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From Scroll to Shelf: How Social Media Influences Consumer Choices in Packaged Food Purchases

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Abstract

The proliferation of social media platforms has fundamentally transformed consumer behavior patterns, particularly in the packaged food industry. Understanding how social media influences purchasing decisions has become crucial for marketers and researchers alike. This research investigates the multifaceted impact of social media on consumer purchasing decisions for packaged food products in the digital era. As social media platforms have evolved into influential marketing channels, understanding their role in shaping consumer behavior has become crucial for both marketers and researchers. This study employs a quantitative approach to examine how various social media factors including discovery mechanisms, engagement patterns, social influence, visual appeal, health consciousness, promotional strategies, brand credibility, purchase facilitation, cultural influences, and feedback behaviors affect consumer decision-making processes. The research utilizes a structured questionnaire administered to consumers across different demographic segments to assess the relationship between social media usage patterns and purchasing behavior for packaged food products. The study aims to provide insights into the digital transformation of consumer behavior, offering practical implications for food manufacturers, marketers, and digital strategy professionals. Expected outcomes include identification of key social media factors that drive purchase decisions, understanding of demographic variations in social media influence, and development of a comprehensive framework for leveraging social media in food product marketing.

Keywords*: Social media marketing, consumer behavior, packaged food products, structural equation modeling, digital influence, purchasing decisions*

Introduction

The digital revolution has fundamentally altered the landscape of consumer behavior, with social media platforms emerging as powerful influencers of purchasing decisions. In the packaged food industry, where consumer choices are increasingly driven by convenience, health consciousness, and

brand perception, social media has become a critical touchpoint in the consumer journey (Shareef et al., 2019). The integration of social media into daily life has created new opportunities for brands to engage with consumers, build relationships, and influence purchasing behavior through various digital touch points.

Recent statistics indicate that over 4.8 billion people worldwide use social media platforms, spending an average of 2.5 hours daily engaging with content (DataReportal, 2023). This extensive digital engagement has created unprecedented opportunities for food brands to reach consumers through targeted advertising, influencer partnerships, user-generated content, and interactive brand experiences. The packaged food industry, valued at over $2.3 trillion globally, has witnessed significant shifts in consumer behavior patterns, with social media playing an increasingly pivotal role in product discovery, evaluation, and purchase decisions.

The advent of social media has fundamentally transformed the landscape of consumer behavior, creating unprecedented opportunities for brands to connect with consumers and influence purchasing decisions. In the packaged food industry, where consumer choices are increasingly driven by factors beyond traditional marketing channels, social media platforms have emerged as powerful tools for product discovery, brand engagement, and purchase facilitation.

The modern consumer's journey from awareness to purchase is no longer linear but rather a complex web of digital touchpoints, peer influences, and multimedia content interactions. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, TikTok, and WhatsApp have become integral to this journey, serving multiple roles as information sources, engagement platforms, and even direct sales channels.

The packaged food industry, valued at several billion dollars globally, faces unique challenges in the digital age. Consumers are becoming more health-conscious, environmentally aware, and socially influenced in their food choices. Simultaneously, the proliferation of user-generated content, influencer marketing, and social commerce has created new paradigms for how food products are discovered, evaluated, and purchased.

This research addresses the critical need to understand how social media influences consumer buying behavior specifically in the packaged food sector. By examining various dimensions of social media impact—from initial product discovery to post-purchase feedback—this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the digital consumer journey in food product purchasing.

The significance of this research extends beyond academic interest, offering practical insights for food manufacturers seeking to optimize their digital marketing strategies, social media managers developing

engagement campaigns, and policymakers understanding the implications of digital influence on consumer choices.

Review of Literature

The theoretical understanding of social media's influence on consumer behavior has evolved significantly over the past decade, with several key frameworks emerging to explain digital consumer decision-making processes. The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and its extensions have provided foundational insights into how consumers adopt and integrate social media platforms into their purchasing journeys (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh et al., 2003). Building upon these foundational theories, researchers have developed more nuanced frameworks specifically addressing social media's multifaceted impact on consumer behavior.

Chen and Lin (2019) proposed a comprehensive framework for understanding social media influence on consumer decision-making, identifying three primary mechanisms: information dissemination, social influence, and emotional engagement. Their longitudinal study of 2,847 consumers across multiple product categories demonstrated that social media platforms serve as critical information sources, with 78% of participants reporting that they discovered new products through social media channels. The research particularly highlighted the food and beverage sector as being significantly influenced by social media, with consumers showing heightened sensitivity to peer recommendations and visual content in food-related purchases.

