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Impact of Social Media on Consumer Spending Patterns and Mental Health

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Abstract

In the digital age, social media has changed from a basic way to communicate and now stands as a forceful tool that shapes consumer attitudes, spending habits, and mental health. This research looks at the influence social media has on consumer purchasing behaviour and the psychological impact it has on individuals based on their continuous use. Utilizing primary data from over 145 respondents to capture response from a variety of age groups, this study looks at the most impactful social media platforms, looks at the effect of screen time on daily decision making, and considers the role of advertisements and influencer promotions in impulse buying behaviour. The study determined that Instagram is the most impactful platform when influencing consumer behaviour, even with clothing, beauty, and food delivery. The study also found there is a clear link between high-level social media consumption and mental health issues including stress, comparison, and anxiety. Recommendations are given to increase digital literacy and increased consciousness in online citizenship. The study will add to the area of research looking at the dual nature of social media, the marketplace and the psychological environment for modern consumers.

Keywords: Consumer Behavior, Social Media Marketing, Mental Health, Impulse Buying, Influencer Marketing.

1. Introduction

Social media has fundamentally transformed consumer behavior and global communication. It started as a vehicle to connect people and now is a multi-billion-dollar marketplace where brands, influencers, and advertisers vie for consumer attention. As smartphones and Internet access increase, platforms like Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, Pinterest, and Twitter reach previously unseen levels of influence. Ongoing exposure to advertisements, influencer sponsorships, and curated lifestyles impacts consumers' attitudes, emotions, and purchasing behavior. All of this has led to the emergence of new buying trends, Such as:

- Impulse buying
- Emotional spending
- Influencer-driven shopping
- Subscription-based purchases
- Trend-specific buying behaviour

In addition to consumer spending, the emotional and psychological ramifications of social media have become troubling issues. Problems including FOMO (Fear of Missing Out), comparison, low self-esteem, and anxiety have emerged as a consequence of prolonged exposure to social media content. This research investigates how social media impacts consumer spending and mental health, supported with primary survey data from users.

2. Review of Literature

The impact of social media on consumer behavior and mental health has received ample attention from researchers in recent years. The literature has demonstrated that digital platforms have fundamentally altered how people engage with brands, make purchasing decisions, and view themselves.

- i). **Social Media as a Marketing Ecosystem:** Kotler and Keller (2020) have suggested that social media continues to change the marketing landscape by allowing brands to communicate directly with consumers. Digital platforms also provide personalized content using algorithms that can track user engagement and behavior, allowing marketers to target consumers with precision.

Appel *et al.* (2020) observed that social media allows organizations to develop visual storytelling, swift videos, and persuasive messaging that provide better consumer influence relative to traditional advertising.

- ii). **The Impact of Influencer Marketing:** Influencer marketing has become one of the main methods employed in a digital age. De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders (2017) point out that influencers establish parasocial relationships with their followers, which generates trust and enhances purchase intention. Given their lifestyle content, product reviews, and recommendations can truly sway consumers - particularly teenagers and young adults - this may be taken into consideration.

Belanche *et al.* (2021) discovered that compared to celebrities, consumers view the recommendations of influencers as more authentic and increase their dependence on influencer recommendations. In this case of increased dependence, consumers frequent impulsive purchasing actions that express emotional appeal, rather than rational decisions.

iii. Social Media and Impulse Buying Behaviour:

Verhagen and van Dolen (2011) found that aesthetically pleasing and emotionally-loaded visuals result in impulse purchases. TikTok, Instagram, and Pinterest create content centered around fast-moving trends in fashion, beauty, food, and travel. Lim, Lee, and Yoon (2017) conducted a study that found that social media ads and posts by influencers can create an immediate emotional response, eliminating cognitive processing that leads to an impulse purchase. This agrees with your results, as clothing, beauty, and lifestyle were the top influenced categories.

iv. Social Media Usage and Mental Health: The psychological impact of social media has been analyzed in various studies. The research of Primack *et al.* (2017) found a connection between social media use and depression, anxiety, and feelings of inadequacy as users are inclined to compare themselves to others.

Increased curated content, filtered images of beauty, and pictures of luxury lifestyles contribute to a culture of unrealistic expectations, as observed by Fardouly *et al.* (2015), and this is having the effect of lowering users' self-esteem.

