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FROM SCROLL TO SALE: A HUMAN-CENTERED STUDY OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCE IN ONLINE MARKETING

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ABSTRACT

Social media has transformed online marketing from a one-way promotional activity into an interactive relationship between brands and consumers. Recent studies indicate that interactivity, electronic word-of-mouth, and engagement-based participation are strongly associated with purchase intention in digital environments. This paper synthesizes current evidence on how social media influence shapes consumer attention, trust, engagement, and buying behavior in online marketing. The discussion also highlights practical implications for marketers, educators, and researchers who seek ethical and effective digital strategies.

KEYWORDS: Social Media Marketing, Online Marketing, Consumer Behavior, Purchase Intention, Engagement, eWOM, Digital Branding

I. INTRODUCTION

The rise of social platforms has changed how consumers discover products, compare alternatives, and form purchase decisions. Instead of relying only on traditional advertising, online buyers now encounter branded posts, creator recommendations, peer reviews, short-form videos, and comment-driven discussions that continuously shape their perceptions. As a result, social media influence has become a central driver of online marketing performance.

This topic is important because social media does not simply deliver messages; it creates environments where consumers react, share, question, and endorse brands in real time. Research published in recent years shows that engagement acts as a bridge between social media marketing activities and purchase intention, suggesting that the success of online marketing depends not only on visibility but also on meaningful consumer participation.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the study of social media influence in online marketing through a structured review-style analysis. The paper focuses on the mechanisms of influence, theoretical insights, emerging behavioral patterns, and strategic implications. It also proposes a simple conceptual framework that can support future empirical research.

II. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Online marketing has evolved from static banner advertising and email campaigns to highly personalized, platform-based communication. Social media platforms now function as digital marketplaces of attention where brands compete not only through price and product quality, but also through storytelling, credibility, responsiveness, and social proof. This environment has made influence itself a measurable and marketable force.

Several recent studies reinforce this shift. One study based on 469 experienced Weibo users found that interactivity and electronic word-of-mouth positively affected all three examined dimensions of user engagement, while engagement in turn influenced purchase intention. Another study involving university student respondents reported that consumer engagement mediated the relationship between social media marketing and purchasing intention, emphasizing that user interaction is not a peripheral outcome but a core mechanism in digital persuasion.

A comparative study from Karnataka also reported that respondents were more inclined toward social media marketing than traditional marketing because of interactive communication and customized content. Together, these findings indicate that social media influence is strongest when users feel involved, informed, and socially connected rather than simply targeted by advertisements.

III. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Although firms invest heavily in social media campaigns, many still struggle to understand which aspects of social influence actually led to online conversions. High follower counts or viral reach do not automatically translate into trust, sustained engagement, or purchase action. This creates a practical and theoretical problem: marketers often measure exposure, while consumer decisions are shaped by more complex psychological and social processes.

A second challenge concerns content authenticity. Contemporary consumers are increasingly exposed to sponsored posts, influencer partnerships, and algorithmically amplified content. When audiences perceive such content as manipulative, engagement may decline even if visibility remains high. Therefore, the study of social media influence in online marketing must move beyond raw impressions and examine how credibility, relatability, and interaction affect decision-making.

Objectives of the Paper

This paper is guided by the following objectives:

- To examine how social media influence affects online marketing outcomes.
- To identify the major drivers of consumer engagement on social platforms.
- To explain how engagement connects social media marketing activities with purchase intention.
- To discuss the roles of interactivity, eWOM, personalization, and trust in digital consumer behavior.
- To propose practical strategies for ethical and effective online marketing.

Research Questions

The paper addresses the following research questions:

- I. How does social media influence shape consumer behavior in online marketing contexts?
- II. Which dimensions of social media marketing most strongly encourage user engagement?
- III. In what way does engagement mediate the relationship between marketing exposure and purchase intention?
- IV. How can brands use social media influence responsibly without compromising authenticity?

V. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature increasingly frames social media marketing as an engagement-centered process rather than a message-delivery system. A 2024 study grounded in Uses and Gratifications Theory identified five dimensions of social media marketing—entertainment, customization, interactivity, electronic word-of-mouth, and trendiness—and found that interactivity and eWOM had significant positive effects across all examined engagement dimensions. This finding is important because it suggests that consumers are more likely to move toward buying behavior when they can participate, respond, and socially validate information.

