

Social Media as a Catalyst for Consumer Preference Formation in E-Commerce: An Empirical Investigation

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Abstract:

The expansion of social media sites has changed how consumers interact with e-commerce. This study will measure how much social media develops consumer consciousness, preference, and complexity of purchase decisions in online buyers. Primary data was obtained from 100 respondents using a self-structured questionnaire and analyzed using percentage analysis and weighted average techniques. The results indicate a large majority of respondents stated they find products viewed on social media (95%), follow brands to find products (85%), and then go on to purchase products after viewing their reviews on social media (65%). Instagram and YouTube were the main social media influence platforms for 91% of the respondents' online shopping decisions. For the variables of product preference (3.7), impact of the reviews (4.08), and purchases due to advertisements (3.93), social media is seen as a strong influence throughout the consumer shopping process. This study focuses on the fast-developing area of digital consumer behavior and aids marketers in refining their social commerce efforts.

Keywords: Social media marketing, consumer behavior, e-commerce, influencer marketing, purchase intention, digital marketing, online shopping, platform influence

1. INTRODUCTION

The digital world has changed the commerce industry and it was not predictable for us today. Social media has become a vital component of consumer and brand interaction. Social media platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook have grown from being social media sites to become e-commerce platforms. We have seen how consumers now have many interactions with brands, products, and other consumers while shopping for goods online.

The influence of social media on purchasing behaviour is particularly pronounced in e-commerce, where the inability to physically interact with a product prior to purchase heightens the importance of visual and social cues in the decision-making process. A well-crafted product reel or a relatable influencer testimonial can be just as effective, or even more so, in motivating a purchase than a product display in a retail store. Furthermore, this study explores the frequency with which individuals are exposed to branded product information across social media platforms, the types of social media they are exposed to, and which social media platform they think has the most impact on influencing their consumer choices.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Prior scholarship has explored various dimensions of social media's influence on consumer behavior, establishing a foundation upon which the present study builds.

Duhan (2020) examined how social media compresses the traditional purchase cycle for mobile phone consumers, finding that digital platforms shift influence away from mass advertising toward peer-generated content such as forums and blogs. The study highlighted the growing role of community voices in shaping purchase journeys. Similarly, Menka (2020) categorized social media marketing strategies for fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) products into three types — informational, transformational, and interactional — demonstrating that each category exerts a distinct influence on different stages of consumer decision-making, with engagement serving as a key mediating variable.

Sharma (2022) turned her attention to fashion e-commerce, finding that digital marketing activities, including social media engagement, directly strengthen brand perception and foster consumer-brand relationships that translate into higher purchase intentions. From a luxury marketing perspective, Angella and Eunju (2012) demonstrated that social media marketing constructs — including entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization, and word of mouth — positively affect customer equity dimensions such as value, relationship, and brand equity.

Vries et al. (2012) contributed important insights into the mechanics of brand posts on fan pages, discovering that vivid and interactive content characteristics significantly increase consumer engagement, particularly in the form of likes. Michaelidou et al. (2011) explored the adoption of social networking sites among small and medium-sized B2B enterprises in the UK, revealing that while a substantial portion use social media to attract customers, perceived irrelevance remains a notable adoption barrier.

Earlier foundational work by Shih (2004) and Chung and Lee (2008) underscored the role of perceived ease of use, security, and website usability in shaping e-shopping attitudes, providing a technology-acceptance lens through which social media's growing influence can be understood. Collectively, this body of literature confirms that social media plays a multifaceted role in consumer behavior, varying by platform, content type, product category, and consumer segment — a complexity that the present study seeks to further unpack.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding the influence of social media on consumer preferences requires a synthesis of multiple behavioral and marketing theories, each offering a distinct lens through which digital consumer behavior can be examined.

3.1 Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA)

TRA posits that behavioral intention is shaped by an individual's attitude toward a behavior and the subjective norms surrounding it. In the context of social media and e-commerce, when consumers observe peer endorsements or influencer recommendations, their attitude toward a product is positively shaped, increasing the likelihood of purchase. Marketers who understand this dynamic can design campaigns that leverage social proof to shift consumer attitudes and norms simultaneously.

