

Chapter 12

The Digital Pulse: Investigating the Influence of Social Media and Online Communities on Consumer Purchasing Behaviour

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ABSTRACT

Social media has become an integral part of global communication, allowing individuals to connect with others and organizations. These platforms enable extensive interaction between users, influencing both social relationships and consumer behaviour. Social media serves as a space for individuals to share opinions, seek recommendations, and make purchasing decisions. This study investigates the impact of social media and online communities on consumer purchasing behaviour. The research, conducted in central Kerala with a sample size of 300 respondents, employs a purposive sampling method for collecting primary data. The study identifies three key factors driving customer engagement such as participation, interaction, and involvement, and each significantly influencing online consumer behaviour. Regression analysis reveals that customer engagement strongly impacts product awareness, which, in turn, affects purchase intention. The results highlight the importance of social media marketing strategies in enhancing customer engagement and driving purchase decisions.

INTRODUCTION

Social media has grown exponentially over the past two decades. According to recent reports, the number of social media users surpassed 4.7 billion globally in 2023, accounting for more than 58% of the world's population (Statista, 2023). Platforms like Instagram and TikTok have evolved from mere social networking sites into powerful tools for marketing and consumer engagement. Brands leverage these platforms to reach target audiences, while consumers use them to discover products, read reviews, and

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validate purchasing decisions. Online communities, characterized by shared interests and collaborative discussions, complement these platforms by offering authentic, peer-generated insights (Hajli, 2014). Social media introduces real-time interaction and peer influence at every stage of the decision-making process, creating a dynamic feedback loop where consumer opinions are continuously shaped and reshaped (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). While social media platforms emphasize broad-based engagement, online communities offer a more focused and in-depth exploration of consumer preferences. Online forums, review sites, and niche communities provide spaces where consumers can seek advice, share experiences, and collectively evaluate products or services. These communities often function as knowledge repositories, where individuals rely on the collective wisdom of peers to inform their decisions (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Peer-generated reviews and discussions are particularly influential in reducing purchase uncertainty. Studies show that consumers trust online reviews as much as personal recommendations, especially when they perceive the reviewer as impartial and knowledgeable (Bright Local, 2022).

Social media occupies a crucial position in influencing consumer perceptions regarding brands, products, and services via platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, etc. The adept utilization of hashtags, brand-focused content, and shareable posts amplifies brand awareness. Social media provides brands with a platform to construct their identity and forge an emotional bond with consumers. Visual narratives, brand stories, and consistent messaging on social media platforms help the consumers to connect with the brand on a deeper level. Social media empowers users to disseminate their personal experiences with products or services, either through user-generated content (UGC) such as reviews, testimonials, and product imagery or by tagging brands in their posts. Consumers typically exhibit a higher degree of trust in peer recommendations compared to conventional advertising, and witnessing others' favorable experiences can markedly alter their perception of a brand.

One of the most powerful ways social media shapes how consumers view brands is through social proof—the concept that individuals are swayed by the actions and opinions of their peers. When influencers advocate for a product or service, their followers often regard the brand as more credible and authentic because influencers have established trust with their audience through relatable content and genuine interactions. Their endorsements feel like personal recommendations rather than traditional advertisements, offering social proof that the product or service is valuable. Social media platforms, by their inherent design, engage fundamental psychological needs and impulses, thereby rendering them formidable instruments for influencing the opinions, behaviours, and decision-making process of a consumer. Social media has fostered an environment conducive to more direct and transparent interactions between brands and consumers. Regular interactions on social media enhance brand visibility, facilitating consumers' ability to recognize and recall the brand when making purchasing decisions.

In today's digital era, social media and online communities have become integral to consumer purchasing behaviour, influencing every stage of the decision-making process. With over 4.7 billion social media users globally (Statista, 2023), platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and online forums serve as powerful marketing channels where brands interact with consumers and shape purchasing intentions. However, the dynamic and ever-evolving nature of these platforms presents challenges in understanding how consumer preferences are influenced through real-time interactions, peer-generated reviews, and community-driven discussions. While previous research highlights the impact of social media marketing and online communities on consumer engagement, there is limited understanding of how these influences translate into actual purchasing behaviour. This study seeks to address these gaps by investigating how social media platforms and online communities shape consumer purchasing behaviour.

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