



The impact of social media marketing on consumer buying behaviour in the apparel industry: A conceptual and theoretical review

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Abstract

With the Digital Platforms that are ever-changing the landscape of contemporary commerce, social media marketing, social media marketing (SMM) has become one of the most influential agents in the shaping of consumer purchase decisions, especially within the apparel industry. The platforms, including Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube have established new and dynamic platforms through which brand engage consumers, build awareness and drive buying behaviour. The first fully digital native consumer generation one that depends heavily on social media content, and influencer endorsement, brand post and peer review as the means of product discovery and purchase decisions. A rather large generation Z, population in the world and a fast growing apparel market which India has one of the largest generation z, population in the world and a fast growing apparel market presents a particularly significant and commercially relevant setting to such an exploration. Although there is an increasing amount of international research on social media marketing, there is a lack of comprehensive empirical studies, investigating its integrated effect on Gen Z apparel buying behaviour in an Indian context. The current research aims at examining this gap through a comprehensive conceptual framework.

The study adopts a conceptual and theoretical review approach based on literature review from published resources, industry data, market research and various marketing studies. Major theoretical frameworks, including the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) Model, Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), Source Credibility Theory, and Information Adoption Model (IAM), are used to explain the mechanisms through which social media marketing affects apparel purchase behaviour.

The findings suggest that social media marketing significantly influences consumer purchase intention, impulse buying behaviour, brand loyalty, and digital engagement in the apparel sector. Influencer credibility, authenticity of user-generated content, peer recommendations, and interactive social commerce features are identified as major determinants of consumer decision-making. The study concludes that social media has become one of the most influential drivers of apparel consumption behaviour in the digital era and highlights the need for integrated and ethically responsible marketing strategies.

Keywords: Social media marketing, apparel industry, consumer buying behaviour, influencer marketing, ewom, user-generated content, social commerce, Generation Z

Introduction

The Rise of social media as a Global Phenomenon

Social media is defined as the internet based platforms and digital tools that enable users to create, share and exchange content, ideas, opinions and information in virtual communities and networks. Since the early 2000s, social media has experienced a dramatic shift in the form of simple networking sites like Friendster, Myspace, and others to complex and algorithm driven ecosystems like Instagram, Tik Tok, Facebook, YouTube, and Pinterest which together host billions of users around the world. According to DataReportal,2024^[36], the number of active social media users across the globe is more than 5.04 billion people, which is approximately 62 percent of the world's population (DataReportal,2024) ^[36]. This is the explosive growth that has not only made social media a tool of communication but one of the most influential tools of shaping culture, commerce and consumer behaviour.

Transition from Traditional to Digital Marketing

For decades, marketing in the fashion and apparel industry was dominated by traditional channels television commercials, print advertisements in fashion magazines such as Vogue and Elle, billboard campaigns, and high

budget celebrity endorsements. Although they were effective in reaching mass audiences, these channels were costly, unidirectional and hard to measure in terms of direct consumer impact. The introduction of internet and more precisely social media upset this model. Digital marketing brought the capability of targeting specific customer segments, real-time measurement of campaign performance, and two-way communication with customers and reaching global audiences at the fraction of the cost of traditional advertising. The social media marketing as a subdivision of digital marketing has become the most interactive, dynamic and consumer centric marketing channel that apparel brands can use today.

Social media as a Marketing Ecosystem

The only difference between social media and other digital marketing platforms is that it is an ecosystem in the sense that it simultaneously serves as an advertising platform, a content distribution network, a consumer review forum, a community building space and more and more, a direct commerce channel. In app shopping features can now be found in various platforms such as Tik Tok and Instagram as well as shoppable posts and live stream commerce capabilities that allow consumers to learn about and shop

apparel products without ever having to leave the social media platform. This merging of social interaction and commercial transaction has brought about what industry analysts call as social commerce, a trillion dollar market that is redefining the world retailing landscape.

The Apparel Industry in the Age of Social Media Global Significance of the Apparel Industry

The global apparel industry is considered to be one of the largest and most economically significant sector in the world with a value of about \$1.79 trillion in 2024^[17] and is projected to grow to a value of about 2.25 trillion by 2028 (Statista, 2024). It has a complicated value chain that includes sourcing of raw materials and manufacturing of textiles, retailing and ecommerce distribution. Clothing is another type of products that is most culturally symbolic. Clothing is not just functional but it is also a means of personal identity, social status, cultural expression and lifestyle communication. This symbolic aspect renders the apparel industry especially susceptible to the impact of social media where image, aspiration and identity are the main currencies of interaction.

