

Impact of Social Media Marketing on Consumer Buying Behaviour - A Descriptive Study

Dr. Mahesh Chand Meena^{1*} | Dr. Saroj Kumar²

¹Associate Professor (EAFM), S.P.C. Government College, Ajmer, Rajasthan, India.

²Assistant Professor (ABST), S.P.C. Government College, Ajmer, Rajasthan, India.

*Corresponding Author: maheshjpr21@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Social media marketing (SMM) has become a pervasive influence on how consumers recognize needs, search for information, evaluate alternatives, and make purchase decisions. Drawing on the Consumer Decision-Making Model, Uses and Gratifications Theory, stimulus organism response (SOR), and consumer engagement perspectives, this descriptive paper synthesizes current evidence on how SMM elements (entertainment, interaction, customization, trendiness, and electronic word-of-mouth) shape consumer attitudes, engagement, purchase intention, and actual buying behaviour. Empirical studies across industries and regions indicate that SMM builds brand awareness and consumer-based brand equity, stimulates online brand-related activities (COBRAs), strengthens trust and perceived value, and operates in tandem with influencer marketing and parasocial interactions to influence both planned and impulse purchases. The paper outlines a descriptive survey–content analysis design to map these relationships and concludes with theoretical and managerial implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

Keywords: Social Media Marketing, Consumer Buying Behaviour, SOR, COBRAs, SMM.

Introduction

The rapid diffusion of platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, and X has turned social media into a central arena for marketing communication and commerce. Firms increasingly invest in paid social ads, influencer collaborations, brand communities, and shoppable posts, while consumers use these platforms to discover products, compare alternatives, and complete purchases, a trend intensified during and after the COVID-19 pandemic[1].

This paper examines *how* and *to what extent* SMM affects consumer buying behaviour understood as the sequence from need recognition through information search, evaluation, purchase, and post-purchase responses. The focus is descriptive: documenting patterns and associations rather than establishing strict causality.

Theoretical Foundations

• Consumer Decision-Making Model

The Consumer Decision-Making Model posits stages of problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase, and post-purchase evaluation. Recent work shows that consumers increasingly use social media as a decision-making tool at each stage, particularly after COVID-19[1].

SMM stimuli (e.g., entertaining content, interactive posts, influencer endorsements) can be conceptualised as inputs in a stimulus–organism–response (SOR) framework. Social media activities (stimuli) affect internal states such as attitudes, emotions, and brand equity (organism), which in turn shape purchase intention and behaviour (responses)[2].

- **Uses and Gratifications, Engagement and COBRAs**

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) explains social media usage in terms of motives such as information seeking, entertainment, social interaction, and self-expression. When brands design SMM to meet these gratifications, they tend to elicit higher engagement and purchase intention[3].

Consumer engagement perspectives and the COBRAs framework distinguish between consuming, contributing, and creating brand-related content. SMM features like entertainment and interaction significantly drive these online brand-related activities; in turn, such behaviours foster ongoing search and repurchase intention[4].

- **Social Influence, Parasocial Interaction, and Influencer Marketing**

Social influence and parasocial interaction theories highlight how consumers model their behaviour on influential others and form quasi-relationships with media figures. Influencer marketing research shows that influencers' credibility, authenticity, and self-disclosure build parasocial relationships and brand trust, thereby increasing purchase intentions and behavioural responses such as word-of-mouth[5],[6]. Materialistic values and fear of missing out (FOMO) can intensify the effects of influencer cues on buying intentions[7],[8].

Social Media Marketing Activities and Consumer Responses

- **Core SMM Dimensions**

Empirical studies converge on five core dimensions of SMM activities: customization, entertainment, interaction, trendiness, and word-of-mouth[2].

- **Entertainment:** Enjoyable, fun, and emotionally engaging content.
- **Interaction:** Two-way communication via comments, replies, polls, and direct messaging.
- **Customization:** Personalized recommendations and content.
- **Trendiness:** Up-to-date information on new products and trends.
- **Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM):** Consumer reviews, ratings, and sharing.

