



Digital Persuasion: How Social Media Shapes What We Buy

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Abstract

This study examines the mechanisms through which social media platforms influence consumer purchasing decisions in the digital age. Through a comprehensive literature review and theoretical analysis, we investigate how social media persuasion techniques, influencer credibility, and algorithmic personalization collectively shape consumer behavior. The primary objective focuses on understanding the mediating role of trust in the relationship between social media exposure and purchase intention. Five hypotheses explore the relationships between social media engagement, influencer credibility, algorithmic targeting, parasocial relationships, and consumer decision-making processes. Our analysis reveals that social media persuasion operates through multiple psychological pathways, with trust serving as a critical mediating factor. The findings suggest that consumers' purchasing decisions are significantly influenced by perceived authenticity, social proof mechanisms, and personalized content delivery. These insights have important implications for consumer protection policies, digital literacy education, and ethical marketing practices in the social media ecosystem.

Keywords: social media marketing, consumer behavior, digital persuasion, influencer marketing, trust, purchase intention



Introduction

The digital revolution has fundamentally transformed the landscape of consumer marketing and decision-making processes. Social media platforms, initially designed for social connection and information sharing, have evolved into sophisticated commercial environments where traditional boundaries between content and advertising have become increasingly blurred (Hudders et al., 2021). This transformation has given rise to new forms of digital persuasion that leverage psychological principles, social dynamics, and algorithmic personalization to influence consumer behavior in unprecedented ways.

The emergence of influencer marketing represents a paradigmatic shift from traditional advertising models toward more personalized, relationship-based persuasion strategies. Unlike conventional advertisements that rely on brand authority and product features, social media persuasion capitalizes on perceived authenticity, social proof, and parasocial relationships between content creators and their audiences (Schouten et al., 2020). This shift has created a complex ecosystem where consumers navigate multiple layers of influence, from algorithmic content curation to peer recommendations and celebrity endorsements.

Understanding how social media shapes consumer purchasing decisions has become increasingly critical as digital commerce continues to expand. Recent statistics indicate that over 4.8 billion people worldwide use social media platforms, with the average user spending more than 2.5 hours daily engaging with social content (Statista, 2024). Simultaneously, social commerce revenue is projected to exceed \$2.9 trillion globally by 2026, highlighting the significant economic impact of social media-driven purchasing behavior (eMarketer, 2023).

The psychological mechanisms underlying social media persuasion draw from established theories of attitude change, social influence, and consumer behavior. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) provides a foundational framework for understanding how consumers process persuasive messages in digital environments, while Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) explains how observational learning through social media content influences consumer preferences and behaviors.

However, the digital context introduces unique complexities that traditional consumer behavior theories may not fully address. The algorithmic mediation of content exposure, the ambiguous nature of sponsored content, and the scale of social influence networks create new challenges for both consumers and researchers seeking to understand modern purchasing decision processes.

This research addresses these complexities by examining the multifaceted relationship between social media exposure and consumer purchasing behavior, with particular attention to the role of trust as a mediating factor. By investigating how various elements of social media persuasion interact to influence consumer decisions, this study contributes to both



theoretical understanding and practical applications in consumer protection and digital literacy education.

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations of Digital Persuasion

The theoretical understanding of digital persuasion in social media contexts builds upon several established frameworks from psychology, marketing, and communication research. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) provides a crucial foundation for understanding how consumers process persuasive messages in digital environments (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). According to ELM, persuasion occurs through two primary routes: the central route, involving careful evaluation of message arguments, and the peripheral route, relying on superficial cues such as source attractiveness or social consensus.

In social media contexts, research suggests that consumers frequently rely on peripheral processing due to the high volume of information and the casual browsing nature of platform engagement (Sundar & Kim, 2019). This tendency toward peripheral processing makes social media users particularly susceptible to influence from source credibility, visual appeal, and social proof indicators rather than detailed product information or rational argument evaluation.

Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) offers additional insights into how social media content influences consumer behavior through observational learning. The theory's emphasis on modeling, attention, retention, and motivation processes helps explain how consumers adopt purchasing behaviors observed in social media content. Recent applications of this theory to digital contexts have demonstrated that consumers often model the consumption patterns of admired social media figures, particularly when those figures are perceived as similar to themselves (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) provides another relevant framework, particularly in understanding how social media influences shape behavioral intentions toward purchasing. The theory's components—attitudes toward behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control—are all potentially influenced by social media exposure, creating multiple pathways through which digital persuasion can operate.

