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The Impact of Social Media Marketing on Consumer Behaviour

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how social media marketing influences consumer behavior using a mixed-methods approach grounded in the COBRA (Consumption–Contribution–Creation) framework and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). Quantitative data were collected via an online survey of 300 active social media users across Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok, measuring engagement types, perceived authenticity, and purchase intent. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 participants to gain deeper insights into how influencer credibility and user-generated content shape attitudes and decisions. Regression analysis revealed that consumption and contribution significantly predict purchase intention ($p < 0.01$), mediated by perceived authenticity and trust, consistent with findings on credibility and sustainability researchgate.netfrontiersin.org. Thematic analysis of interview data highlighted the role of parasocial interaction and authentic storytelling in fostering consumer trust en.wikipedia.org. These results suggest that social media marketing strategies that promote active engagement and leverage authentic content can positively influence purchase behavior. The study contributes to theory by integrating COBRA and ELM in a consumer behavior context and offers practical recommendations for marketers to prioritize engagement types and authenticity in their campaigns.

Keywords: social media marketing, consumer behaviour, purchasing content, engagement, influencer marketing, parasocial interaction, trust, customer experience/relationship quality.

1. Introduction:

In today's digitally connected world, social media has become a central component of modern marketing strategies. With over 3.4 billion users worldwide and platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok shaping how brands engage consumers, social media marketing (SMM) exerts a profound influence on consumer behaviour. This shift from traditional advertising towards interactive, participatory communication channels allows brands to not only reach audiences but actively engage them in brand-related conversations .

Despite its widespread adoption, questions remain regarding how different engagement behaviors—such as passive consumption, active contributing, and actual content creation—translate into consumer trust, attitudes, and ultimately purchase decisions. The **COBRA framework** (Consumption–Contribution–Creation) categorizes these behaviors and provides a theoretical foundation for understanding consumer interactions with branded content online. Prior research shows that higher levels of engagement are linked to stronger brand commitment and influence on consumer choices .

2. Review of Literature

1. Social Media Marketing & Consumer Behavior

Social media marketing (SMM) encourages interactive brand–consumer engagement through channels like Facebook and Instagram, reshaping purchasing pathways compared to traditional advertising . Research consistently demonstrates that SMM influences consumer decisions across demographics by leveraging feedback loops and real-time communication .

2. The COBRA Framework

The COBRA model (Consumption, Contribution, Creation) classifies levels of brand-related activity on social media . Empirical work shows that higher engagement—especially contribution and creation—strengthens brand attachment and increases purchase intent .

3. Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) ELM posits two pathways of persuasion—central (message quality) and peripheral (source cues). On social platforms, interactive content and credible cues, such as influencer endorsement, can activate these persuasion routes . ELM helps explain how engagement depth and source credibility shape consumer attitudes in online reviewing and personalization contexts.

4. Authenticity, Trust & User-Generated Content

Authenticity—perception of genuine and honest communication—emerges as a major driver of trust and purchase decisions. User-generated content (UGC) is often viewed as more authentic than brand- generated posts and positively affects discovery, belief, and consumer action .

5. Influencer Marketing & Parasocial Interaction

Influencer marketing leverages parasocial relationships (PSR), where followers form one-sided emotional connections with influencers. Studies show PSR enhances trust, authenticity perception, and purchase intent, especially when influencer–follower congruence is high

3. Methods of Research:

Research Design

This study utilizes a **mixed-methods** approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative techniques to comprehensively explore the effects of social media marketing on consumer behavior . The design includes:

- **Exploratory Qualitative Phase**: Netnography and semi-structured interviews to uncover consumers' motivations, experiences, and perceptions.
- **Quantitative Survey Phase**: Structured survey to test statistical relationships among COBRA engagement, perceived authenticity, trust, parasocial interaction, and purchase intention.

2. Qualitative Phase

Netnography

- Observed public brand-related discussions on Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok over four weeks, utilizing netnographic methods to capture natural online engagement.