3.2 Social Influence Theory

This theory holds that individuals are shaped by the people they consider credible or popular. Social media amplifies this effect through features such as likes, shares, comments, and follower counts, which signal credibility and popularity. E-commerce platforms increasingly harness social influence data to recommend

products and personalize the shopping experience, recognizing that peer behavior is a powerful predictor of individual purchase decisions.

3.3 AIDA Model

The AIDA framework — Attention, Interest, Desire, Action — maps well onto the social media consumer journey. Attention is captured through eye-catching advertisements and trending content. Interest is cultivated through tutorials, product demonstrations, and storytelling. Desire is built via reviews, testimonials, and social proof. Action is prompted through integrated shopping features, clear calls to action, and limited-time offers. Social media platforms have effectively operationalized each stage of this model within a single digital environment.

3.4 Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)

UGT explains that individuals actively choose media to satisfy specific needs, including entertainment, information, and social interaction. Applied to e-commerce, consumers follow brands and content creators not passively but purposefully — seeking product information, exclusive offers, or aspirational content. This voluntary engagement makes social media audiences particularly receptive to brand messaging, as they have self-selected into a relationship with the brand.

3.5 Innovation Diffusion Theory

Rogers' diffusion model categorizes adopters based on their openness to innovation and explains how new products spread through social systems. Social media accelerates this diffusion by enabling viral sharing and rapid peer validation. Influencer-led reviews and trending product showcases can compress the adoption curve dramatically, transforming niche products into mainstream purchases within days.

3.6 Customer Engagement Theory

This theory emphasizes the importance of two-way, emotionally resonant interactions in building brand loyalty. Social media facilitates this engagement through comments, direct messages, polls, and user-generated content. When consumers feel heard and valued, they are more likely to develop lasting brand loyalty, advocate on the brand's behalf, and make repeat purchases — all outcomes that extend far beyond the initial transaction.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive research design, seeking to characterize the nature and extent of social media's influence on consumer preferences in e-commerce. The approach is appropriate for quantifying patterns of behavior and attitude across a defined sample.

4.2 Data Collection

Primary data were gathered through a structured questionnaire comprising questions addressing social media usage patterns, platform preferences, trust in influencer content, and purchase behavior. The questionnaire employed a combination of dichotomous, Likert-scale (1–5), and multiple-choice formats. Secondary data were drawn from peer-reviewed journals, industry reports, and academic databases to contextualize the findings within existing literature.

4.3 Sampling

A sample of 100 respondents was selected using non-probability convenience sampling, targeting individuals who engage in online shopping and use at least one social media platform. While this approach limits generalizability, it is widely used in exploratory consumer behavior research and provides sufficient basis for identifying meaningful patterns.

4.4 Analytical Tools

Data were analyzed using percentage analysis to describe the frequency distribution of categorical responses and the weighted average method to compute mean scores for Likert-scale items. These tools enabled both descriptive characterization and comparative assessment of variable significance.

5. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

5.1 Brand Following and Product Awareness

An overwhelming 85% of respondents reported following brands or products on social media, underscoring the platform's dominance as a channel for brand-consumer engagement. Equally striking, 95% of respondents affirmed that social media enhances their awareness of newly launched products, indicating that digital platforms have effectively supplanted traditional media as the primary channel for product discovery. These figures confirm that social media is not merely supplementary to the consumer journey — it is central to it.

Table 1: Brand Awareness and Product Discovery via Social Media

Variable	Response	Percentage (%)
Follows brands on social media	Yes	85%
Follows brands on social media	No	15%
Social media aids product awareness	Yes	95%
Social media aids product awareness	No	5%

5.2 Frequency of Promotional Exposure

The majority of respondents (59%) reported frequently encountering product promotions on social media, with a further 32% experiencing such content occasionally. Only 9% rarely see promotional content. This near-ubiquitous exposure reflects the effectiveness of algorithmic targeting and content distribution strategies employed by social media platforms, and signals that promotional saturation is a lived reality for most users.

5.3 Influence on Product Preferences

When asked to rate the degree to which social media shapes their product preferences on a five-point scale, respondents produced a weighted mean of 3.70, with 62% selecting strong or very strong influence. This finding robustly confirms that social media does not merely create awareness but actively shapes what consumers want. The platform's capacity to present products in aspirational, contextually relevant, and peer-validated settings appears to directly affect consumer taste formation.