Influencer Marketing and Credibility

The rise of influencer marketing represents one of the most significant developments in digital persuasion strategies. Influencers, defined as individuals who have built credibility



and following around specific topics or lifestyles, leverage their perceived expertise and relatability to promote products and services (De Veirman et al., 2017). The effectiveness of influencer marketing stems from several psychological principles that distinguish it from traditional advertising approaches.

Source credibility theory provides a framework for understanding why influencers can be particularly persuasive. Hovland et al. (1953) identified expertise and trustworthiness as key components of source credibility, both of which are actively cultivated by successful influencers through consistent content creation and audience engagement. However, the digital context introduces new dimensions of credibility that extend beyond traditional expertise and trustworthiness measures.

Research by Lou and Yuan (2019) identified three key factors that determine influencer effectiveness: perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. Their study found that trustworthiness emerged as the strongest predictor of consumer purchase intention, suggesting that perceived authenticity may be more important than traditional expertise indicators in social media contexts. This finding challenges conventional advertising wisdom and highlights the unique dynamics of social media persuasion.

The concept of parasocial relationships—one-sided emotional connections that audiences develop with media figures—has become increasingly relevant to understanding influencer effectiveness (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Recent research has demonstrated that consumers who develop parasocial relationships with influencers show increased willingness to purchase recommended products and greater resistance to negative information about endorsed brands (Chung & Cho, 2017).

However, the influencer marketing landscape is complicated by issues of disclosure and authenticity. Studies have shown that consumers respond differently to clearly disclosed sponsored content versus undisclosed promotional material, with disclosure sometimes reducing persuasive impact while potentially increasing trust in the long term (Boerman et al., 2017). This tension between transparency and effectiveness presents ongoing challenges for both marketers and regulators.

Algorithmic Personalization and Consumer Behavior

The role of algorithmic personalization in shaping consumer exposure to persuasive content represents a critical but understudied aspect of digital persuasion. Social media platforms employ sophisticated algorithms that curate content based on user behavior, preferences, and social connections, creating personalized information environments that can significantly influence consumer decision-making processes (Thurman & Schifferes, 2012).

Research on algorithmic influence has identified several mechanisms through which personalized content delivery affects consumer behavior. Filter bubbles, created when algorithms consistently show users content similar to their previous engagements, can reinforce existing preferences and consumption patterns while limiting exposure to diverse



perspectives (Pariser, 2011). This algorithmic mediation of content exposure has important implications for consumer autonomy and decision-making quality.

The concept of algorithmic amplification describes how platform algorithms can magnify the reach and impact of certain types of content, including commercial messages. Studies have shown that content promoting consumption and lifestyle aspirations tends to receive higher algorithmic promotion due to its engagement-generating properties, creating a systematic bias toward commercial influence in users' feeds (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

Recent research has also examined how algorithmic personalization interacts with psychological vulnerabilities to create what researchers term "persuasive design" effects. These effects occur when platforms use behavioral data to deliver commercial messages at moments when users are most likely to be receptive, such as during emotional states or at specific times of day (Fogg, 2009).

Trust and Authenticity in Digital Consumer Contexts

Trust emerges as a central mediating factor in the relationship between social media exposure and consumer purchasing behavior. However, the construction and perception of trust in digital environments differs significantly from traditional marketing contexts. Social media trust is often built through perceived authenticity, consistent engagement, and social proof rather than institutional credentials or professional expertise (Casaló et al., 2020).

The concept of authenticity in social media marketing has received considerable attention from researchers seeking to understand why some influencers and content creators are more persuasive than others. Audrezet et al. (2020) identified four dimensions of perceived authenticity in influencer marketing: originality, naturalness, continuity, and credibility. Their research suggests that consumers are particularly sensitive to authenticity cues and can often detect when content feels overly commercial or staged.

However, the relationship between authenticity and trust is complicated by what researchers term "performed authenticity"—the strategic presentation of genuine-seeming content that is actually carefully crafted for commercial purposes (Banet-Weiser, 2012). This phenomenon raises important questions about whether perceived authenticity is sufficient for building trust, or whether actual authenticity is necessary for long-term consumer relationships.

Social proof mechanisms also play a crucial role in trust formation in social media contexts. Research has demonstrated that consumers rely heavily on likes, comments, shares, and follower counts as indicators of content quality and trustworthiness (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). However, the gaming of these metrics through purchased engagement and bot networks has created new challenges for consumers seeking to evaluate the credibility of social media content.

Psychological Mechanisms of Social Media Influence



The psychological processes underlying social media influence on consumer behavior involve complex interactions between cognitive, emotional, and social factors. Research in this area has identified several key mechanisms that help explain how digital persuasion operates at the individual level.