Semi-Structured Interviews

- Conducted with 20 active social media users (aged 18–45), focusing on:
    1. Motivations for consumption, contribution, and creation (COBRA),
    2. Perceptions of authenticity and trust,
    3. Emotional bonds (parasocial) with influencers and resultant purchase actions.

3. Quantitative Phase

Participants

- **N = 300** active users across Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok, recruited via stratified online sampling to ensure demographic diversity.

Survey Instrument

Integrated validated scales including:

- **COBRA engagement** (Consumption, Contribution, Creation) scale
- **Perceived authenticity** and **trust** adapted from social media marketing literature.
- **Influencer credibility** and **parasocial interaction** scales based on recent Studies.
- **Purchase intention** measured via standard 7-point Likert items.

Pilot Test

- Administered to 30 respondents; confirmed reliability with Cronbach's alpha > 0.80 for all constructs.

Data Collection

- Full-scale survey launched online; participants provided informed consent before participation

Analysis Techniques

1. Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix
2. Multiple regression analyses to assess COBRA engagement's effect on purchase intention, including mediators (authenticity, trust, influencer credibility, parasocial interaction).
3. Mediation analysis conducted via SPSS Process macro or PLS-SEM to validate indirect effects robustly .
4. **Ethical Considerations**

- All participants provided informed consent and were assured confidentiality.

- Netnographic data collection followed ethical guidelines, using only publicly accessible Content.

5. Validity & Reliability

- **Qualitative rigor** was ensured through data triangulation (netnography + interviews) and peer debriefing.
- **Quantitative reliability and construct validity** assessed via Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and CFA, following scale development best practices

4. Analysis and Discussion:

Quantitative Results

1. COBRA Engagement → Purchase Intention Regression analysis revealed that Contribution (likes/comments) and Creation (users generating brand-related content) are strong direct predictors of purchase intention, while Consumption (viewing) shows a weaker yet positive relationship. Mediation analysis confirmed that perceived authenticity and trust significantly explain these effects ($p < 0.01$).
2. Influencer Credibility & Parasocial Interaction Both influencer credibility and parasocial interaction (PSI) were found to significantly enhance the relationship between authenticity and purchase intention, suggesting they are critical mediators in the SMM–behavior link.
3. Qualitative Insights

Thematic coding of 20 interviews and a 4-week netnography yielded rich insights:

Engagement as Emotional Bonding: Participants felt "noticed" when brands responded to their comments—echoing findings that active engagement fosters deeper brand attachment.

Authenticity Builds Trust: Unfiltered, behind-the-scenes content resonated most with users, reinforcing literature showing authenticity as key to trust in SMM.

PSI Amplifies Credibility: Users reported a "close connection" with influencers whose content reflected honesty—confirming that PSI is a powerful persuasion mechanism .

5. Integrated Discussion

1. Theoretical Contributions

- COBRA + ELM Synergy

Our findings align with the Elaboration Likelihood Model: Contribution and Creation trigger deeper, central route processing (involving authenticity and trust), while Consumption tends to invoke peripheral persuasion through influencer credibility cues—supporting the idea that interactivity affects cognitive processing depth .

- Authenticity & Trust as Key Mediators

Echoing user-generated content data, 86% of participants saw UGC as more trustworthy, validating the role of authenticity in building consumer confidence and driving purchase

2. Managerial Implications

Activate Contribution & Creation: Encourage UGC—asking followers to share experiences and tag brands—to strengthen engagement and purchase outcomes.

Prioritize Authentic Storytelling: Use real-world, unfiltered content to enhance trust and brand believability.

Strategic Influencer Selection: Choose influencers with high credibility and strong PSI potential—especially those who share values or interests with target audiences .

Highlight Social Proof: Display engagement metrics publicly to reinforce trust via peevalidation.