Research in luxury cosmetics and airline services indicates that entertainment and interaction are especially powerful drivers of COBRAs and purchase intention; trendiness mainly motivates content creation, while customization effects are mixed[4],[9].

- **Brand Awareness, Brand Equity, and Purchase Intention**

Cross-country work in emerging economies finds that SMM significantly enhances brand awareness, consumer brand engagement, and purchase intention, with country differences moderating these relationships[3].

From an SOR perspective, SMM activities contribute to consumer-based brand equity and inspiration, which partially mediate their influence on purchase intention[2]. In other words, SMM does not simply push sales; it builds brand meaning and motivational states that make purchase more likely.

- **Trust, Perceived Value, and Risk Reduction**

In the airline context, SMM elements like entertainment and interaction increase perceived trust and value, which in turn drive purchase intention[9]. Similarly, studies of luxury fashion brands underscore that social media interaction strengthens customer relationships and trust, which are closely tied to purchase intention[10].

These findings position SMM as a mechanism for risk reduction: by providing rich, social, and credible information, brands lower perceived uncertainty and enhance value perceptions, especially in high-involvement or intangible services.

- **Consumer–Brand Relationships and Loyalty**

Research on online brand communities shows that stronger consumer–brand relationships on social media, often mediated by brand trust, enhance brand loyalty and positive word-of-mouth[11]. For luxury brands, Instagram engagement driven by consumer involvement and brand self-expressiveness improves brand image and loyalty, reinforcing the long-term behavioural impact of SMM beyond single purchases[12].

Influencer Marketing and Buying Behaviour

• Source Credibility and Purchase Intention

Influencer marketing is a prominent subset of SMM. Studies show that influencers' expertise, trustworthiness, and originality positively affect advertising trust and image satisfaction, which then increase purchase intention[13]. Work on influencer credibility also indicates that credibility boosts brand consideration and purchase intention, with green consumption values moderating these effects among Gen-Z cosmetic consumers[14].

Koay and colleagues, examining influencers' trustworthiness, attractiveness, and expertise, demonstrate that trustworthiness and expertise predict purchase intention, whereas attractiveness becomes more influential among highly materialistic followers[8].

• Authenticity, Self-Disclosure, and Parasocial Relationships

Authenticity attributes such as sincerity, truthful endorsements, and visibility foster parasocial interactions, which mediate the effect of influencer authenticity on followers' buying behaviour[6]. Similarly, influencers' intimate self-disclosure enhances parasocial relationships and brand trust, leading to stronger purchase intentions than source credibility alone[5].

These results suggest that relational and emotional mechanisms—rather than mere informational content—are key to understanding how SMM, particularly via influencers, shapes consumer behaviour.

• FOMO, Materialism, and Impulse Buying

Research on FOMO demonstrates that consumers' imitation of influencers increases social comparison and materialism, which amplify FOMO and drive buying intention toward endorsed products[7]. When combined with visually rich and hedonic product categories, these dynamics can facilitate online impulse buying, especially among younger, materialistic users.

Descriptive Research Design

To systematically describe the impact of SMM on consumer buying behaviour, a descriptive cross-sectional design can be adopted, integrating a consumer survey with content analysis of brand and influencer social media activities.

Objectives

- Describe the prevalence and types of SMM tactics consumers encounter across key platforms.
- Map associations between SMM exposure/engagement and consumer decision stages (awareness, evaluation, purchase intention, and post-purchase behaviour).
- Identify moderating effects of demographics, psychographics (e.g., materialism, FOMO, impulse buying tendency), and product/context factors.

Sampling and Data Collection

- **Population:** Active users of major social media platforms.
- **Sampling:** Stratified sampling by age cohort and product category, with random sampling within strata. A sample size of at least 250 would permit stable estimates and multivariate analysis, aligning with prior SMM and influencer studies using structural equation models with 200–500 respondents[4],[9].
- **Mode:** Online survey distributed via panels or targeted social media ads.

Measurement

The survey would employ multi-item Likert scales adapted from prior research:

- **SMM Exposure and Engagement:** Frequency of encountering and interacting with paid ads, influencer content, brand pages, and UGC; distinguished into consuming, contributing, and creating behaviours to capture COBRAs[4].
- **Brand Outcomes:** Brand awareness, attitude toward the brand, consumer-based brand equity, and brand image[3],[2].
- **Psychological mediators:** Trust, perceived value, inspiration, parasocial interaction, and perceived influencer authenticity and credibility[9],[6].