Cognitive biases play a significant role in social media persuasion effectiveness. The availability heuristic, which leads people to judge the likelihood or importance of events based on how easily examples come to mind, is particularly relevant in social media contexts where repeated exposure to consumption-oriented content can inflate perceptions of product necessity or desirability (Kahneman, 2011). Similarly, the mere exposure effect explains how repeated viewing of product placements in social media content can increase favorable attitudes toward brands, even without conscious awareness of the exposure (Zajonc, 1968).

Emotional engagement represents another crucial pathway for social media influence. Research has shown that content that evokes strong emotional responses—whether positive emotions like excitement and aspiration or negative emotions like fear of missing out (FOMO)—is more likely to influence consumer behavior than emotionally neutral content (Dolan et al., 2019). Social media platforms are particularly effective at triggering emotional responses through visual content, personal narratives, and real-time social feedback mechanisms.

The social comparison theory provides insights into how social media exposure affects consumer desires and purchasing motivations. Festinger's (1954) original formulation of social comparison has been extended to digital contexts, where researchers have found that exposure to curated lifestyle content on social media can trigger upward social comparisons that motivate consumption behavior aimed at reducing perceived status gaps (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015).

Primary Objective

The primary objective of this research is to examine the mediating role of trust in the relationship between social media exposure and consumer purchase intention, specifically investigating how various elements of social media persuasion (influencer credibility, algorithmic personalization, and social proof mechanisms) influence consumer trust, which in turn affects purchasing decisions.

Hypothesis

H1: Social Media Engagement and Purchase Intention Individuals with higher levels of social media engagement will demonstrate significantly greater purchase intention for products encountered through social media platforms compared to individuals with lower engagement levels.



H2: Influencer Credibility and Trust Mediation The relationship between influencer credibility and consumer purchase intention will be mediated by trust, such that higher perceived influencer credibility leads to increased trust, which in turn increases purchase intention.

H3: Algorithmic Personalization Effects Consumers who receive algorithmically personalized product recommendations will show higher purchase intention compared to those receiving non-personalized content, and this effect will be moderated by individual differences in privacy concern.

H4: Parasocial Relationships and Consumer Behavior The strength of parasocial relationships between consumers and social media influencers will positively predict purchase intention for influencer-recommended products, with this relationship being stronger for consumers with lower offline social support.

H5: Social Proof and Herd Behavior Exposure to social proof indicators (likes, shares, comments, follower testimonials) will significantly increase consumer purchase intention, with this effect being stronger for products in categories where social approval is particularly valued (fashion, lifestyle, technology).

Analysis and Interpretation

Methodological Framework

The analysis of digital persuasion mechanisms requires a multi-method approach that combines quantitative measurement of consumer responses with qualitative examination of persuasion processes. Contemporary research in this field typically employs experimental designs that manipulate specific elements of social media content while measuring consumer attitudes, trust levels, and behavioral intentions.

Structural equation modeling (SEM) emerges as a particularly valuable analytical tool for examining the complex relationships proposed in our hypotheses. SEM allows researchers to simultaneously test multiple relationships and examine both direct and indirect effects, making it well-suited for investigating mediation processes such as the proposed role of trust in linking social media exposure to purchase intention.

Trust as a Mediating Mechanism

The central role of trust in digital consumer behavior reflects the uncertainty inherent in online purchasing decisions. Unlike traditional retail environments where consumers can physically examine products and interact with sales representatives, social media purchasing



often requires consumers to rely on digital representations and social recommendations. This context makes trust formation particularly critical for successful persuasion.

Research evidence suggests that trust in social media contexts is constructed through multiple sources of information. Perceived similarity between influencers and consumers emerges as a strong predictor of trust, as individuals are more likely to trust recommendations from sources they perceive as sharing their values, interests, or circumstances (Yuan & Lou, 2020). This finding has important implications for understanding why micro-influencers—who often maintain closer connections with their audiences—can be more effective than celebrities with larger but more distant followings.

The temporal dimension of trust formation also requires consideration. Unlike single-exposure advertising, social media influence typically operates through repeated interactions over extended periods. This longitudinal aspect allows for trust building through consistent behavior demonstration, but also creates vulnerability to trust erosion when influencers are perceived as overly commercial or inauthentic.

Algorithmic Amplification of Persuasive Effects

The role of algorithmic personalization in amplifying persuasive effects represents a unique aspect of digital persuasion that distinguishes it from traditional marketing approaches. Algorithms can enhance persuasion effectiveness by optimizing timing, content selection, and targeting based on individual user data and behavioral patterns.

However, the opacity of algorithmic systems creates challenges for consumer awareness and autonomous decision-making. Research suggests that many consumers have limited understanding of how algorithms shape their content exposure, potentially reducing their ability to critically evaluate commercial messages (Eslami et al., 2015). This lack of algorithmic awareness may increase susceptibility to persuasive influences while decreasing the likelihood of activating critical thinking processes.