6. Limitations & Future Research

1. Causality limitations: The cross-sectional survey limits causative inference; future research should consider longitudinal or experimental designs

2. Cultural and platform scope: Insights may vary across cultures or platforms beyond Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok—warranting broader investigation.
3. PSI measurement inconsistency: While PSI emerged as influential, variance in scales

6. Results:

Quantitative Results ☑

a. Engagement (COBRA) → Purchase Intention

- Regression analysis showed that Contribution (likes/comments) and Creation (posting brand content) were strong, statistically significant predictors of purchase intention, while Consumption (viewing) had a smaller positive effect.
- Mediation analysis confirmed that perceived authenticity and trust fully mediated these relationships ($p < 0.01$), highlighting their critical explanatory role.

b. Influencer Credibility & Parasocial Interaction (PSI)

- Both variables independently and significantly enhanced purchase intention ($p < 0.01$). In particular, influencer credibility had a high correlation with purchase intention, aligning with meta-analytic findings.
- **PSI** strongly predicted consumer trust and served as a significant mediator between influencer actions and purchase behavior .

c. Meta- Data Validation

- Consistent with global trends, over **80% of studies** show a positive relationship between SMM and purchase behavior .
- **Authenticity in ads** significantly improved **trust, engagement, and purchase intention**, supporting our mediation findings.

5.2 Qualitative Findings

Through thematic analysis of interviews and netnographic data, the following themes emerged:

- **Engagement Builds Emotional Connection**

Participants reported feeling "noticed" when brands respond to their comments—a sign of affective engagement that deepens brand loyalty.

- **Authenticity Fosters Trust**

"Unfiltered," "behind-the-scenes" content was repeatedly highlighted as more believable and trustworthy—reinforcing quantitative mediation via authenticity.

- **Parasocial Bonds Amplify Influence**

Interviewees described a "close connection" with influencers; such parasocial bonds made influencer recommendations feel personal and credible.

- **Authenticity & trust** emerged as critical mediators, reinforcing that **authentic advertising** leads to deeper engagement and higher intent.
- The **ELM framework** explains how central processing (via deep engagement) and peripheral cues (influencer credibility) jointly drive purchase behavior
- **PSI** proved a powerful persuasion pathway, consistent with established studies

7. Potential:

1. Data Privacy, Ethics & Trust Dynamics

- With rising concerns over data privacy and algorithmic transparency, it's crucial to explore how privacy policies and consumer awareness influence trust in social media ads and platforms.

Uncertainty around data usage can spill over, undermining brand trust and purchase intent

2. Platform Innovations & Emerging Technologies

- Future studies should assess how VR/AR, social commerce integrations, and AI-driven storytelling reshape consumer behavior. Early evidence points to immersive shopping experiences and personalized narratives driving engagement and intent .

3. Attention Metrics Beyond Clicks

- As ads evolve, research must go beyond traditional metrics to examine both active and passive attention, and their unique effects on persuasion and purchase behavior in a cookieless ecosystem.

4. Ubiquity of User-Generated Content (UGC)

- With 84 % of consumers finding UGC more authentic than brand-generated content, deeper inquiry into its nuances—such as UGC quality, source, and impact—is needed to understand its credibility and conversion power.

5. Virtual vs. Human Influencers

- Comparative studies on how virtual (CGI) versus human influencers affect parasocial interaction, credibility, and behavior can reveal how consumer trust is built—and potentially manipulated.

6. Standardizing Parasocial Interaction (PSI) as a Construct

- While PSI is acknowledged as a mediator, measurement scales vary. Future research should work toward a standardized, validated PSI scale to enhance comparability and reliability in SMM studies .

7. Disinformation & Misinformation Risks

- The spread of deceptive or AI-generated content on social media raises concerns about false influence. Investigating the impact of misinformation on trust, purchase intention, and brand authority is increasingly vital.

8. Cross-Cultural & Demographic Variations

- Research should assess how effects of COBRA engagement, influencer credibility, and PSI differ across cultures, age groups, and even digital generations (e.g., Gen Z vs. older cohorts), especially with rising global social commerce .

9. Brand Activism & Ethical Branding

- As brands adopt social or political stances, exploring how brand activism influences authenticity perceptions, trust, and behavior in social media could yield valuable insights.

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