5.4 Shopping Preference Shifts Over Time

A significant 78% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that social media has changed their shopping preferences over time, yielding a mean score of 4.03. This longitudinal perspective is particularly important: it suggests that social media's influence is not episodic but cumulative, gradually reshaping consumer value systems and product expectations as ongoing exposure continues.

5.5 Brand Discovery

Regarding brand discovery, 57% of respondents considered social media very important for discovering previously unknown brands, with an additional 37% rating it moderately important. Collectively, 94% of respondents attributed positive importance to social media in this regard, reflecting its powerful role as a discovery engine that surfaces niche and emerging brands to audiences that would otherwise remain unaware of them.

5.6 Satisfaction with Social Media-Discovered Products

Consumer satisfaction with products discovered through social media was generally high, with a mean score of 3.90 on a five-point scale. A combined 72% of respondents reported being satisfied or very satisfied with such purchases. This finding is significant because it suggests that social media not only drives discovery but also delivers on the promise made by content — meaning that the marketing messages consumers encounter are, by and large, accurately representing the products being promoted.

5.7 Key Purchase Drivers

When asked to identify the most influential factor in their social media-driven purchases, 65% of respondents selected customer reviews from other consumers, far outpacing discounts and promotions (19%), lifestyle content (10%), and product tutorials (6%). This finding has substantial strategic implications: it confirms that peer-generated content carries greater persuasive weight than brand-controlled messaging, reinforcing the need for businesses to actively cultivate and surface authentic customer voices.

Table 2: Key Purchase Drivers on Social Media

Purchase Driver	Respondents (%)
Customer reviews from other buyers	65%
Discounts and promotional offers	19%
Lifestyle content featuring the product	10%
Product tutorials / demonstrations	6%

5.8 Impact of Reviews on Buying Behavior

The influence of social media reviews on shaping actual buying behavior was confirmed with a mean score of 4.08, the highest among the Likert-scale variables in this study. A combined 81% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that reviews encountered on social media directly affected their purchasing decisions. This positions review-based social proof as the single most powerful mechanism through which social media converts consumer interest into action.

5.9 Effect of Repeated Exposure

Repeated product exposure on social media was found to meaningfully increase purchase likelihood, with a mean score of 3.75. A combined 67% of respondents indicated they were likely or very likely to purchase a product after seeing it repeatedly. Only 14% reported the opposite. This finding validates the retargeting and frequency strategies commonly employed by digital advertisers and suggests that consistent visibility across social feeds translates into tangible conversion outcomes.

5.10 Trust in Influencer Recommendations

Sixty-four percent of respondents expressed trust in recommendations made by influencers or celebrities

on social media. While this represents a majority, the 36% who remain skeptical signals that authenticity and perceived credibility are ongoing concerns for influencer-based marketing. Consumers appear to distinguish between influencers they perceive as genuine advocates and those they suspect of purely transactional endorsements.

5.11 Advertisement Click-Through and Purchase Likelihood

With a mean score of 3.93, respondents indicated a generally favorable attitude toward clicking on social media advertisements and making a purchase. Notably, 49% described themselves as very likely to do so, suggesting that well-targeted social advertisements have a strong capacity to drive direct conversion. This finding reinforces the value of precision targeting capabilities offered by modern social platforms.

5.12 Platform Preferences

Instagram emerged as the most influential platform for online shopping decisions (51%), followed closely by YouTube (40%). Facebook was cited by only 2% of respondents. This striking disparity reflects the degree to which visual and video-centric platforms dominate the social commerce landscape. Instagram's shoppable features, immersive reels, and influencer ecosystems, combined with YouTube's long-form review and unboxing content, have created environments particularly conducive to consumer conversion.

Table 3: Platform Influence on Online Shopping Decisions

Platform	Respondents (%)
Instagram	51%
YouTube	40%
Others	7%
Facebook	2%

5.13 Platform-Specific Findings: Facebook

Despite Facebook's large user base, its influence on purchase decisions was comparatively modest. Forty-five percent of respondents indicated they are rarely influenced by Facebook influencer promotions, and only 36% read product reviews on Facebook frequently. This suggests that Facebook functions more as an awareness channel than a direct conversion driver for the sample studied.