India's Apparel Market: A Digital Frontier

India is a particularly accommodating environment to research the effects of social media on the consumption of apparel. The textile and apparel industry is worth more than 155 billion and contributes about 2.3 percent to the GDP (IBEF, 2023) ^[14]. India is one of the world's largest producers and consumers of apparel. The social media market in India is also equally impressive with more than 467 million social media users, India ranks second largest social media market in the world after China. The convergence of a youthful demographic profile with an estimated 377 million Gen Z consumers rapidly growing smartphone penetration, cheap mobile data and a booming ecommerce sector has created a highly fertile environment in which social media marketing can be used to drive apparel behaviour on an unprecedented scale.

The shift from physical to digital fashion discovery

Conventionally, new parallel brands and products were found in physical retail outlets, fashion magazines, and television advertisements. Today, an increasing number of consumers, especially younger demographics, are finding fashion in their social media feeds, influencer posts, peer recommendations and algorithmically curated content. Capgemini (2024) ^[29] reports that 60 percent of Gen Z consumers said that they had discovered and purchased a new fashion product through social media within a six month time period. Social media platforms such as Instagram and Tik Tok have successfully become the new runways of fashion, where the trends are set, propagated and reach mass audiences in hours, radically outpacing the fashion cycle and shaping consumer expectations and around novelty, variety and speed.

Social Commerce: Where Content Meets Commerce

The adoption of shopping functionality in the social media space has brought about a new paradigm referred to as social commerce where the whole consumer process of discovery and evaluation to purchase and post purchase sharing is carried out in the social media space. Instagram shopping, Tik Tok shop, Pinterest buyable film and

Facebook marketplace have changed social media into a marketing channel to a direct sale channel. This development has far-reaching consequences on the apparel brands because it will decrease the number of steps between a consumer seeing a product and making a purchase dramatically decreasing the purchase friction and increasing the conversion rates.

Social Media Marketing: Key Dimensions and Strategies Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing refers to the act of collaborating with personalities of the social media who have gained credibility, large following and a strong involvement in a niche audience segments. This influencer marketing has now become one of the strongest weapons in the market arsenal of the apparel. The level of influencers includes mega influencers with millions of followers, macro, micro and nano influencers. Influencers are digital opinion leaders in the fashion industry whose style choices, product recommendations and lifestyle imagery are the direct cause of purchase intentions and buying behaviour of their followers. In 2023^[3], the global influencer marketing industry was valued at \$21.1 billion and is projected to reach \$52 billion by 2028 (Statista, 2024) ^[17] reflecting the massive commercial importance of such a strategy to apparel brands.

Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM)

Electronic word of mouth (Ewom) is any positive or negative comment posted by potential, actual or former consumers about a product, brand or company made available to a multitude of people via the internet. In the context of apparel marketing, eWOM consists of consumer reviews, star ratings, social media comments, fashion haul videos, unboxing posts and peer recommendation posts on platforms. Research has consistently indicated that eWOM is among the most plausible and persuasive forms of information to persuade consumers to buy a product, and it is usually more effective than brand generated advertising. The perceived independence i.e. the views of other consumers is more believable than any promotional arguments of the brands.

User Generated Content (UGC)

User generated content (UGC) is any type of content such as images, videos, reviews, blog posts and social media updates that is created and shared by consumers and not brands. UGC in the apparel industry can take numerous forms such as consumers posting outfit of the day photos (OOTD), styling their purchased items in creative ways sharing unboxing videos or participating in brand-initiated hashtags challenges. UGC can be especially useful to apparel brands since it offers authentic, relatable content that can be easily related to by other consumers, creating a community of brands and generating social proof that can easily trigger purchase behaviour. A study by Taylor (2020) ^[51] revealed that UGC has a significant positive impact on brand loyalty in the readymade garments industry and Mayrhofer *et al.* (2020) ^[68] confirmed that UGC increases purchase intentions especially when consumers are not aware of its commercial aspect.

Brand Generated Content (BGC) and Paid Advertising

Besides influencer marketing and UGC, clothing brands are actively creating and posting their own social media content

such as product showcase posts, behind the scenes videos, lookbook campaigns, style guides, and promotional advertisements. Social media advertising that is paid such as sponsored posts, story ads, carousel ads and shoppable product tags enable brands to reach specific targeted consumer segments based on demographics, interests and behavioural data. A study by Springer Nature (2025) ^[30] has found that although both brand generated content and UGC have a positive effect on purchase intentions, BGC has a stronger impact due to its professional quality and emotional appeal, indicating that both types of content play complementary roles in an effective social media marketing strategy.

Live Stream Commerce and Interactive Features

Livestream shopping is a format pioneered in China and now rapidly expanding globally which represents the newest frontier of social media marketing in the apparel industry. Brands and influencers conduct real time video streams on platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook during which they showcase and sell products, interact with viewers in real time, and offer exclusive deals and limited time offers. Research by Dao Cam Thuy and Nguyen Ngoc Quang (2025) ^[20] found that visual content quality, entertainment value, and streamer professionalism significantly drive purchase intention and repurchase behaviour in livestream fashion commerce. The real time interactive nature of livestream shopping creates a sense of urgency and community that powerfully drives the purchase decisions.