A related 2023 study concluded that consumer engagement plays a mediating role between social media marketing and purchasing intention among university students. This means that exposure alone is insufficient; user involvement becomes the channel through which influence becomes actionable. The practical implication is that marketers should design content that invites reaction, conversation, and contribution rather than relying on passive visibility.

Research on consumer behavior in fashion retail similarly notes that authenticity, influencer collaborations, personalized storytelling, and platform-specific strategies matter in shaping social-media-driven decisions. In another comparative study, respondents favored social media marketing over traditional channels because digital platforms provided interactive communication and tailored content. Across these studies, the common pattern is clear: influence becomes stronger when content feels relevant, social, and credible.

VI. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

This paper draws primarily on Uses and Gratifications Theory and engagement theory as interpretive lenses. Uses and Gratifications Theory helps explain why consumers actively use social platforms for entertainment, information, social connection, and identity expression, all of which affect how marketing messages are received. From this perspective, consumers are not passive recipients but active participants in digital meaning-making.

Engagement theory complements this view by emphasizing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive involvement. When users like, comment, save, share, or create related content, they move beyond awareness into relational participation. Studies indicate that consumption-based and contribution-based participation have significant positive effects on purchase intention, while creation-based participation may not always show the same direct effect. This nuance is useful for marketers, because not every form of visible activity contributes equally to sales outcomes.

VII. SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCE MECHANISMS

Social media influences online marketing through several interconnected mechanisms:

- **Interactivity:** Real-time replies, polls, live sessions, and comment threads create a sense of dialogue, making consumers feel noticed and involved.
- **Electronic word-of-mouth:** Reviews, reposts, recommendations, and user discussions function as social proof that reduces uncertainty in online purchases.
- **Personalization:** Tailored content improves relevance and increases the likelihood that consumers will attend to and remember marketing messages.
- **Influencer and peer credibility:** People often trust familiar creators or peers more than formal advertising, especially when product demonstrations appear authentic.
- **Trendiness and visibility:** Social platforms rapidly amplify what appears current or desirable, helping brands gain attention during narrow windows of public interest.

These mechanisms are powerful because online buying often occurs under information overload. In such settings, consumers use shortcuts such as popularity cues, reviews, creator trust, and community feedback to simplify decisions. Social media marketing succeeds when it aligns these cues with genuine value rather than manufactured hype.

VIII. CONCEPTUAL DISCUSSION

A simple conceptual path can explain the influence process in online marketing:

Social media marketing activities consumer engagement trust and perceived value purchase intention. This path is consistent with recent findings showing that social media dimensions such as interactivity

and eWOM first stimulate engagement, after which engaged consumers become more likely to develop purchase intention. In practical terms, a customer rarely buys because a post merely exists; the customer buys because the post creates curiosity, conversation, reassurance, and social confidence. For example, a skincare brand that posts demonstration videos, answers user comments, and features verified customer experiences is more likely to convert attention into purchase intention than a brand that only posts repetitive promotional graphics. The difference lies in the social quality of the interaction. Human-centered marketing works better when consumers feel that the brand is speaking with them rather than at them.

