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IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON CONSUMER BUYING DECISIONS: UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF YOUNG ADULT USERS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of social media on consumer buying decisions among young adult users aged 18-35 years through systematic analysis of secondary data sources. Drawing from peer-reviewed journals, industry reports, and market research databases, this research investigates how social media platforms influence the consumer decision-making process. Results indicate that social media significantly affects young adults' buying decisions through influencer marketing, user-generated content, targeted advertising, and peer recommendations. Findings reveal that 78% of young consumers discover new products through social media, while 71% are more likely to purchase based on social media referrals. Platform-specific effects vary, with Instagram and TikTok showing stronger influence on impulse purchases compared to Facebook and LinkedIn. This research contributes to understanding digital consumer behaviour and provides insights for marketers targeting young adult demographics.

KEYWORDS: Social media marketing, consumer buying behaviour, young adults, purchase decisions, influencer marketing, digital commerce, user-generated content, social commerce.

INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of social media platforms has fundamentally transformed consumer buying behaviour. With over 4.9 billion active social media users worldwide, these platforms have evolved into powerful marketing channels that shape purchasing decisions at every stage

(Kemp, 2023). Young adults aged 18-35, comprising Millennials and Generation Z, represent the most active demographic, spending an average of 2.5 hours daily on social media (Global Web Index, 2023). This demographic has grown up in a digitally connected environment where social media is integrated into daily life. Their purchasing decisions are increasingly influenced by content on Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, and Twitter. Unlike traditional advertising, social media enables two-way communication, peer recommendations, and real-time brand engagement, creating new dynamics in consumer decision-making.

Review of Literature

The traditional consumer decision-making model consists of five stages: need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase behaviour (Kotler & Armstrong, 2021). Social media has complicated this linear process, created feedback loops and introduced new touchpoints at each stage. The "consumer decision journey" framework suggests social media enables consumers to enter and exit the purchasing process at various points, making the journey more circular and iterative (Court et al., 2009).

Social influence theory provides foundation for understanding how social media affects buying decisions. The theory identifies principles including social proof, authority, liking, and scarcity (Cialdini, 2009). Social media amplifies these through features like likes, shares, follower counts, and limited-time offers. Young adults, who value peer acceptance and social validation, are particularly responsive to these mechanisms (Pentina et al., 2018).

Different platforms exhibit distinct characteristics influencing their effectiveness. Instagram's visual format makes it effective for fashion, beauty, food, and lifestyle products, with 83% of users discovering new products on the platform (Facebook Business, 2019). TikTok's short-form video format and algorithm-driven content discovery drive viral product trends, particularly among Gen Z (Anderson, 2020). Facebook's sophisticated advertising tools enable precise targeting, though its influence on young adults has declined relative to newer platforms (Pew Research Center, 2021). YouTube's long-form content supports detailed product reviews and tutorials, influencing considered purchases (Think with Google, 2020). Influencer marketing has emerged as highly effective for reaching young consumers. Businesses generate an average of \$5.78 in earned media value for every dollar spent on influencer marketing (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2023). Among young adults, 49% depend

on influencer recommendations when making purchase decisions (Digital Marketing Institute, 2020). User-generated content (UGC) from ordinary consumers significantly influences decisions. Research shows 92% of consumers trust UGC more than traditional advertising, while 79% say UGC highly impacts purchasing decisions (Stackla, 2019). Visual UGC generates 5x higher conversion rates than non-UGC content (PhotoSlurp, 2018).

Trust emerges as critical mediator of social media's influence. Social commerce trust built through platform interactions significantly impacts purchase intentions (Hajli, 2014). Credibility assessments incorporate source expertise, attractiveness, trustworthiness, and verification badges (Xiao et al., 2018). Peer recommendations exert powerful influence, with 83% of consumers trusting recommendations from friends and family, and 66% trusting consumer opinions posted online (Nielsen, 2015). Social comparison processes, amplified by curated feeds, influence consumption aspirations and purchase decisions (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Engagement level significantly impacts buying decisions. Highly engaged users who actively like, comment, and share demonstrate stronger purchase intentions than passive viewers (Moro et al., 2016). Interactive features like shoppable posts and augmented reality try-ons increase engagement and reduce purchase friction (Javornik et al., 2021).

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to examine the relationship between social media usage and consumer buying decisions among young adults. To synthesize existing research findings to provide comprehensive understanding of social media's impact on young adult consumers.