Consumer Buying Behaviour: Concepts and Framework Understanding Consumer Buying Behaviour

Consumer buying behaviour is the decision making and decision taking of people who are involved in the purchase and consumption of goods and services. Buy behaviour as applied to the apparel industry entails the whole scope of consumer behaviour beginning with need recognition and information search, evaluation of alternatives and decision to post purchase evaluation and brand advocacy. The interplay of psychological factors such as motivation, perception, attitude, learning, social factors such as family, peer groups, social class, culture and personal factors such as age, income, occupation, lifestyle and increasingly digital factors such as exposure to social media, electronic word of mouth, algorithmic content curation.

The Digital Transformation of the Purchase Decision Process

The social media has drastically transformed the five stage model of the consumer decision making process that requires recognition of needs, search of information, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decisions and post purchase behaviour. The need recognition has been in many cases provoked by the content of social media that creates awareness about new products or styles. The information search has largely moved off the search engines and brand websites to the social media platforms where consumers are seeking peer reviews, influencer opinions and UGC. Alternative evaluation is increasingly being done through social comparisons facilitated by social media with consumers consulting their social networks to be validated before making their purchase decisions. The very process of making a purchase can now be accomplished immediately

using inapp shopping capabilities. The social component of the post purchase behaviour has taken a new dimension, with consumers posting their purchases in the social media that contribute to the eWOM cycles, which influence the purchasing decisions of other consumers.

Purchase Intention vs Actual Buying Behaviour

In consumer behaviour research a distinction is made between purchase intention a plan or willingness of a consumer to buy a product in the future and actual purchase behaviour the actual purchase of a product by a consumer. It has been repeatedly demonstrated through the studies that purchase intention is a strong predictor of actual purchase behaviour, particularly in the fashion and apparel context (Bukhari *et al.*, 2023; Kamalanon *et al.*, 2022) ^[14, 55]. It works on the level of purchase intention mainly by creating brand awareness, generating positive brand attitudes, developing aspirational desire and providing social validation which in turn drives actual buying behaviour. The mediating factors between social media exposure and purchase intention are thus the focus of comprehending the overall impact of social media on purchase intention of apparel.

Impulse Buying in Fashion: A Social Media Effect

Impulse buying unplanned, spontaneous purchase decisions made at the point of exposure to a product is a particularly significant dimension of consumer buying behaviour in the apparel industry, and social media has dramatically amplified this tendency. Research by Djafarova and Bowes (2021) ^[10] found that 41% of Gen Z consumers are impulse buyers, significantly higher than older generations, and that Instagram's algorithmic structure by continuously exposing users to personalized content matching their style preferences creates conditions highly conducive to impulse fashion purchases. The Fear of Missing out (FOMO), influencer endorsements, limited time offers, and the seamless availability of in-app purchasing all serve as powerful triggers of impulse buying behaviour in the social media fashion context.

Generation Z and Millennials: The SocialMediaNative Consumer

Who is Generation Z?

The first generation to have grown up in the digital age with smartphones, social media and on demand digital content as part of their daily lives since childhood. By 2024^[17], Gen Z makes up about 32 percent of the world population and is fast becoming the customer powerhouse in the apparel industry. In India alone the number of Gen Z consumers is estimated to be 377 million the largest Gen Z group in any single country representing a huge and highly digitally engaged target market in fashion brands.

Social Media's Disproportionate Influence on Gen Z

Studies have consistently shown that social media has a disproportionately high impact on the fashion purchase behaviour of Gen Z in comparison to older demographic groups. The International Council of Shopping Centres (ICSC, 2023) ^[8] reports that 85% of Gen Z respondents said that social media affects their purchasing decisions, with Tik Tok and Instagram identified as the most influential platforms. According to Capgemini (2024) ^[39], 60% of Gen Z consumers learned about and purchased a new fashion

product through social media within six months of the survey period almost doubled the rate of total shoppers. Their preference of authenticity, their distrust of traditional advertising, their responsiveness to peer recommendations, and their digital fluency make Gen Z uniquely vulnerable to the influence of social media marketing.

Millennials as Early Digital Adopters

The first generation to embrace social media as young adults, millennials have played a key role in shaping the social media marketing landscape in the fashion industry. Even though they are not as addicted to the social media as Gen Z in their decision making in purchases, Millennials are quite active on such a platform as Instagram, Pinterest, and Facebook and are one of the consumers of influencer content and fashion UGC. Generally, premium and midmarket apparel brands, which want to leverage social media marketing to drive revenues, would make a good target market of Millennials.

