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Analyzing the Impact of Influencer Authenticity on Consumer Trust and Purchasing Behavior

Dr. S. Vijayalakshmi¹

Assistant Professor, Erode Arts & Science College, Rangamapalayam

Kiruthika. M²

Ph.D Part Time, Erode Arts & Science College, Rangamapalayam

ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of social media platforms has transformed influencer marketing into a powerful tool for shaping consumer perceptions and purchasing decisions. This study analyzes the impact of influencer authenticity on consumer trust and purchasing behavior. Influencer authenticity, defined as the perceived genuineness, transparency, credibility, and consistency of influencers, plays a critical role in building meaningful relationships with audiences. Drawing on theories of source credibility and parasocial interaction, the research examines how authentic self-presentation enhances consumer trust and strengthens purchase intentions. The study utilizes a quantitative research design, collecting survey data from active social media users who engage with influencers on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. Statistical analysis reveals a significant positive relationship between perceived influencer authenticity and consumer trust, which in turn mediates purchasing behavior. The findings suggest that authenticity serves as a key determinant of marketing effectiveness, as consumers are more likely to support influencers they perceive as honest and relatable. This research contributes to the growing body of literature on digital marketing by highlighting authenticity as a strategic asset for brands and influencers seeking to foster long-term consumer relationships and drive sales outcomes.

Keywords: Social Media, Consumer Buying Behaviour, Social Proof, Targeted Advertising, E-Commerce Integration, Influencer Marketing, AI Recommendations, Augmented Reality, Sustainability and Digital Marketing

Introduction

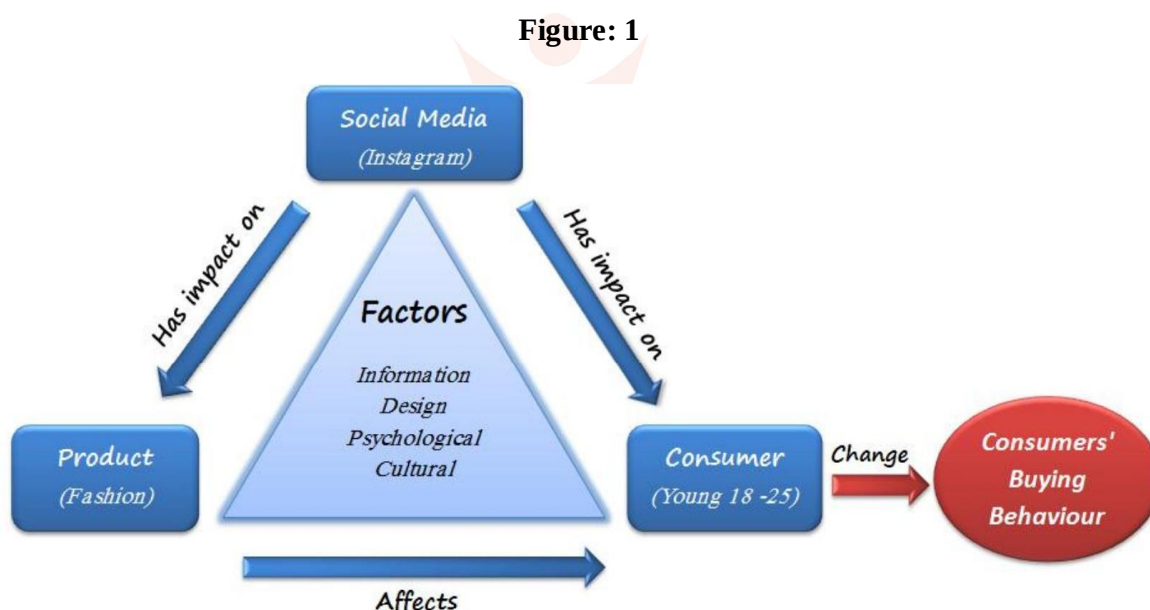
In the past two decades, social media has become one of the strongest influencing factors in regards to how consumers behave. Since the advent of platforms like Face book, Instagram, Twitter (X), TikTok, LinkedIn, and YouTube which boast of billions of subscribers in different parts of the world, companies have discovered new strategically ways of relating to their potential customers. The aspect that makes social media a completely different marketing

environment is not unlike traditional forms of marketing, it is that it offers two-way communication, immediate feedback, user generated material and targeted advertising making it an ever-changing environment where consumer decisions are continually shaped and reshaped. The paper will discuss how social media influences consumer buying behavior based on its decision-making processes, how social media marketing strategies influence people, peer recommendations and reviews, influencer marketing, personalization, psychological triggers, and their possible limitations such as misinformation and lack of privacy. The presentation also has an assessment of the trends that will influence the future consumer purchasing behavior in a digital-first economy.

