketing influence the intention to purchase art toys, mediated by brand image perception. Influencer marketing has the strongest overall effect on the intention to purchase art toys, mediated by brand image. This is partially consistent with Ooi et al. [40], who stated that attitude and trust in the brand mediate the effect of influencers on purchase intention. Martínez-López et al. [41] suggest that influencers play a vital role in shaping brand credibility and could lead consumers to start the decision process from information search to post-purchase behaviour. The key aspects that influencers should be aware of are their professionalism and credibility, which can positively affect purchase intention Chen et al. [17] likely because the authenticity and positioning of influencers are transferred to a product's brand image. As a result, influencers should be transparent in disclosing the scope of their brand collaboration with followers to maintain or enhance their credibility. Chen et al. [17] recommended that influencers should not over-endorse the brand because this will deteriorate brand image and thus reduce purchase intention. The mediating effect of brand image on the relationship between influencer marketing and the intention to purchase art toys has been unexplored in the past, with this study shedding new light on this mediator. Moreover, e-WOM has an impact on the intention to purchase art toys through brand image, which is partly consistent with findings suggesting that brand image partially mediates the influence of e-WOM on online purchase intention Hoang and Tung [42] and Prastiwi and Aminah [43] reinforce the notion that e-WOM influences brand and corporate image, which in turn mediates the relationship between e-WOM and consumers' likelihood of purchasing. Therefore, marketers should encourage consumers to share more positive experiences towards the brand by spreading favorable stories to increase consumers' intention to purchase [44]. While marketers might not be able to directly control e-WOM because it naturally occurs in the online community or via social media, they should monitor both positive and negative comments and prepare a crisis communication plan to tackle any corporate mistakes or misunderstandings.

5. Research Implications

5.1. Theoretical Implications

The implications of this research can be divided into theoretical and managerial aspects. In terms of theoretical implications, first, this study opens a new perspective on the determinants of the intention to purchase art toys with the previously unexplored factors of e-WOM and influencer marketing in the same causal model, mediated by brand image. Previous research has focused on the direct or indirect influence of either e-WOM or influencer marketing on purchase intention but has not created a model considering the combined impact of these two variables. Most art toy producers focus on both e-WOM and influencer marketing in the launch of new collections since both strategic online initiatives shape the brand image and hence increase purchase intention. Both e-WOM and influencer marketing together lead to brand image significantly and positively influencing purchase intention. Second, this study identifies brand image as playing a mediating role between marketing initiatives and the intention to purchase, whereas prior studies have mainly emphasized the direct impact. Brand image plays a strong mediating role because all marketing efforts – especially e-WOM and influencer marketing – form consumers' perceptions towards a brand, whereby increased brand image perception promotes higher loyalty among target consumers. Third, this study provides new contextual insights into brand image formation, highlighting that brand building in the digital world is derived from community interactions and influencer storytelling, which is considered a unique space for art toys.

5.2. Managerial Implications

In terms of managerial implications, first, influencer marketing exerts a stronger impact on both brand image and the intention to purchase art toys. Influencer marketing has become a crucial marketing initiative for art toys because influencers can build brand image and persuade consumers to purchase art toys based on their unique characteristics and perceived expertise. There are various types of influencers, from celebrities, artists, and content creators to art toy characters such as Butter Bear. Given

that influencer marketing also has certain risks, marketers should select influencers who align with art toys' product positioning to transfer their trust and credibility to the brand. Moreover, influencers themselves should be transparent in communicating their roles as brand ambassadors and not overly promote the brand. Second, e-WOM reaches a wider target audience group through social media platforms including TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube. This initiative is considered user-generated content, whereby other consumers tend to resonate well with their opinions. The excitement of opening surprise boxes is echoed by many consumers' experience reviews. Marketers should monitor online community discussions carefully to understand the sentiments of their members. If there are misunderstandings about the brand, they can provide clarifications with transparency and authenticity. In addition, marketers could take part in the community by supporting community activities such as offline gatherings among members, exhibitions, education sessions, and special meetings with artists. Third, influencer marketing and e-WOM should not be present in isolation because these two initiatives complement each other to build brand image. Marketers should plan the right strategy for both efforts at the same time, aligned with the brand positioning of art toys as part of a holistic online campaign together with other communication tools. Hence, marketers should not look at e-WOM and influencer marketing in isolation but rather consider how they can support each other to create synergy for art toy campaigns. For example, community members might be interested in inviting artists or other influencers to engage in a discussion with community members to share their opinions and experiences. The followers of both influencers and community members would benefit from the content and spread positivity about the brand to the wider groups of consumers and online followers.

6. Conclusion

This work is the first to study the factors affecting the intention to purchase art toys by finding a combined influence of e-WOM and influencer marketing, mediated by brand image. This model offers both theoretical and managerial implications for art toy manufacturers to incorporate e-WOM and influencer marketing to increase purchase intention for art toys, with transferable findings for similar niche markets of other collectible products. Overall, it is suggested that e-WOM and influencer marketing should work together to create multiplier effects for the brand to positively influence the purchase intention of art toys.

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