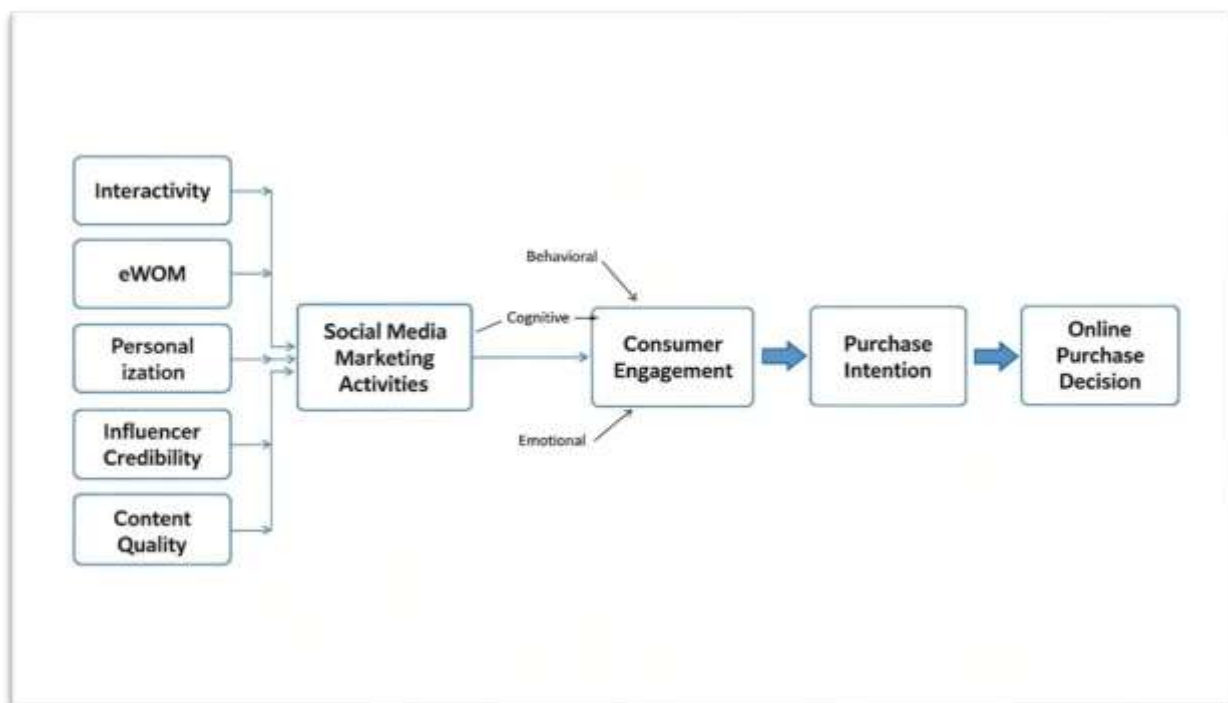


Fig1. Social media marketing activities

IX. IMPLICATIONS FOR ONLINE MARKETERS

The findings across recent studies suggest several implications for practitioners:

- Marketers should prioritize engagement quality over vanity metrics such as raw follower counts.
- Interactive formats, including Q&A sessions, live commerce, and comment-driven content, are likely to produce stronger behavioral responses.
- eWOM should be cultivated ethically through customer satisfaction, transparent reviews, and community building rather than artificial amplification.
- Personalization should remain useful and respectful, because relevance can increase attention but excessive targeting may damage trust.

- Influencer collaborations work best when the creator-brand relationship appears authentic and contextually appropriate.

These implications matter because online consumers are increasingly skilled at recognizing forced persuasion. Social media influence becomes commercially effective when it feels socially natural. In other words, the strongest digital marketing often resembles a credible conversation rather than a hard sell.

X. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The growth of social media influence in online marketing also raises ethical concerns. Sponsored content may blur the boundary between recommendation and advertisement, especially when disclosures are weak or hidden. This can undermine consumer autonomy and distort informed choice. Another concern involves data-driven personalization. Although tailored messaging can improve user relevance, it can also create discomfort when consumers perceive that platforms or brands know too much about their habits. Ethical online marketing therefore requires transparency, truthful endorsements, respect for privacy, and avoidance of manipulative emotional triggers. These principles are especially important in youth-oriented and impulse-buying segments.

XI. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Current studies provide useful insights, but important gaps remain. Many available findings rely on cross-sectional surveys and specific demographic groups, such as students or users from single platforms, which limits generalizability. Future research should examine cross-platform behavior, longitudinal effects, and differences across age, culture, and product category.

Further work should also explore emerging formats such as live shopping, AI-assisted recommendations, creator commerce, and short-video ecosystems. Another valuable direction is to compare positive engagement with skeptical engagement, because comments and shares do not always indicate favorable influence. More precise models are needed to distinguish attention, trust, and actual conversion in the social commerce journey.

XII. CONCLUSION

The study of social media influence in online marketing shows that digital persuasion is most effective when it is interactive, socially validated, and grounded in authentic engagement. Recent research consistently indicates that interactivity, eWOM, and consumer participation play significant roles in shaping purchase intention, while personalized and credible communication strengthens online marketing outcomes.

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