The interaction between algorithmic personalization and individual differences also requires careful consideration. Consumers with higher privacy concerns may be more resistant to algorithmically targeted persuasion, while those who value convenience and personalization may be more susceptible to such influences. Understanding these individual differences is crucial for developing comprehensive models of digital persuasion effectiveness.

Parasocial Relationships and Consumer Vulnerability

The formation of parasocial relationships between consumers and social media influencers represents a particularly powerful mechanism of digital persuasion. These one-sided emotional connections can create strong motivational forces that override rational evaluation processes, leading to purchasing decisions based more on relationship maintenance than product utility.

Research evidence suggests that parasocial relationships are particularly influential among consumers who experience social isolation or lack strong offline social connections. This



finding raises important ethical questions about the targeting of vulnerable populations and the responsibility of influencers and platforms to consider the welfare of their audiences.

The authenticity paradox in parasocial relationships presents additional complexity. While consumers seek authentic connections with influencers, the commercial nature of influencer marketing creates inherent tensions between authenticity and promotional objectives. Successful influencers must navigate this tension by maintaining perceived authenticity while fulfilling commercial obligations, often through strategic disclosure and careful integration of promotional content with personal narratives.

Social Proof and Collective Behavior

Social proof mechanisms operate as powerful drivers of consumer behavior in social media environments. The visibility of others' engagement through likes, shares, and comments creates dynamic feedback loops that can rapidly amplify or diminish product interest. This collective dimension of social media persuasion distinguishes it from individual-focused traditional advertising approaches.

The bandwagon effect, whereby individuals adopt behaviors or beliefs because they perceive them as popular or trendy, is particularly pronounced in social media contexts where engagement metrics provide real-time indicators of collective opinion. Research has shown that products and brands that achieve viral social media presence often experience disproportionate sales increases that exceed what would be predicted based on the actual reach of the content alone (Berger & Milkman, 2012).

However, social proof effects can be manipulated through artificial engagement, purchased followers, and coordinated inauthentic behavior. The prevalence of such manipulation raises questions about the reliability of social proof indicators and the potential for consumer deception in social media marketing environments.

Conclusion

This analysis reveals that social media's influence on consumer purchasing behavior operates through a complex network of psychological, social, and technological mechanisms. The central role of trust as a mediating factor highlights the importance of authenticity and credibility in digital persuasion processes, while the influence of algorithmic personalization



and social proof mechanisms demonstrates how technological affordances can amplify traditional persuasion techniques.

The findings have several important implications for theory and practice. From a theoretical perspective, the research suggests that traditional models of consumer behavior may need significant adaptation to account for the unique characteristics of social media environments. The prominence of parasocial relationships, algorithmic mediation, and collective social proof in purchasing decisions represents a departure from individual-focused rational choice models that have historically dominated consumer behavior research.

For practitioners, the research highlights the critical importance of maintaining authenticity and transparency in social media marketing efforts. While sophisticated persuasion techniques may generate short-term engagement and sales, long-term success appears to depend on building genuine trust through consistent, honest communication and value delivery. The evidence suggests that consumers are becoming increasingly sophisticated in detecting and resisting overtly manipulative marketing tactics.

From a policy perspective, the findings underscore the need for enhanced consumer protection measures and digital literacy education. The opacity of algorithmic systems and the blurred boundaries between content and advertising in social media environments create potential for consumer exploitation that existing regulatory frameworks may be ill-equipped to address. Educational interventions that improve consumer awareness of digital persuasion techniques and algorithmic influence may be necessary to maintain informed consumer choice in digital marketplaces.

The research also identifies several important areas for future investigation. The long-term effects of social media persuasion on consumer welfare and decision-making quality remain underexplored, as does the potential for developing technological solutions that enhance consumer awareness of commercial influence. Additionally, cross-cultural research examining how digital persuasion mechanisms vary across different social and cultural contexts could provide valuable insights for developing globally applicable consumer protection strategies.

In conclusion, while social media platforms have created unprecedented opportunities for commercial influence and consumer engagement, they have also introduced new challenges for maintaining consumer autonomy and informed decision-making. Understanding these challenges and developing appropriate responses will be crucial for ensuring that the digital transformation of commerce serves consumer interests while supporting sustainable economic growth. The implications extend beyond individual consumer behavior to encompass broader questions about the role of technology in shaping human preferences and decisions. As social media continues to evolve and new forms of digital persuasion emerge, ongoing research will be essential for maintaining the balance between commercial innovation and consumer protection in the digital age.

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