Research Methodology

This study employs systematic literature review methodology to synthesize existing research on social media's impact on young adult buying decisions. This approach provides rigorous, transparent examination of secondary sources to identify patterns and trends (Tranfield et al., 2003). The study relies on secondary sources like published articles, social media platforms, references and reports. Search strategy employed keywords including "social media marketing," "consumer buying behaviour," "purchase decisions," "young adults," "Millennials," "Generation Z," and "influencer marketing." Literature from 2015-2023 was prioritized to capture recent developments while maintaining historical context.

Discussion & Findings

The findings demonstrate that social media fundamentally alters traditional consumer decision-making among young adults. Research shows 78% of consumers aged 18-34 discovered new products through social media, while 71% made purchases based on social media referrals (Global Web Index, 2022). Platform usage statistics indicate young adults spend 2.5 hours daily on social media, with Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok most popular (Kemp, 2023).

Social media's effectiveness stems from converging factors: integration of social proof mechanisms through likes and shares leverages young adults' responsiveness to peer validation; visual and experiential content enables emotional engagement; algorithmic personalization ensures marketing messages reach receptive consumers. Platform-specific effects highlight the importance of matching strategies to platform characteristics and user expectations. Instagram emerges as most influential for product discovery and visual categories. Posts with product tags generate 37% more engagement than regular posts (Socialbakers, 2020). The platform's influence is strongest for fashion, beauty, food, and lifestyle products, with 96% of fashion brands using Instagram for influencer partnerships (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2022).

TikTok has become powerful driver of viral product trends. Research found 67% of TikTok users reported the platform inspired shopping even when not planning to purchase (Business Insider, 2021). YouTube influences considered purchases requiring detailed information, with 68% of users watching videos when making purchase decisions (Think with Google, 2020). The platform is particularly influential for technology, home appliances, and cosmetics.

Demographic variations within young adults indicate need for segmented strategies. Gen Z demonstrates higher engagement with TikTok and Instagram and stronger influencer responsiveness compared to older Millennials (Priporas et al., 2017). Female young adults spend more time researching products on social media and are more influenced by recommendations (Khwaja et al., 2020). Social media influence varies significantly by category. Low involvement purchases like fashion accessories are more susceptible to impulse buying, while high involvement purchases like electronics require additional touchpoints (Akram et al., 2021).

Research identifies several concerns like 52% of social media users report unplanned purchases influenced by platform content, raising financial well-being concerns (Akram et

al., 2021). Approximately 16% of reviews on social platforms are fake, undermining information quality (Luca & Zervas, 2016). Young adults' express anxiety about data collection, with 79% concerned about how companies use their data (Auxier et al., 2019). The findings raise concerns about impulse buying, information quality, and privacy that warrant attention from consumer advocates and policymakers. Financial literacy education should address social media-driven consumption patterns. Platform governance improvements are needed to combat fake reviews and ensure authentic content. Stronger data privacy protections may be warranted given young adults' concerns about data collection.

CONCLUSIONS

The rise of influencer marketing and user-generated content reflects shift from traditional advertising to peer-driven recommendations. Young adults trust authentic voices over corporate messaging, making influencer partnerships and UGC (User Generated Content) is crucial for brand success. The seamless integration of shopping features reduces friction between discovery and purchase, particularly enabling impulse buying. While this benefits marketers, it raises concerns about financial well-being, especially among young adults with limited income and developing financial literacy.

Trust emerges as most critical factor mediating social media's influence. Brands must build trust through consistent engagement, transparent communication, and authentic content. The prevalence of fake reviews and manipulated content threatens this trust, suggesting need for platform governance and consumer education. The systematic review of secondary sources confirms that social media significantly influences young adult buying decisions across all stages of the consumer journey. With 78% discovering products and 71% making purchase decisions based on social media, these platforms have become central to modern consumer behaviour. Variations between Gen Z and Millennials, and across gender and income levels, require segmented marketing approaches rather than treating young adults as homogeneous group.

LIMITATIONS

This study relies heavily on secondary data, much of which was originally gathered for broader or different research purposes, making direct alignment with the present objectives challenging. Variations in research methodologies, sampling frames, and analytical tools across the reviewed studies limit the ability to draw uniform conclusions about young adults' buying patterns. Moreover, social media platforms evolve rapidly in terms of features,

algorithms, and user behaviour, which may result in some findings becoming outdated or less reflective of current trends. The study may also be influenced by publication bias, as existing literature often favours studies that report significant or positive relationships between social media use and consumer behaviour, potentially skewing the overall interpretation.

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