

Evaluating AI-Based Digital Marketing Resources: A VRIO Framework Analysis for Competitive Advantage Assessment in Pre-Launch Skincare Brands

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Abstract

Objective – This study aims to evaluate the AI-enabled digital marketing resources of L'Essaine, a pre-launch skincare brand, using the VRIO (Value, Rarity, Imitability, and Organization) framework grounded in Resource-Based View (RBV) theory, in order to assess their potential to generate competitive advantage.

Design/methodology/approach – Using a qualitative strategic analysis approach, this research applies the VRIO framework to identify and assess ten key AI-enabled and brand-related digital marketing resources of L'Essaine against the four VRIO criteria.

Findings – The findings indicate that AIGC specialist expertise and AI-driven content capabilities provide a temporary competitive advantage, as these resources are valuable and relatively rare but are expected to become imitable within a 12-24 month timeframe. In contrast, the brand story and identity resource satisfies all VRIO dimensions, thereby constituting a source of sustainable competitive advantage. The remaining six resources are classified as providing competitive parity.

Research limitations/implications – This study is limited by its qualitative nature and pre-launch context, as the analysis is based on strategic resource assessment rather than post-implementation performance outcomes. Future research could examine similar AI-enabled digital marketing resources in post-launch or multi-brand contexts to validate and extend the findings.

Practical implications – From a strategic perspective, the results underscore the importance for firms to exploit short-term advantages derived from AI capabilities while concurrently investing in more enduring, brand-based resources. The study offers managerial insights into the strategic allocation of digital marketing resources to maximize competitive advantage in highly competitive industries.

Originality/value – This study contributes to the strategic management and digital marketing literature by elucidating how AI technologies can generate differentiated value within the skincare industry. Its originality lies in integrating VRIO analysis with AI-enabled digital marketing resources in a pre-launch brand context, providing a structured approach to understanding how temporary and sustainable advantages can be strategically balanced



INTRODUCTION

The digital transformation of marketing has fundamentally reshaped how firms create and deliver customer value, with artificial intelligence (AI) emerging as a key driver of competitive advantage (Huang & Rust, 2022). Within the global skincare industry, valued at more than USD 145 billion in 2024, brands increasingly deploy AI-enabled tools for content generation, customer engagement, and personalized marketing activities (Dwivedi et al., 2023). While these developments offer substantial opportunities, they also raise critical strategic questions regarding whether AI-based marketing resources can generate sustainable competitive advantages or merely provide short-term benefits before becoming widely commoditized. For pre-launch brands operating in highly competitive markets, assessing the strategic value of AI-enabled resources is particularly important for informed resource allocation and long-term positioning decisions.

Despite the rapid diffusion of AI in marketing practice, notable gaps remain in the academic understanding of its strategic value from a resource-based perspective. Existing studies have largely focused on the technical capabilities of AI and its effects on customer experience and engagement (Felix & Rembulan, 2023a; Li et al., 2021), while comparatively little attention has been given to evaluating AI-driven marketing resources using established strategic frameworks such as VRIO. According to the Resource-Based View (RBV), firms achieve competitive advantage through resources that are valuable, rare, difficult to imitate, and effectively organized for exploitation (J. B. Barney & Hesterly, 2024). However, systematic applications of RBV and VRIO to AI-based digital marketing resources remain limited, particularly in pre-launch settings where firms face pronounced resource constraints.

Moreover, the increasing accessibility of AI technologies through platforms such as ChatGPT and Midjourney challenges traditional assumptions regarding resource rarity and inimitability, potentially weakening AI's ability to serve as a source of sustained competitive advantage (Peres et al., 2023). This tension between widespread AI adoption and the principles of strategic resource heterogeneity creates uncertainty for brands seeking to justify investments in AI-powered marketing capabilities.