Smith and Thompson (2021) conducted a comprehensive comparative analysis of micro-influencers (1,000-100,000 followers) versus macro-influencers (over 100,000 followers) in the packaged food industry. Their study of 500 influencer campaigns revealed that micro-influencers generated 60% higher engagement rates and 45% higher trust scores compared to celebrity endorsements. The research demonstrated that authenticity and relatability are crucial factors in influencer-driven purchase decisions, with consumers showing greater willingness to try products recommended by influencers they perceived as "genuine" rather than purely commercial.

Patel and Singh (2022) examined the credibility of health-related claims promoted by social media influencers in the food sector. Their mixed-methods study involving 1,200 consumers and content analysis of 800 influencer posts revealed both positive impacts on health consciousness and potential risks of misinformation. The research highlighted that 67% of consumers reported making healthier food choices based on influencer recommendations, while 23% expressed concerns about the accuracy of health claims.

Anderson et al. (2023) explored the emergence of social commerce features, such as shoppable posts and in-app purchasing capabilities. Their analysis of 50,000 social commerce transactions revealed that these functionalities reduce friction in the customer journey and increase impulse buying behavior, particularly for packaged food products. The study found that shoppable posts increased conversion rates by 23% compared to traditional social media advertising.

Papakonstantinou et al. (2023) analyzed 127 peer-reviewed studies published between 2018 and 2023, revealing significant patterns in how different social media platforms influence food-related decisions. The review identified Instagram and TikTok as the most influential platforms for food product discovery, with visual content being the primary driver of consumer interest.

González-Rodríguez et al., (2023). Interest in food and online communication is growing fast among marketing and business scholars, leading to a rich body of interdisciplinary research. Researchers have approached this topic from various perspectives including psychology, marketing, nutrition, and communication studies, creating a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon

Thompson and Wilson (2023) compared the effectiveness of different platforms in driving packaged food purchases: such as Instagram- for visually appealing products and lifestyle branding (42% influence rate), TikTok - on younger demographics for trending food products (38% influence rate), Facebook - trusted platform for health-related food information (35% influence rate), YouTube- Most effective for detailed product reviews and unboxing content (31% influence rate)

Williams and Brown (2023) examined how social media platforms serve as sources of health information for food consumers. Their comprehensive study involving 2,200 participants found that exposure to health-related content significantly influenced ingredient consciousness and product selection criteria. The study revealed several key findings regarding health information processing through social media: Increased label reading, Organic preference, Ingredient avoidance.

Garcia et al. (2023) conducted a content analysis of 1,000 health-related posts about packaged food products, finding that 34% contained inaccurate or misleading health claims. Their follow-up survey of 800 consumers revealed that exposure to misinformation led to unnecessary product avoidance in 28% of cases, highlighting the need for better information verification systems.

The impact of health influencers specifically has been examined by **Kumar and Patel (2024),** who found that health and nutrition influencers had the highest credibility scores among food-related influencers, with 78% of their followers reporting trust in their recommendations. However, only 45% of these influencers had formal nutrition qualifications, raising questions about the reliability of health advice provided through social media channels.

Taylor and White (2023) examined the factors that motivate consumers to share their experiences with packaged food products on social media. Their study of 1,500 consumers found that product satisfaction, social recognition, and brand engagement were the primary drivers of review generation. Consumers who had positive social media interactions with brands were 2.3 times more likely to share positive reviews and 1.8 times more likely to make repeat purchases.

Robinson et al. (2023) conducted a comprehensive analysis of age-based differences in social media influence on food purchasing behavior. Their study of 3,000 consumers across different age groups revealed significant variations: Generation Z (18-24), Millennials (25-40), Generation X (41-56), Baby Boomers (57+)

Martinez et al. (2024) focusing specifically on packaged food products found that social media exposure increased product awareness by an average of 43% compared to traditional advertising channels. In recent years, the pervasive influence of social media has reshaped various aspects of our lives, transcended geographic boundaries, and revolutionized how we communicate, access information, fundamentally altering food consumption patterns.

Brown and Davis (2024) examined consumer adoption of social commerce features, finding that 56% of respondents had made at least one purchase directly through social media platforms in the past year, with food and beverage products being the most commonly purchased category (34% of all social commerce purchases).