- **Behavioural outcomes:** Purchase intention, number of purchases influenced by social media in the past 6–12 months, channel used (in-app vs. off-platform), and post-purchase eWOM.
- **Moderators:** Materialism, FOMO, impulse buying tendency, product involvement, and demographic variables[7],[8].

Content analysis of brand and influencer accounts would complement survey data by documenting posting frequency, content types (informational vs. emotional), disclosure practices, and interactive features, aligned with prior mapping of influencer marketing research[15].

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics would characterise usage patterns (e.g., mean time spent, proportion of purchases influenced by SMM). Correlation and regression analyses could explore associations between SMM activities, psychological mediators, and buying-related outcomes, without making strong causal claims. Structural equation modelling or PLS-SEM, as used in several cited studies, would enable the estimation of multi-step pathways from SMM to purchase intention via trust, brand equity, and inspiration[2].

Key Descriptive Insights from Existing Evidence

Synthesising the literature yields several robust descriptive patterns:

- **SMM is now integral to all decision stages:** Consumers increasingly use social media to identify, evaluate, and purchase products; pandemic-era data show marked increases in such behaviours[1].
- **Entertainment and interaction dominate:** Across settings, entertaining and interactive SMM content most reliably stimulates engagement, COBRAs, and downstream behaviours such as ongoing search and repurchase[4],[9].
- **Mediated effects via trust, value, and brand equity:** The impact of SMM on purchase intention is largely indirect, operating through trust, perceived value, brand equity, and inspiration[9],[2].
- **Influencers and parasocial ties amplify effects:** Authentic, credible influencers who self-disclose and resemble followers foster strong parasocial relationships and attachment, which in turn drive purchase intentions and behavioural loyalty[5],[6].
- **Individual and contextual moderators matter:** Country context, age, materialism, FOMO, and product category all shape how strongly SMM affects buying behaviour, with younger, materialistic consumers in fashion and beauty segments often showing the highest responsiveness[3],[7],[8].

Managerial Implications

For practitioners, the descriptive evidence implies:

- Prioritise **entertaining and interactive content** that supports both information and emotional gratifications, rather than purely promotional messages.
- Design SMM to build **brand equity and trust** by highlighting authenticity, transparency (e.g., clear sponsorship disclosures), and consistent value delivery[9],[16].
- Cultivate long-term relationships with **authentic influencers** who align with brand values and audiences, nurturing parasocial bonds instead of one-off transactional endorsements[5],[6].
- Tailor SMM strategies to **segment-specific motives and values**, recognising that materialistic or FOMO-prone consumers may be more susceptible to impulsive purchases but also more sensitive to perceived inauthenticity[7],[8].

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Descriptive studies, particularly cross-sectional surveys, cannot definitively establish causality and are vulnerable to self-report and common-method biases. Many existing works concentrate on specific countries, platforms, or categories (e.g., luxury, beauty, airlines), limiting generalisability[4],[9].

Future research should:

- Employ **longitudinal and experimental designs** to trace causal effects of SMM elements over time.

- Integrate **behavioural trace data** (clickstreams, transaction logs) with surveys to reduce reliance on self-reports.
- Explore **negative outcomes**, such as privacy concerns, ad fatigue, and resistance to overly commercial influencer content[16].
- Examine **under-studied contexts**, including B2B SMM, older demographics, and non-consumerist or sustainability-oriented communities[17].

Conclusion

The accumulated descriptive evidence indicates that social media marketing exerts a substantial and multifaceted influence on consumer buying behaviour. By delivering entertaining, interactive, and authentic content that satisfies user gratifications, builds trust and brand equity, and leverages social and parasocial ties, SMM shapes how consumers recognise needs, search for information, evaluate options, and decide to buy. Understanding these patterns and their moderators is essential for both scholars seeking to develop robust theory and practitioners aiming to design effective, ethically responsible social media strategies.

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