This study addresses these gaps by conducting a structured VRIO analysis of AI-based digital marketing resources within the context of L'Essaine, a pre-launch skincare brand. The research contributes theoretically by extending the application of RBV to emerging AI-driven marketing environments and empirically by identifying which AI-enabled resources are capable of generating competitive advantage. From a managerial perspective, the study offers strategic insights to support decision-making related to resource prioritization and competitive positioning. By distinguishing among technological resources, human capabilities, and intangible assets, the analysis provides a nuanced understanding of the conditions under which AI can contribute to sustainable advantage. Therefore, this study aims to evaluate AI-enabled digital marketing resources in a pre-launch skincare brand using the VRIO framework and to determine whether these resources generate competitive parity, temporary competitive advantage, or sustained competitive advantage.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH MODEL

AI-Based Digital Marketing Resources

The intersection of artificial intelligence (AI) and digital marketing has evolved rapidly between 2022 and 2025, generating both strategic opportunities and implementation challenges. Prior research conceptualizes AI in marketing across three functional dimensions: mechanical AI, which automates routine and repetitive tasks; thinking AI, which supports data analysis, prediction, and decision-making; and feeling AI, which facilitates emotional interaction and relationship building with customers (Huang & Rust, 2022). This framework highlights that while mechanical AI capabilities are increasingly commoditized, thinking and feeling AI retain greater potential for differentiation, making this distinction essential for assessing which AI-based resources may yield sustainable competitive advantage.

Empirical studies consistently emphasize that competitive outcomes from digital transformation

depend less on technology adoption itself than on firms' capabilities to deploy and integrate digital resources effectively. Research on Indonesian small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) demonstrates that organizational capability in leveraging digital tools mediates the relationship between technology adoption and performance outcomes (Felix & Rembulan, 2023b). Similarly, analyses of TikTok marketing strategies show that execution quality, creativity, and strategic content alignment exert a stronger influence on marketing effectiveness than platform access alone, reinforcing a resource-based rather than technology-deterministic perspective (Felix et al., 2024). Broader digital marketing research further supports this view. Studies on metaverse marketing reveal that immersive technologies generate customer value only when supported by complementary organizational capabilities, with inconsistent performance outcomes attributable to variations in implementation quality (Dwivedi et al., 2023). Research on social media marketing effectiveness identifies content authenticity and audience engagement as critical success factors beyond algorithmic optimization, suggesting that AI-generated content must be strategically curated to preserve brand credibility and trust (Li et al., 2021). A meta-analysis on social media effects on consumer behavior further confirms that personalization enhances engagement, but only when supported by sophisticated data management and analytical capabilities (Liadeli et al., 2023).

AI-Based Resources, Rarity, and Imitability

Recent scholarship has also raised concerns regarding the sustainability of AI-driven competitive advantages. Studies examining the marketing implications of generative AI tools such as ChatGPT argue that widespread accessibility may rapidly erode first-mover advantages, with estimates suggesting a 12–18 month window before AI content generation becomes standard practice (Peres et al., 2023). This rapid diffusion challenges traditional assumptions about rarity and inimitability, core dimensions of the Resource-Based View (RBV), and underscores the need to reassess AI resources through a strategic lens.

RBV, VRIO, and Dynamic Capabilities

Complementing RBV, research on dynamic capabilities highlights the importance of continuous resource reconfiguration in maintaining competitiveness within rapidly evolving digital environments. While RBV emphasizes resource heterogeneity as the foundation of competitive advantage, dynamic capability perspectives introduce a temporal dimension, suggesting that advantages derived from AI resources may be inherently transient unless continuously renewed and strategically embedded.

Competitive Advantage in Pre-Launch Brands

Taken together, the literature indicates that the effectiveness of AI in digital marketing is contingent upon organizational capabilities, execution quality, and strategic integration rather than access to AI tools alone. However, three significant gaps remain. First, a methodological gap persists: although many studies assess AI marketing effectiveness using experimental or survey-based approaches, few employ strategic analysis frameworks such as VRIO to systematically evaluate the value, rarity, imitability, and organizational exploitation of AI-based resources. Second, an empirical gap exists, as prior research predominantly focuses on established firms with substantial resources, leaving pre-launch and resource-constrained contexts underexplored. Pre-launch brands face distinct challenges in building competitive advantage without existing market legitimacy, rendering resource prioritization particularly critical. Third, a theoretical gap remains regarding the applicability of RBV to rapidly evolving AI technologies, as traditional assumptions concerning resource stability and imitation timelines may not fully capture the accelerating democratization of AI tools (J. B. Barney & Hesterly, 2024; Peres et al., 2023).