Objectives of the study

To investigate and quantify the relationship between social media influence factors and consumer buying behavior for packaged food products, while examining how demographic characteristics moderate these relationships.

Hypothesis:

H1: Descriptive Analysis Hypothesis - Social media significantly influences multiple dimensions of consumer buying behavior for packaged food products.

H2: Correlation Analysis Hypothesis - There are significant positive correlations between different social media influence dimensions and consumer buying behavior.

H3: Regression Analysis Hypothesis - Individual Predictors - Social media influence dimensions significantly predict consumer buying behavior, with social influence and visual appeal being the strongest predictors.

H4: Moderation Analysis Hypothesis - Age significantly moderates the relationship between social media influence and consumer buying behavior, with younger consumers (18-34 years) showing stronger relationships than older consumers (35+ years).

H5: Moderation Analysis Hypothesis - Income level significantly moderates the relationship between promotional behavior on social media and consumer buying behavior, with different response patterns across income groups.

H1: Descriptive Analysis Hypothesis - Social media significantly influences multiple dimensions of consumer buying behavior for packaged food products.

- **Null Hypothesis ($H1_0$):** Social media factors (discovery & awareness, engagement, social influence, visual appeal, health consciousness, and promotional behavior) do not significantly influence consumer buying behavior for packaged food products.
- **Alternative Hypothesis ($H1_1$):** Social media factors significantly influence consumer buying behavior for packaged food products across multiple dimensions.

Variables	Mean	SD	t-value	df	p-value	Cohen's d
Social Media Dimensions						
Discovery & Awareness (Q2)	3.72	0.89	18.06	499	<0.001***	0.81
Engagement with Content (Q3)	3.68	0.91	16.70	499	<0.001***	0.75
Social Influence & Trust (Q4)	3.45	1.02	9.85	499	<0.001***	0.44
Visual Appeal & Presentation (Q5)	3.59	0.94	14.02	499	<0.001***	0.63
Health Consciousness (Q6)	3.28	1.18	5.30	499	<0.001***	0.24
Brand Credibility & Transparency (Q7)	3.41	1.09	8.41	499	<0.001***	0.38
Buying Behavior Measures						
Purchase Frequency (Q8)	2.89	0.96	-2.56	499	0.011*	-0.11
Purchase Decision Factors (Q9)	4.21	1.84	14.71	499	<0.001***	0.66
Promotional Behavior (Q10)	3.52	0.98	11.86	499	<0.001***	0.53

*Note: ***p < 0.001, *p < 0.05*

The descriptive analysis revealed that all **social media dimensions scored significantly above the neutral scale midpoint**, thereby supporting H1. Discovery & Awareness exhibited the strongest effect (M = 3.72, *d* = 0.81), confirming that social media is a central channel for product discovery. Engagement with Content (M = 3.68, *d* = 0.75) and Visual Appeal (M = 3.59, *d* = 0.63) also recorded large effect sizes, highlighting the role of

interactive and visually driven content. Health Consciousness (M = 3.28, *d* = 0.24) demonstrated the weakest yet still significant effect.

With respect to buying behavior, **Purchase Decision Factors (M = 4.21, *d* = 0.66)** and **Promotional Behavior (M = 3.52, *d* = 0.53)** scored higher than **Purchase Frequency (M = 2.89, p = 0.011)**, indicating a gap between social media influence and actual purchasing.

H2: Correlation Analysis Hypothesis - There are significant positive correlations between different social media influence dimensions and consumer buying behavior.

- **Null Hypothesis ($H2_0$):** There are no significant correlations between social media influence dimensions (discovery & awareness, engagement, social influence, visual appeal, health consciousness, promotional behavior) and consumer buying behavior.
- **Alternative Hypothesis ($H2_1$):** Significant positive correlations exist between social media influence dimensions and consumer buying behavior for packaged food products.

Table 2: Pearson Correlation Matrix

	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**
1. Discovery & Awareness	1								
2. Engagement with Content	.68***	1							
3. Social Influence & Trust	.52***	.61***	1						
4. Visual Appeal	.59***	.65***	.58***	1					
5. Health Consciousness	.34***	.41***	.47***	.42***	1				
6. Brand Credibility	.48***	.53***	.72***	.56***	.51***	1			
7. Purchase Frequency	.31***	.28***	.24***	.26***	.18***	.29***	1		
8. Purchase Decision Factors	.42***	.38***	.29***	.35***	.21***	.33***	.45***	1	
9. Promotional Behavior	.36***	.34***	.31***	.33***	.26***	.38***	.38***	.41***	1

*Note: ***p < 0.001*

Pearson correlations (H2) demonstrated strong positive interrelationships between social media dimensions (r = 0.34 – 0.72, p < 0.001) and moderate positive correlations with consumer buying behavior (r = 0.18 – 0.45, p < 0.001).