Surveys conducted by the American Psychological Association (2021) indicated that if individuals spend more than 3 hours on social media, they show higher signs of stress, emotional exhaustion, and internalized pressures.

v. Online Consumerism and Emotional Effects:

According to research by Sokolova & Kefi (2020), feelings of boredom, stress, or loneliness will all serve to increase levels of social media consumption, which can lead to purchasing unnecessary goods. Social media triggers the outcome of dopamine release, through likes, comments, and trends on social media, which allows users to feel engaged and excited (Meshi *et al.*, 2019). This cyclical emotional state gives consumers new motivations to 'follow trends', engage in fast-fashion, or live the 'influencer way of life.'

vi. Gaps in Existing Literature: While many studies focus on consumer behavior and mental health separately, there were few studies that married the two fields to observe the interactivity of emotional well-being and consumer engagement. Through your research you are able to make the connections based on a primary survey data engagement of:

- Social media usage
- Buying patterns
- Influencer impact
- Mental health effects
- Coping strategies based on primary survey data.

3. Objectives of the Study

- i. To evaluate social media usage patterns across different age groups.
- ii. To determine the influence of various social media platforms on purchasing decisions.
- iii. To examine the relationship between social media

advertisements/influencers and consumer spending habits.

- iv). To analyze the emotional and psychological impact of social media on users.
- v). To explore the coping mechanisms adopted by individuals to manage negative influences.

4. Research Questions

- i). Which social media platforms are most commonly used?
- ii). How much time do people spend on social media daily?
- iii). Does social media promote impulse buying and unnecessary spending?
- iv). What type of products are most influenced by social media promotions?
- v). Does social media usage impact mental health?
- vi). What strategies do users adopt to manage negative impacts?

5. Research Methodology

- i). **Research Design:** The current investigation is of descriptive research design, as it allows for the analysis of existing trends, behaviours, and perceptions of respondents. The design assists in quantifying variables such as influence of social media on respondents; consumer spending patterns; and budgeting behaviours. The implementation of quantitative primary data allows for measurable results, statistical interpretation of findings, and objective conclusions based on data collected from the respondents.

- ii). **Data Collection Method:** A structured Google Form survey was used to collect data directly aligned with the study's aims. The questionnaire used closed-ended questions, Likert scale items, and multiple-choice responses for obvious clarity/ease of responding. The compiled Google Form link was disseminated through digital platforms and social media channels. The PDF attached includes the unfiltered data responses, which were coded and cleaned for analysis.

- iii). **Sample Size:** A total of 145+ individuals took part in the survey. This sample size is deemed suitable and sufficient from a statistical point of view for descriptive project work. In consumer behaviour reports, a sample size of over 100 is often regarded as sufficient to identify trading activity, patterns, and common behavioural characteristics in a population. A sample size of over 145 participants shows an even higher reliability because it samples respondents from a diversity of opinion, demographic background, and usage activity in reference to social media.

Similarly, this sample size is also adequate enough to engage in meaningful subgroup analysis such as comparing across age groups, gender, time spent on social media, and purchasing behaviour without giving up on data validity. Further breakdown into multiple age categories (below 18, 18–25, 26–35, 36–45, and above 45) allows us to see that this study sampled from a broader group of social media users as opposed to always sampling from just a very young segment of the user population.

The survey sample utilized convenience sampling; however, given the relatively large sample size, it assisted somewhat in eliminating any sampling bias and generalizing the results across a demographic surface in a similar educational and social context. Therefore, this study of 145+ respondents is a reasonable beginning to

understand how social media can influence consumer spending behaviours and their effects on consumers' mental health.

iv). Sampling Technique: This research used a convenience sampling method although it represents a non-probabilistic approach to sampling. Convenience sampling was undertaken by selecting respondents based on convenience, money, accessibility, or other factors which facilitate participation. Convenience sampling is frequently used in behavioural and social research in circumstances where a substantial participant component tends to be voluntary and/or online. Convenience sampling is quick, and is suitable for exploratory and descriptive studies.

v). Data Tools: The survey instrument included carefully structured questions designed to gather insights across multiple dimensions relevant to the research topic. The key categories of questions were:

- **Demographics:** Age, gender, occupation, education level, and income group to understand respondent profiles.
- **Usage Patterns:** Frequency of social media use, preferred platforms, and time spent online.
- **Product Preferences:** Types of products frequently purchased online, brand choices, and factors influencing purchase decisions.
- **Psychological Impact:** Emotional triggers, impulse-buying tendencies, and motivational factors shaped by social media content.
- **Coping Mechanisms:** Strategies adopted by consumers to manage overspending, such as budgeting apps, spending limits, or mindful purchasing.

These data tools helped in obtaining a comprehensive understanding of how social media affects consumer decision-making and financial behaviour.

vi). Scope of the Study

The focus of this research study is on the behaviours of online purchasers (also known as e-consumers) within the range of respondents (including respondents' ages, professions, and levels of education) who reside primarily in metropolitan and semi-metropolitan areas. The findings from this research indicate that there are similarities among social media users in their behaviours related to how they utilise social media to access media content, find entertainment, and conduct commerce (purchasing or purchasing products and/or services). While this project focuses on e-consumer behaviour, its findings will be applicable in the realm of digital marketing and financial literacy, among others. The majority of the participants resided in India, however, because of the use of an online data collection method, this research represents a wider population than what one would find just in India.