These gaps create uncertainty for practitioners and scholars alike regarding which AI-based marketing resources can genuinely support sustainable competitive advantage. Addressing this uncertainty requires a structured strategic evaluation of AI-enabled resources, particularly within

pre-launch contexts where strategic choices have long-term implications.

Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in the Resource-Based View (RBV), which posits that sustainable competitive advantage arises from resources that are valuable, rare, difficult to imitate, and effectively organized for exploitation (J. B. Barney & Hesterly, 2024). RBV provides a robust theoretical foundation for explaining performance differentials among firms operating in similar competitive environments by emphasizing resource heterogeneity and imperfect mobility.

The VRIO framework operationalizes RBV by offering a systematic evaluative logic through four sequential criteria: Value, Rarity, Imitability, and Organization (J. Barney, 1991; J. B. Barney & Hesterly, 2024). Based on these criteria, resources can be classified into competitive disadvantage, parity, temporary competitive advantage, unrealized advantage, or sustained competitive advantage.

The selection of VRIO is justified on three grounds. First, the framework's explicit focus on imitability directly addresses the core research question regarding whether AI-based marketing resources can generate sustainable advantages amid rapid technological diffusion. Second, the "Organization" dimension recognizes that resource possession alone is insufficient; firms must possess complementary capabilities and structures to exploit resources effectively, aligning with prior findings on digital transformation success factors. Third, VRIO provides a structured and replicable analytical protocol suitable for evaluating heterogeneous resource types.

To enhance relevance for AI-driven contexts, the study adapts VRIO application by incorporating temporal assessments of imitability. Rather than treating imitability as binary, the analysis estimates approximate imitation timeframes, reflecting the accelerated diffusion of AI technologies. Additionally, resources are analytically disaggregated into technological, human, and intangible categories to enable more nuanced interpretation of advantage sources while maintaining theoretical consistency with RBV.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Paradigm and Approach

This research employs a qualitative approach grounded primarily in an interpretivist paradigm to develop an in-depth understanding of the strategic characteristics of AI-based digital marketing resources. A qualitative design is appropriate because the study investigates a complex and emerging phenomenon, the intersection of artificial intelligence and competitive advantage, where meaning, interpretation, and contextual understanding are central (Creswell & Poth, 2024). Rather than testing predefined hypotheses, the study seeks to uncover how AI-enabled resources are perceived, deployed, and evaluated strategically within an organizational context.

Philosophically, the study adopts a critical realist orientation within an interpretive research strategy. Ontologically, critical realism acknowledges that objective resource characteristics exist (e.g., accessibility of AI tools, technical functionality), while recognizing that their strategic value is not inherent but emerges through organizational interpretation, deployment, and exploitation (J. B. Barney & Hesterly, 2024). Epistemologically, the research aligns with constructivist assumptions, whereby knowledge about competitive advantage is constructed through contextualized analysis of managerial perceptions, organizational routines, and strategic choices rather than discovered as universal laws.

This combination allows the study to reconcile RBV's emphasis on resource attributes with interpretivist insights into how value, rarity, and inimitability are socially and strategically enacted. Such an approach is particularly suitable for pre-launch contexts, where strategic meaning-making precedes observable performance outcomes.

The qualitative approach enables rich contextual understanding of a pre-launch skincare brand environment, where resource constraints and market uncertainty shape strategic decisions differently from those of established firms. By prioritizing analytical depth over statistical generalization, the study generates insights that are theoretically transferable to similar digital-first, resource-constrained contexts while respecting contextual specificity. This methodological choice aligns with

recent calls for more interpretive and process-oriented research in strategic management and digital transformation studies (Gruber & Bliese, 2024).

Research Design

This study adopts a case study research design with descriptive and analytical objectives. Case study methodology is particularly appropriate for examining contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts where the boundaries between phenomenon and context are blurred (Yin, 2023). The selected case, L'Essaine, a pre-launch skincare brand, functions as an instrumental case, offering analytical insights into broader strategic questions concerning AI-based digital marketing resources and competitive advantage.