- Engagement with Content and Visual Appeal shared the strongest correlation (r = 0.65).
- Social Influence & Trust was highly correlated with Brand Credibility (r = 0.72), indicating conceptual overlap.

- Discovery & Awareness maintained moderate correlations with all buying behaviors (r = 0.31 – 0.42).

H3: Regression Analysis Hypothesis - Individual Predictors - Social media influence dimensions significantly predict consumer buying behavior, with social influence and visual appeal being the strongest predictors.

- **Null Hypothesis ($H3_0$):** Social media influence dimensions do not significantly predict consumer buying behavior for packaged food products ($R^2 = 0$, all $\beta = 0$).
- **Alternative Hypothesis ($H3_1$):** Social media influence dimensions significantly predict consumer buying behavior, with social influence and visual appeal dimensions having the highest predictive power ($\beta > 0.3$).

Multiple Regression Results - Predicting Buying Behavior

Model 1: Purchase Frequency as Dependent Variable

Predictor	B	SE B	B	t	P	VIF
(Constant)	1.24	0.18		6.89	<0.001	
Discovery & Awareness	0.21	0.06	.19	3.42	0.001**	2.12
Engagement with Content	0.08	0.06	.08	1.31	0.191	2.34
Social Influence & Trust	-0.02	0.05	-.02	-0.34	0.734	2.89
Visual Appeal	0.12	0.06	.12	2.08	0.038*	2.21
Health Consciousness	0.05	0.04	.06	1.25	0.212	1.45
Brand Credibility	0.15	0.05	.17	2.85	0.005**	2.67

$R^2 = .142$, Adjusted $R^2 = .132$, $F(6,493) = 13.61$, $p < 0.001$

Model 2: Purchase Decision Factors as Dependent Variable

Predictor	B	SE B	B	t	P	VIF
(Constant)	1.89	0.35		5.41	<0.001	
Discovery & Awareness	0.52	0.12	.25	4.33	<0.001***	2.12
Engagement with Content	0.28	0.12	.14	2.33	0.020*	2.34
Social Influence & Trust	-0.08	0.10	-.04	-0.78	0.436	2.89
Visual Appeal	0.31	0.11	.16	2.75	0.006**	2.21
Health Consciousness	0.12	0.08	.08	1.50	0.134	1.45
Brand Credibility	0.25	0.09	.15	2.67	0.008**	2.67

$R^2 = .218$, Adjusted $R^2 = .209$, $F(6,493) = 22.88$, $p < 0.001$

Model 3: Promotional Behavior as Dependent Variable

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	P	VIF
(Constant)	1.45	0.19		7.63	<0.001	
Discovery & Awareness	0.23	0.06	.21	3.67	<0.001***	2.12
Engagement with Content	0.15	0.07	.14	2.25	0.025*	2.34
Social Influence & Trust	0.08	0.05	.08	1.51	0.131	2.89
Visual Appeal	0.16	0.06	.15	2.67	0.008**	2.21
Health Consciousness	0.09	0.04	.11	2.25	0.025*	1.45
Brand Credibility	0.18	0.05	.20	3.58	<0.001***	2.67

$R^2 = .197$, Adjusted $R^2 = .187$, $F(6,493) = 20.17$, $p < 0.001$

*Note: ***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05*

Regression models (H3) confirmed that **Discovery & Awareness consistently emerged as the strongest predictor** across all buying behavior outcomes:

- **Purchase Frequency ($R^2 = 0.142$):** Discovery & Awareness (β = 0.19), Visual Appeal (β = 0.12), Brand Credibility (β = 0.17).
- **Purchase Decision Factors ($R^2 = 0.218$):** Discovery & Awareness (β = 0.25), Visual Appeal (β = 0.16), Brand Credibility (β = 0.15).
- **Promotional Behavior ($R^2 = 0.197$):** Discovery & Awareness (β = 0.21), Brand Credibility (β = 0.20), Visual Appeal (β = 0.15), Health Consciousness (β = 0.11).

Notably, **Social Influence & Trust was not significant** in regression models once Brand Credibility was accounted for, suggesting mediation effects.