Understanding Consumer Buying Behaviour

Consumer buying behavior refers to the psychological, emotional, and social processes that individuals go through before, during, and after making a purchase. Traditionally, this process has been studied through the consumer decision-making model, which involves five stages: Social media plays a crucial role in each of these stages. From identifying needs through targeted advertisements, gathering product reviews on YouTube, comparing alternatives on Instagram, making purchases via integrated shopping features, and sharing feedback through online posts, the consumer decision-making process has become deeply intertwined with social media platforms.

Figure: 1



1. Problem Recognition

Problem recognition is the first stage of the consumer decision-making process and occurs when a consumer identifies a gap between their current state and a desired state. Social media plays a major role in triggering this recognition by constantly exposing users to inspirational lifestyles, trending products, and targeted advertisements. For instance, an Instagram user may not realize they “need” a new skincare product until they see an influencer promoting it as essential for healthy skin. Similarly, TikTok trends like “must-have gadgets” create awareness of products that consumers were previously unaware of. This stage is often emotional, driven by

comparisons with peers or influencers online. Platforms utilize algorithms to ensure that consumers are exposed to content that resonates with their interests, subtly planting seeds of desire. Thus, social media transforms latent needs into active wants, making problem recognition more frequent and impulsive than in traditional buying contexts.

2. Information Search

Once a need has been identified, consumers turn to social media for information gathering. Unlike traditional search methods, social media offers a blend of expert opinions, peer reviews, and user-generated content that consumers perceive as authentic and trustworthy. Platforms such as YouTube host detailed product reviews and unboxing videos, while Instagram hashtags and Pinterest boards provide visual inspiration. Facebook groups and Reddit communities allow discussions, where consumers can ask questions and receive feedback from real users. Influencers also serve as key information providers by showcasing product features in relatable contexts. Importantly, algorithms personalize content by showing consumers posts and ads relevant to their search history, speeding up the process. This abundance of readily available, user-driven information reduces uncertainty and builds confidence before making a purchase. Therefore, social media has become one of the most dominant information sources for consumers during the buying journey.

3. Evaluation of Alternatives

During the evaluation stage, consumers compare different options to determine which product best meets their needs. Social media facilitates this process by providing side-by-side comparisons, sponsored product reviews, and detailed consumer testimonials. For example, YouTube “comparison videos” often analyze the pros and cons of competing brands, while TikTok creators highlight unique features in short, engaging clips. Social proof likes, shares, and positive comments also influence evaluations by signaling product popularity and credibility. Brands often encourage user-generated content, such as customers posting photos or reviews, to provide additional reassurance. Influencers play a role by offering authentic insights that make evaluations more relatable. Unlike traditional advertising, where consumers relied solely on company-driven messages, social media allows them to access multiple perspectives instantly. This makes the evaluation process more transparent but also more complex, as consumers are exposed to an overwhelming number of choices and opinions.

4. Purchase Decision

The purchase decision stage is where consumers finally select a product and complete the transaction. Social media significantly accelerates this stage by integrating shopping features directly into platforms. For example, Instagram and Facebook offer “Shop Now” options, while TikTok and Pinterest have partnered with e-commerce platforms to enable in-app purchases. Emotional triggers such as limited-time discounts, flash sales, or scarcity messages (e.g., “Only 3 left in stock!”) influence consumer urgency and drive impulse buying. Influencer endorsements can tip the balance at this stage, especially when the consumer is hesitant between similar options. Retargeting ads, which remind users of products they previously viewed, further encourage conversion. In contrast to traditional buying behavior, where consumers might take days or weeks to finalize a decision, social media often shortens this timeframe to just minutes. Thus, social platforms transform purchase decisions into faster, more emotional, and more convenient actions.