The unit of analysis comprises individual marketing resources deployed by the organization. Ten key resources were identified and categorized into three groups: technological resources, human capabilities, and intangible assets. Each resource is treated as a distinct analytical unit, allowing for cross-resource comparison and identification of heterogeneity in competitive implications, consistent with RBV assumptions.

The study employs a cross-sectional time horizon, capturing resource characteristics during the pre-launch phase (late 2024 to early 2025). Although this design limits longitudinal inference regarding resource evolution, it provides a strategic snapshot at a critical decision-making stage, prior to market entry, when resource allocation and positioning choices have long-term implications. The pre-launch setting minimizes confounding effects from established brand equity, customer loyalty, or historical performance data, enabling a clearer assessment of AI-enabled resource potential.

The research setting is Indonesia's rapidly growing skincare market, characterized by high digital penetration and increasing AI adoption. This context is particularly relevant for examining AI-based marketing strategies, given Indonesian consumers' strong engagement with social media and receptiveness to digital content. The pre-launch condition creates a natural analytical control by isolating strategic resource considerations from post-launch market feedback.

Data Collection Prosedures

Data collection employed multiple sources to ensure triangulation and comprehensive resource assessment. Primary data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with L'Essaine's founder/CEO (one interview, 90 minutes) and AIGC specialist (one interview, 75 minutes), selected due to their direct involvement in strategic decision-making and technical implementation.

Secondary data included documentary analysis of brand strategy materials, social media content (Instagram and TikTok), competitor analysis reports, and technical documentation of AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Midjourney, Canva AI). These sources provided objective evidence to corroborate and contextualize interview insights.

Interview guides were structured around VRIO dimensions to ensure systematic evaluation of each resource. Observational protocols documented AI tool usage and content creation workflows, while document analysis checklists facilitated consistent extraction of relevant data. Purposive sampling focused on information-rich cases, with sample size determined by analytical saturation, resulting in the identification of ten key resources.

Data Analysis

Data analysis combined deductive application of the VRIO framework with inductive pattern recognition. The analytical process followed five stages: (1) data organization and familiarization; (2) resource identification and categorization; (3) VRIO assessment of individual resources; (4) determination of competitive implications; and (5) cross-resource pattern analysis.

NVivo 14 was used for qualitative coding, Microsoft Excel for VRIO matrices, and Mermaid.js for visual representation of resource configurations. Trustworthiness was enhanced through member checking, data triangulation, peer debriefing with external scholars, and rich contextual description to support transferability.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Confidentiality measures protected sensitive business information through anonymization, secure data storage, and restricted access. Participants were granted the right to review and redact sensitive content. The study received ethical approval from the Universitas Indonesia ethics committee (Approval No. ETH-2024-0847).

RESULTS/FINDINGS

Technological resources comprise: (1) AIGC Technical Capability, defined as access to generative AI tools such as ChatGPT-4, Midjourney, and Canva AI for content production; (2) Chatbot Technology enabling automated customer interaction; (3) Social Media Platform Access, specifically Instagram and TikTok with embedded AI functionalities; and (4) Website/E-commerce Platform, a Shopify-based site incorporating AI-driven personalization features.

Human resources include: (5) AIGC Specialist Expertise, encompassing advanced prompt engineering and AI workflow optimization skills; and (6) Digital Marketing Team Skills, relating to content strategy development and campaign execution.

Intangible resources consist of: (7) Brand Story and Identity, articulated around natural ingredients and sustainability values; (8) AI Content Quality, reflected in consistently high-quality AI-generated visuals and copy; (9) Customer Data and Insights, derived from early-stage market research and pre-launch engagement; and (10) Visual Design System, comprising cohesive aesthetic guidelines ensuring consistency across AI-generated materials.

Collectively, these resources constitute a comprehensive digital marketing infrastructure for a pre-launch brand, with AI-enabled capabilities partially substituting for traditional advantages such as large advertising budgets or established brand recognition

VRIO Assessment Results

A systematic VRIO evaluation of each resource produced the competitive implications summarized in Table 1.