Authenticity, Sustainability, and Value Alignment

Both Gen Z and Millennial consumers are very concerned with authenticity and transparency in brand communication. The younger consumers are very sensitive to performative or inauthentic marketing, and they are quick to disengage with brands whose social media presence feels performative or inauthentic. This authenticity has significant ramifications on the social media marketing approach it favours micro influencers to mega celebrities, UGC to brand generated content, and authentic storytelling to promotional messaging. Gen Z and Millennials are also highly aware of and concerned about sustainability, ethical production and social responsibility and are increasingly considering this when buying apparel.

Theoretical Frameworks Underpinning the Study Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) Model

One of the most commonly used theoretical models in explaining the effects of social media on consumer buying behaviour is the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) model, which was originally developed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974) ^[53]. In this model, the social media marketing stimuli (such as influencer content, advertisements, and eWOM) are the external stimuli that trigger internal psychological states (the organism dimension including attitudes, emotions, and purchase intentions) which in turn drive behavioural responses (the response dimension including actual purchase, brand loyalty, and social sharing). Several empirical studies reviewed in this study, such as Djafarova and Bowes (2021) and ScienceDirect (2025) ^[24, 56], have successfully applied the SOR framework to explain impulse buying and purchase intention in the context of social media fashion marketing.

Source Credibility Theory

The Source Credibility Theory, which was initially formulated by Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953) ^[33], is based on the premise that the perceived credibility of a source of a persuasive message is a key determinant of the effectiveness of the message. In the context of social media influencer marketing in the fashion industry, source credibility has three dimensions: trustworthiness (the degree to which the influencer is perceived to be honest and unbiased), expertise (the perceived knowledge and

experience of the influencer in the fashion domain), and attractiveness (the perceived physical and social attractiveness of the influencer in the fashion industry). The studies by Chetioui *et al.* (2020), Magano *et al.* (2022), and Ashraf *et al.* (2023) ^[8, 16, 55] all consistently show that influencer credibility is among the strongest predictors of purchase intention in fashion marketing situations.

Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) ^[4] suggests that consumer behaviour is determined by behavioural intentions, which in turn are determined by three factors: attitudes toward the behaviour, subjective norms (perceived social pressure of important others), and perceived behavioural control (perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behaviour). In social media fashion marketing, TPB is used to explain how positive attitudes developed through exposure to influencer content and UGC, in combination with social norms reinforced by peer behaviour on social media, create strong purchase intentions.

Information Adoption Model (IAM)

The Information Adoption Model, which is based on the Technology Acceptance Model and the Elaboration Likelihood Model, considers the mechanisms by which consumers adopt information they encounter on social media as the foundation of their purchase decisions. The model recognizes information quality, information credibility, information usefulness, and information adoption as the important constructs that connect social media content exposure to purchase intention. This framework is especially applicable to the interpretation of how eWOM such as online reviews, influencer recommendations, and peer commentary influence the decision to purchase apparel. Indrawati *et al.* (2023) and Erkan and Evans (2016) ^[26, 35] have successfully used this framework in their research on the effect of eWOM on fashion purchase intention.

Conclusion

The study highlights the transformative role of social media marketing in reshaping consumer buying behaviour within the apparel industry. Social media platforms have evolved beyond communication tools and now function as integrated ecosystems that influence fashion discovery, consumer engagement, purchase intention, and actual buying behaviour. The increasing influence of influencer marketing, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), user-generated content (UGC), and social commerce demonstrates that digital interactions have become central to contemporary apparel consumption.

The paper further establishes that Generation Z and millennial consumers are particularly responsive to social media-based marketing strategies because of their high levels of digital engagement and dependence on peer validation and online communities. Influencer credibility, authenticity of content, and interactive digital experiences significantly shape consumer attitudes toward apparel brands and directly influence purchase intention and impulse buying behaviour.

Theoretical frameworks such as the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) Model, Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), Source Credibility Theory, and Information

Adoption Model (IAM) provide strong conceptual explanations for understanding how social media stimuli influence consumer psychology and behavioural outcomes. The study also identifies that social commerce and integrated digital shopping experiences have shortened the distance between product exposure and purchase decisions, thereby accelerating apparel consumption behaviour. The research concludes that social media marketing has become one of the most powerful determinants of consumer behaviour in the apparel industry, particularly in digitally engaged markets like India with high Gen Z population. Apparel brands must therefore focus on authenticity, ethical communication, influencer credibility, customer engagement, and sustainable brand positioning to remain competitive in rapidly evolving digital markets. This conceptual review provides a foundation for future empirical research that should continue exploring emerging technologies, platform dynamics, and long-term behavioural impacts associated with digital fashion consumption.

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