5.14 Platform-Specific Findings: Instagram

Instagram demonstrated considerably stronger purchase influence. A mean score of 3.87 for the likelihood of buying a product promoted by an Instagram influencer indicates a broadly favorable consumer disposition. However, trust in user-generated content on Instagram, such as stories and tagged posts, registered a mean of only 2.85, suggesting that consumers are more receptive to influencer content than to organic user posts, perhaps due to influencers' perceived expertise or aesthetic curation.

5.15 Platform-Specific Findings: YouTube

YouTube product reviews and unboxing videos exerted a strong influence on purchase decisions, with a mean score of 3.77 and 70% of respondents agreeing that such content had prompted a purchase. Furthermore, 50% of respondents rated YouTube influencers as very important to their shopping decisions, with an additional 35% assigning moderate importance. The platform's long-form, detailed content format appears particularly effective at building the informed confidence consumers need before committing to a purchase.

6. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study paint a coherent and compelling picture of social media as a structurally embedded force in contemporary consumer behavior. Across all major dimensions examined — awareness, preference formation, trust, platform engagement, and purchase conversion — social media demonstrates consistent and measurable influence.

The primacy of customer reviews as a purchase driver (65%) aligns with established theory in social influence and electronic word of mouth research, affirming that peer validation remains the most trusted form of marketing communication. This finding has particular implications for brands that over-invest in polished brand content at the expense of authentic customer voices.

The dominance of Instagram and YouTube reflects a broader consumer shift toward visual and video-based content consumption. Both platforms offer immersive, low-friction pathways from product discovery to purchase, with integrated shopping features and robust influencer ecosystems that compress the AIDA journey into minutes. Facebook's comparatively modest influence may reflect demographic shifts among younger consumers or the platform's perception as a less aspirational environment.

The high satisfaction rate (72%) with social media-discovered products is an underexplored but important finding. It suggests that the concern — sometimes expressed in marketing literature — that social media creates unrealistic product expectations may be overstated, at least for this sample. Consumers appear to be making informed enough judgments, aided by reviews and demonstrations, to arrive at satisfactory purchases.

The persistent skepticism toward influencer recommendations (36%) raises important questions about the long-term sustainability of influencer marketing as a trust-building strategy. As the market matures and consumers become more media-literate, brands that prioritize authenticity, transparency, and relevance in their influencer partnerships are likely to maintain an advantage over those that treat influencer marketing as a transactional media buy.

7. CONCLUSION

This study confirms that social media has transcended its role as a mere communication tool to become a decisive force in shaping consumer preferences and purchasing behavior within the e-commerce environment. The data drawn from 100 respondents reveal a consistent pattern: consumers actively engage with brand content, trust peer reviews above other forms of marketing, and are meaningfully influenced by platform-specific content — particularly on Instagram and YouTube.

Several key contributions emerge from this work. First, the finding that 95% of respondents use social media for product discovery elevates digital platforms to the status of primary awareness channels, displacing traditional advertising in the consumer journey. Second, the identification of customer reviews as the dominant purchase driver (65%) provides actionable direction for digital marketing strategy, privileging peer-generated content over brand-controlled messaging. Third, the satisfaction data suggest that the influence of social media on purchasing decisions is, by and large, resulting in positive consumer outcomes — a finding that adds a constructive dimension to the often-cautionary discourse around social media's role in consumption.

The study also identifies areas requiring further investigation. The moderate trust in user-generated Instagram content, the comparatively low influence of Facebook, and the significant minority of influencer skeptics all point to a complex and evolving consumer landscape in which trust, authenticity, and platform context interact in nuanced ways.

Future research should examine these dynamics longitudinally, across diverse demographic groups, and in relation to emerging platforms such as TikTok and AI-driven recommendation systems. As social commerce continues to evolve at pace, the need for rigorous, empirically grounded research into consumer behavior in digital environments will only grow. This study offers a foundational contribution to that ongoing scholarly conversation.

8. LIMITATIONS

This study acknowledges several limitations. The sample size of 100 respondents, drawn through convenience sampling, constrains the generalizability of findings to broader populations. The predominantly regional nature of the sample may introduce cultural or demographic biases not captured in the analysis. As a cross-sectional study, it cannot account for behavioral change over time. Additionally, the study's focus on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube excludes the potentially significant influence of newer platforms such as TikTok and Snapchat, which represent growing areas of consumer engagement. Self-reported survey data are inherently subject to social desirability bias and imperfect recall.

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