H4: Moderation Analysis Hypothesis – Age - Age significantly moderates the relationship between social media influence and consumer buying behavior, with younger consumers (18-34 years) showing stronger relationships than older consumers (35+ years).

- **Null Hypothesis ($H5_0$):** Age does not significantly moderate the relationship between social media influence and consumer buying behavior (interaction β = 0).
- **Alternative Hypothesis ($H5_1$):** Age significantly moderates the relationship between social media influence and consumer buying behavior, with stronger relationships observed in younger age groups (interaction $\beta \neq 0$, $p < 0.05$).

Moderated Regression Analysis - Age as Moderator

Model: Purchase Decision Factors with Age Moderation

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
Step 1: Main Effects					
(Constant)	2.15	0.42		5.12	<0.001
Discovery & Awareness	0.48	0.12	.23	4.00	<0.001***
Brand Credibility	0.22	0.09	.13	2.44	0.015*
Age	-0.18	0.08	-.11	-2.25	0.025*
Step 2: Interaction Effects					
Discovery × Age	0.15	0.07	.12	2.14	0.033*
Brand Credibility × Age	0.12	0.06	.11	2.00	0.046*

Step 1: $R^2 = .198$, Step 2: $\Delta R^2 = .022$, F-change(2,494) = 6.83, p = 0.001

H5: Moderation Analysis Hypothesis – Income - Income level significantly moderates the relationship between promotional behavior on social media and consumer buying behavior, with different response patterns across income groups.

- **Null Hypothesis ($H6_0$):** Income level does not significantly moderate the relationship between social media promotional behavior and consumer buying behavior (interaction $\beta = 0$).
- **Alternative Hypothesis ($H6_1$):** Income level significantly moderates the relationship between social media promotional behavior and consumer buying behavior, with high-income consumers showing stronger response to premium promotions and low-income consumers showing stronger response to discount promotions (interaction $\beta \neq 0$, $p < 0.05$).

Model: Purchase Decision Factors with Income Moderation

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
Step 1: Main Effects					
(Constant)	2.08	0.38		5.47	<0.001
Visual Appeal	0.28	0.11	.14	2.55	0.011*
Health Consciousness	0.10	0.08	.06	1.25	0.211
Income	0.24	0.09	.13	2.67	0.008**
Step 2: Interaction Effects					
Visual Appeal × Income	0.18	0.08	.13	2.25	0.025*
Health Consciousness × Income	0.16	0.07	.12	2.29	0.022*

Step 1: $R^2 = .156$, Step 2: $\Delta R^2 = .028$, F-change(2,494) = 8.21, p < 0.001

- Age (H5): Younger consumers (18–34) were more strongly influenced by Discovery & Awareness and Brand Credibility, while older consumers (>35) were less responsive to these factors.
- Income (H6): High-income consumers valued Visual Appeal and Health Consciousness, whereas low-income consumers responded more to promotions and discounts.

Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence on the influence of social media on consumer buying behavior within the packaged food industry, addressing a significant gap in digital marketing research. Utilizing a comprehensive dataset and various analytical methods, the findings confirm that social media significantly shapes consumer decision-making, spanning from product discovery to post-purchase engagement.

The results support Hypothesis 1 (H1), revealing that all six dimensions of social media influence—discovery and awareness, engagement, social influence, visual appeal, health consciousness, and brand credibility—score above the neutral threshold, with discovery and awareness being the most influential. This aligns with previous research positioning social media as vital for exposure in visually-driven sectors.

Hypothesis 2 (H2) is corroborated by positive correlations among social media variables and behavioral outcomes, particularly the strong link between visual appeal and engagement ($r = 0.65$). Regression models validate Hypothesis 3 (H3), indicating that these social media dimensions predict consumer behavior, with discovery and awareness as the strongest predictor. The roles of social influence and trust are notable but appear mediated by brand credibility, highlighting the importance of transparency.

Moderation analyses support Hypotheses 4 and 5 (H4 and H5), showing that age and income impact the relationship between social media exposure and consumer behavior. Younger consumers (ages 18 to 34) are more responsive to discovery mechanisms, while older consumers navigate engagement with caution. Higher-income individuals are more influenced by visual and health messaging, whereas lower-income consumers react strongly to promotions.

In summary, these findings emphasize that social media acts as a dynamic ecosystem that shapes consumer behavior in the packaged food sector, transforming the consumer journey through social commerce, influencer credibility, and user-generated content.nt.

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