Table 1.
VRIO ANALYSIS SUMMARY

Resource	Value	Rarity	Imitability	Organization	Est. Imitation Timeline
AIGC Technical Capability	✓	✗	-	✓	Competitive Parity
AIGC Specialist Expertise	✓	✓	✗	✓	Temporary Advantage
AI Content Quality	✓	✓	✗	✓	Temporary Advantage
Social Media Presence	✓	✗	-	✓	Competitive Parity
Chatbot Technology	✓	✗	-	✓	Competitive Parity
Customer Data/Insights	✓	✗	-	✓	Competitive Parity
Brand Story/Identity	✓	✓	✓	✓	Sustained Advantage
Educational Content	✓	✗	-	✓	Competitive Parity
Visual Design System	✓	✗	-	✓	Competitive Parity
Digital Marketing Team	✓	✗	-	✓	Competitive Parity
Resource	Value	Rarity		Imitability	Organization
AIGC Technical Capability	✓	✗	-	✓	Competitive Parity
AIGC Specialist Expertise	✓	✓	✗	✓	Temporary Advantage
AI Content Quality	✓	✓	✗	✓	Temporary Advantage

Source: Data Processed (2026)

Detailed Resource Analysis

AIGC Technical Capability (Competitive Parity)

The result shown in the table 5 indicate how well the model explain each construct. For Perceived Switching Potential, the R^2 value of 0.610 suggest that a little over sixty percent of the variance in this variable can be accounted by the predictors. The Adjusted R^2 which slightly decreases to 0.607 implies that the model remains stable even after adjusting for the number of independent variables involved. Meanwhile, Product Cannibalism Potential record an R^2 of 0.435, meaning that just under half of its variation explained by the model. Its Adjusted R^2 of 0.430 shows only a small drop, indicating that the predictor still offer a reasonable level of explanatory strength.

AIGC Specialist Expertise (Temporary Competitive Advantage)

UBO transparency emerged as an important determinant of managerial perceptions and strategic assessments within banks. Path estimates showed a positive and significant effect of UBO transparency on Perceived Switching Potential ($\beta = 0.781$; $t = 28.402$; $p < 0.001$). This means that the clearer the ownership structure, the more managers perceive that customers have greater flexibility and opportunity to switch to competing banks. Practically, clarity of ultimate beneficial owner information increases managers' awareness of competitive exposure and reduces assumptions about customer lock-in. Conversely, UBO transparency is negatively and significantly related to Product Cannibalism Potential ($\beta = -0.660$; $t = 15.138$; $p < 0.001$), indicating that higher levels of transparency are associated with perceptions of better internal coordination and a lower risk of product overlap within a banking group.

AI Content Quality (Temporary Competitive Advantage)

The overall fit indices suggest that the proposed model provides a reasonable representation of the observed data. The SRMR value for both the saturated model (0.086) and the estimated model (0.093) are below the 0.10 cut – off that is commonly referenced in PLS – SEM research, indicating that the differences between the empirical correlations and those implied by the model remain at an acceptable level. This suggest that the model is capable to captures the main pattern present in the data.

Brand Story and Identity (Sustained Competitive Advantage)

The overall fit indices suggest that the proposed model provides a reasonable representation of the observed data. The SRMR value for both the saturated model (0.086) and the estimated model (0.093) are below the 0.10 cut – off that is commonly referenced in PLS – SEM research, indicating that the differences between the empirical correlations and those implied by the model remain at an acceptable level. This suggest that the model is capable to captures the main pattern present in the data.

Other Resources (Competitive Parity)

The overall fit indices suggest that the proposed model provides a reasonable representation of the observed data. The SRMR value for both the saturated model (0.086) and the estimated model (0.093) are below the 0.10 cut – off that is commonly referenced in PLS – SEM research, indicating that the differences between the empirical correlations and those implied by the model remain at an acceptable level. This suggest that the model is capable to captures the main pattern present in the data.