5. Post-Purchase Evaluation

The purchase is not the end of consumer choice process since the post-purchase evaluation, whereby buyers dwell on whether they were satisfied by their decision or not. Social media has a considerable influence on this phase since customers regularly post their experiences there in the form of reviews, testimonials, or posts. A pleasant experience can create a user-generated content which helps to popularize the brand, whereas the information about the negative experience can be easily shared, and destroy a business reputation. As an example, unsatisfied customers can publish posts on TIKTOK (X) or record videos on Twitter stating the flaws and affecting prospective consumers. Brands incorporate consumers into the brand relationship process after the purchase by replying to the reviews, giving consumer support through direct messaging, or reposting of positive consumer approved user content to build loyalty. The social media communities have also enabled buyers to do comparisons with other individuals who have bought the same product. Consequently, the post-purchasing phase in social media is not only a mere mirror to the consumer but it is an extended marketing or image-enhancing instrument to companies.

Research Gap and Significance

Despite the considerable volume of research devoted to consumer behavior and digital marketing, the part played by social media as a marketing tool and their multi-dimensional effect on consumer behavior in the buying process is almost unexplored. Previous research has looked into either conventional marketing communication, the adoption of e-commerce, or internet consumer psychology in general, and thus fails to see how social media have quite uniquely combined peer influence, celebrity endorsement, targeted advertising, and interactive shopping elements into the process of the decision making process. Whereas previous studies point out the importance of social proof and trust-building mechanisms others do not compare and contrast two or more particular factors in a systematic fashion, such as massive size of a user base, targeted advertising, visual interest, social proof, and e-commerce integration.

In addition, new tendencies such as AI-powered suggestions, augmented reality shopping, environment-friendliness, and decentralized privacy-centric systems are only at the early stages of their development upon scholarly investigation. Previous studies have not adequately explained the effects of these innovations on the perceptions of the consumers, rate of decision making and subsequent loyalty. This leads to the emergence of a gap in knowledge about the changing dynamics of social media marketing and what this means to the business and consumers.

The importance of the study is that it is of a unified nature. The study of the standard consumer decision-making considerations together with the nature of new technologies that present a disruption in the social media allows marketers, policy makers and scholars to easily understand. It not only provides the information which factors are most influential, but also how they interact to change consumer journeys. Finally, the research establishes the need to have businesses implement ethically responsible, consumer centric and technologically flexible approaches to stay relevant in the fast evolving digital environment.

Objectives

1. To analyze the key factors influencing social media as a marketing channel.
2. To examine the role of social media in shaping consumer buying behavior across decision-making stages.
3. To identify emerging trends in social media marketing and their implications for businesses and consumers.

Analysis, findings and Results

In today's digital era, the success of social media platforms and online businesses is largely shaped by a combination of key factors that influence user engagement and purchasing behavior. A massive user base forms the foundation, as platforms with millions of active users naturally attract greater visibility and brand reach. Targeted advertising further enhances this advantage by delivering personalized content to specific demographics, ensuring relevance and higher conversion rates. Equally important is visual appeal, since eye-catching designs, images, and videos capture attention and create lasting impressions in a highly competitive online space. Another powerful factor is social proof, where reviews, likes, and shares build trust and credibility, influencing potential customers' decisions. Finally, the seamless integration with e-commerce bridges the gap between discovery and purchase, allowing users to shop effortlessly. Together, these factors create a dynamic ecosystem that drives both user satisfaction and business growth. Social media marketing has moved from being a secondary strategy to becoming one of the most dominant ways companies engage with customers. Several factors contribute to this rise:

Table: 1
Factors influencing Social Media as a Marketing Channel

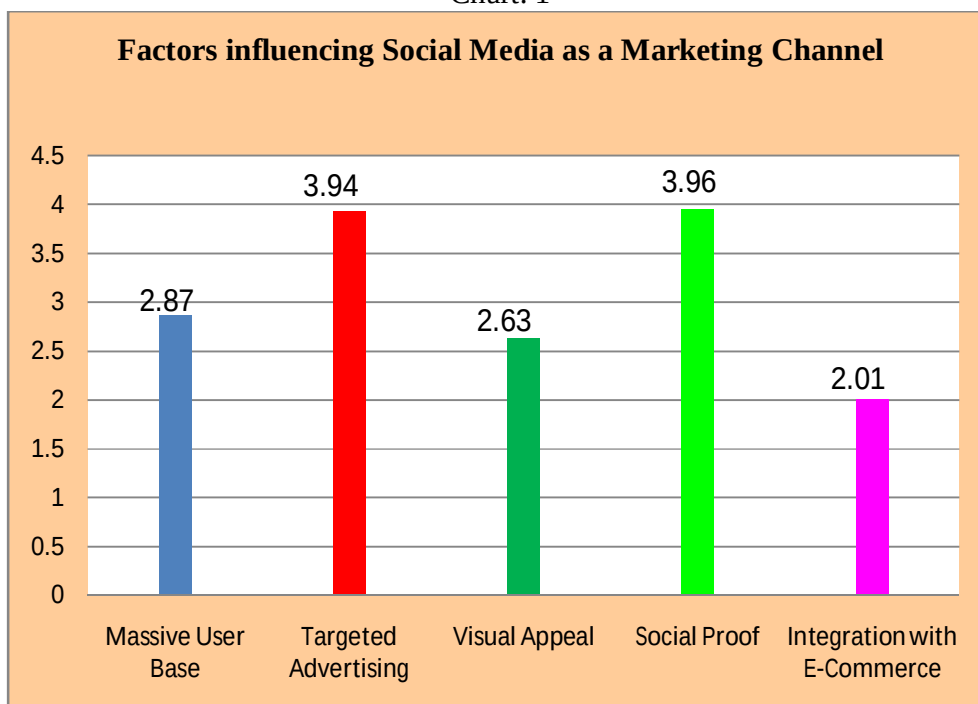
Factors	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean Rank	Rank
Massive User Base	100	3.95	.890	2.87	3
Targeted Advertising	100	4.20	.945	3.94	2
Visual Appeal	100	3.41	1.037	2.63	4
Social Proof	100	4.33	.909	3.96	1
Integration with E-Commerce	100	3.28	1.209	2.01	5

- **Social Proof (Rank 1, Mean Rank 3.96):** Social proof (likes, shares, reviews, and recommendations) is the **most influential factor** in making social media an effective marketing channel. Consumers trust peer opinions and community validation more than direct advertising, so this factor ranks highest.
- **Targeted Advertising (Rank 2, Mean Rank 3.94):** Close behind social proof, targeted advertising is the second most important factor. Its high mean rank shows that users value how platforms customize content and promotions to individual preferences, making ads more relevant and persuasive.
- **Massive User Base (Rank 3, Mean Rank 2.87):** The large global audience on social media is also seen as an important factor, though less influential compared to social proof and targeting. While reach is essential, users may consider engagement quality more critical than sheer numbers.
- **Visual Appeal (Rank 4, Mean Rank 2.63):** Visual content (images, videos, reels) is moderately important. Although aesthetics drive attention, participants ranked it lower,

possibly because visuals alone do not guarantee persuasion without trust or personalization.

- **Integration with E-Commerce (Rank 5, Mean Rank 2.01):** Surprisingly, integration with e-commerce features (like “Shop Now” buttons or in-app checkouts) was rated the **least influential factor**. This suggests that while convenience matters, consumers prioritize **trust and relevance** (social proof and targeting) over technical shopping features.

Chart: 1



The mean rank values show that **trust and relevance outweigh convenience and aesthetics** when it comes to social media marketing effectiveness. In other words, consumers are more likely to be influenced by **social proof and personalized ads** rather than simply the platform’s reach, visual design, or shopping integrations

Table: 2
Kendall's Coefficient of Concordance

N	100
Kendall's W ^a	.031
Chi-Square	73.957
difference	4
Asymp. Sig.	.000

The Kendall’s W value of **0.031** indicates a **low level of agreement** among the respondents in ranking the given factors (social proof, targeted advertising, massive user base, visual appeal, and e-commerce integration). In other words, participants differed in their preferences, showing diverse opinions about which factor has the greatest influence.

However, the **Chi-Square test value (73.957, df = 4, p = 0.000)** is statistically significant at the 1% level. This means that despite the weak overall agreement (low W), the rankings are not random. There is a meaningful pattern in the way respondents perceived the importance of these factors.

In practical terms, this result suggests that while consumers' opinions vary, the overall trend highlights **social proof and targeted advertising** as the most influential aspects of social media marketing, while **integration with e-commerce** is consistently ranked as least influential.

Future Trends in Social Media and Consumer Behaviour

Social Commerce Expansion: Social commerce is rapidly growing as platforms integrate shopping features directly into social media feeds. Consumers no longer need to leave apps like Instagram, TikTok, or Facebook to complete purchases. Features such as “Shop Now” buttons, live-stream shopping, and in-app checkout make buying seamless and immediate. This integration reduces the friction between product discovery and purchase, encouraging impulse buying. For businesses, social commerce provides a powerful opportunity to connect with customers in real time, track behavior, and personalize offerings. As a result, social commerce is set to become a dominant driver of online retail growth.

AI-Powered Recommendations: Artificial intelligence (AI) has transformed the way products are marketed on social media. Platforms analyze user behavior, preferences, and browsing history to provide hyper-personalized recommendations. From suggesting clothing items similar to past purchases to promoting restaurants near a user's location, AI ensures that content is relevant and timely. These predictive algorithms increase engagement and purchasing likelihood by presenting consumers with options they are most likely to buy. While effective, this raises ethical concerns regarding privacy and manipulation. Still, AI-driven personalization is expected to remain a cornerstone of digital marketing, enhancing consumer convenience and business efficiency.

Augmented Reality (AR) Shopping: Augmented Reality (AR) is revolutionizing online shopping by allowing consumers to virtually “try before they buy.” Social media platforms and e-commerce apps now feature AR filters that let users test makeup shades, visualize furniture in their homes, or see how clothes fit before purchasing. This technology enhances decision-making by reducing uncertainty and increasing confidence in product choices. For businesses, AR creates engaging and immersive shopping experiences that differentiate them from competitors. As AR tools become more advanced and accessible, they are expected to significantly influence consumer buying behavior, bridging the gap between physical and digital shopping.

Sustainability Influence: Consumers are increasingly prioritizing sustainability in their purchasing decisions, and social media amplifies this trend. Brands that showcase eco-friendly practices, promote sustainable products, and highlight ethical sourcing gain stronger engagement and loyalty from socially conscious buyers. Shopping inspire consumers to align their purchases with environmental values. Influencers who advocate green lifestyles further boost awareness and credibility. This growing emphasis on sustainability not only shapes consumer choices but also pressures companies to adopt responsible practices. As climate concerns intensify, sustainability will remain a powerful force driving social media marketing and consumer behavior.

Decentralized Platforms & Privacy Tools: With growing concerns about data misuse, surveillance, and targeted advertising, consumers are becoming more cautious about privacy. Decentralized platforms and privacy-focused tools are emerging as alternatives to mainstream social media. These platforms prioritize user control, data protection, and transparency, allowing individuals to share content without exploitation by algorithms or intrusive tracking. Block chain-based social media, for example, offers enhanced security and rewards users for engagement. While still in early stages, such platforms reflect a shift in consumer preferences toward more ethical and privacy-conscious digital spaces. This trend may redefine how businesses connect with customers in the future.

Conclusion

Social media has revolutionized consumer buying behavior, transforming how people discover, evaluate, and purchase products. Through influencers, peer recommendations, targeted ads, and integrated shopping features, platforms have shortened the buying journey and amplified brand reach. While this has created unprecedented opportunities for businesses, it has also raised challenges related to privacy, misinformation, and impulse buying. The future of consumer behavior will likely be even more intertwined with social media as technology evolves. Companies that adapt to changing expectations balancing personalization with ethical practices will be best positioned to thrive in the digital marketplace. Ultimately, social media does not just influence consumer buying behavior; it has become an inseparable part of it.

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