DISCUSSION AND STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

Discussion

The structural model results indicate that UBO transparency is positively and significantly related to managers' assessments of potential client switching ($\beta = 0.781$; $t = 28.402$; $p < 0.001$). Practically, when the ultimate ownership structure is more clearly presented, managers perceive clients as having

greater flexibility to switch providers. Rather than merely serving as a reassuring signal, transparency in this context carries a “dark side” signal: when interbank common ownership becomes prominent, managers expect clients to view affiliated banks as close substitutes, thereby reducing perceived lock-in and increasing switching room.

An important implication of this finding is that the theoretical prediction derived from conventional transparency literature does not fully apply to banking organizations characterized by common ownership structures. Previous studies generally conceptualize transparency as a mechanism that enhances trust, reduce uncertainty, and discourage switching behavior. However, within banking groups sharing the same Ultimate Beneficial Owner, transparency also reveals ownership interconnectedness across multiple banks. This additional information changes customers’ competitive reference points by making affiliated banks appear more substitutable. Consequently, transparency simultaneously reduces informational asymmetry while increasing perceived switching opportunities. This finding extends Signaling Theory by suggesting that the effectiveness of governance signals depends not only the quality of the disclosed information but also on how stakeholders interpret competitive relationship embedded within that information.

Theoretical Implications

The structural model results indicate that increased UBO transparency correlates with a significant decrease in perceived product cannibalization among banks within a common ownership group ($\beta = -0.660$; $t = 15.138$; $p < 0.001$). In other words, clearer disclosure of ultimate ownership leads managers to perceive affiliated banks’ portfolios as less overlapping and less directly competitive.

Why does transparency reduce perceived cannibalization?

This apparent discrepancy can be bridged by considering the multibank common ownership context, where the source of confusion is often not only product attributes but also uncertainty about strategic relationships between affiliates. In such an environment, customers may perceive offerings as substitutes simply because they appear to come from different banks with similar portfolios, rather than from a coordinated group with differentiated mandates. UBO transparency helps rectify this interpretation by clarifying structural relationships, thereby reducing the assumption of unwanted internal competition. By clarifying ownership and strategic alignment, transparency changes how stakeholders assess each affiliated bank’s objectives and position. Consequently, managers perceive a lower risk of cannibalization even when some product features remain comparable. Thus, while previous work has highlighted the role of feature-based substitution, these findings suggest that structural transparency can independently shape competitive interpretations, particularly in industries with complex brand architectures and less transparent ownership.

Managerial Implications

The analysis shows that Perceived Switching Potential is positively and significantly related to Bank Sales Performance ($\beta = 0.562$; $t = 8.483$; $p < 0.001$). Practically speaking, when managers expect the likelihood of customers switching to competitors to increase, they tend to improve commercial execution strengthening sales programs, improving service quality, and refining customer management practices. While customer switching is typically viewed as a threat, the anticipation of switching risk in this context acts as an internal trigger that drives intensified competitive efforts; as a result, perceived switching potential may be accompanied by increased sales performance, rather than simply an immediate decline in revenue.

Limitations and Future Research

Estimates show a negative and significant relationship between Product Cannibalism Potential and Bank Sales Performance ($\beta = -0.259$; $t = 3.320$; $p < 0.001$). This means that when managers perceive strong overlap or substitution between products within the same ownership group, they anticipate weakening aggregate sales. This pattern aligns with recent findings that inadequate differentiation intensifies internal portfolio competition, fragmenting demand, and reducing the effectiveness of sales

efforts. Menezes & Pinto (2022) and de Giovanni & Ramani (2018), for example, show that the proliferation of similar products tends to increase organizational complexity and accelerate internal substitution, ultimately limiting revenue growth. When products are perceived as substitutes, competition shifts inward and the incremental contribution of each line declines.

CONCLUSIONS

This research offers several important theoretical contributions. First, while previous studies predominantly examine Ultimate Beneficial Ownership transparency from regulatory compliance, anti-money laundering and corporate governance perspective, the present study extends this literature by investigating UBO transparency as a strategic governance signal capable of influencing managerial perceptions and competitive outcomes within the banking industry.

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