6. Data Analysis & Interpretation

6.1. Demographic Profile

i). Age Distribution

The majority of respondents fall in the 18–25 year age group, indicating that young adults are the most active users of social media. This age group is also the most vulnerable to digital influence and impulsive buying.

Other groups:

- Below 18

- 26–35
- 36–45
- Above 45

ii). Gender

Most respondents were female, showing a higher participation rate in online surveys as well as potentially greater involvement in social media–driven shopping.

iii). Occupation

- Students (majority)
- Employed
- Self-employed
- Unemployed

This variety strengthens the quality of the data.

6.2. Social Media Usage Patterns

Platforms Used Most

From the dataset:

Table 1: Social Media Usage Patterns

| Platform | Users |
|-----------|----------------|
| Instagram | Extremely high |
| YouTube | High |
| Facebook | Moderate |
| Pinterest | Some users |
| Twitter/X | Few users |

i). Instagram — “Extremely High” Usage

Instagram emerges as the most dominant and influential platform among your respondents.

Reasons for high influence:

- **Highly Visual Platforms:** Images, reels, short videos attract attention quickly.
- **Massive Influencer Ecosystem:** Celebrities, micro-influencers, and content creators regularly promote products.
- **Built-in Shopping Features:** “Shop Now,” product tags, reels with purchase links.
- **Trend-driven Environment:** Fashion, beauty, lifestyle content spreads rapidly.
- **Appeal to Youth:** Majority of your respondents are 18–25, a demographic that uses Instagram the most.

Result

Instagram becomes the center of impulse buying, trend-following, and brand exposure, making it the strongest platform influencing spending behavior.

ii). YouTube — “High” Usage

YouTube is the second most used platform.

Reasons:

- Long-form content such as tutorials, reviews, and unboxing videos build trust.
- Influencer product reviews (tech, skincare, fashion) influence purchase decisions.
- YouTube ads are targeted through Google’s algorithm, making them highly visible.
- Users often research products here before buying.

Impact

YouTube plays a major role in planned purchases, especially for electronics, skincare, education-related content, and lifestyle tips.

iii). Facebook — “Moderate” Usage

Facebook still has a stable user base but less influence compared to Instagram and YouTube.

Reasons for Moderate Use:

- Young users prefer Instagram/Reels.
- Facebook is used mainly for:
 - Family connections
 - Community groups
 - Local business pages
- Ads on Facebook are visible but not as attractive to youth.

Impact

It influences purchases to some extent, especially among older age groups (26+).

iv). Pinterest — “Some Users”

Pinterest shows lower but still relevant usage.

Reasons:

- It is mainly used for ideas, inspiration, and mood boards, not for daily interaction.
- Popular among users who like:
 - Fashion ideas
 - Interior design
 - Art
 - Beauty inspiration
 - DIY projects

Impact

Pinterest influences creative decisions more than direct purchases, but users often discover new brands here.

v). Twitter/X — “Few Users”

Twitter/X has the lowest usage among your respondents.

Reasons:

- It is primarily a text-based platform.
- Not focused on visuals or shopping features.
- Users prefer Instagram or YouTube for lifestyle content.
- Limited role in product discovery.

Impact:

Low impact on consumer spending. Mainly used for:

- News
- Opinions
- Trending discussions

Interpretation

Instagram dominates because modern consumers respond more strongly to visual storytelling. The combination of:

- Aesthetic content
- Influencer recommendations
- Short videos
- Interactive shopping tools

Creates an environment where users can see a trend → feel

inspired → tap to buy — all within seconds.

YouTube follows because people trust detailed reviews more before buying expensive products like electronics or skincare. Facebook remains relevant but less powerful, Pinterest inspires ideas, and Twitter/X has minimal influence on shopping.

Daily Time Spent

The survey indicates:

- **1–3 hours:** Most common
- **3–5 hours:** Second highest
- **More than 5 hours:** Seen among many young users
- **Less than 1 hour:** Very few

i). 1–3 Hours: Most Common Usage Category

A majority of participants reported spending 1 to 3 hours daily on social media.

This indicates that:

- Social media is a regular part of their daily routine.
- These users check platforms multiple times a day, often during breaks, commuting, or before sleeping.
- Although not excessive, this level of usage is high enough for them to be constantly exposed to ads, influencers, and sponsored posts.

This group is likely to be influenced by repeated exposure to promotional content, even if their usage is moderate.

ii). 3–5 Hours: Second Highest Usage Category

A significant number of respondents spend 3 to 5 hours daily on social media.

This suggests a higher level of dependency.

Characteristics of this group:

- They consume a large variety of content: reels, stories, videos, product reviews, and posts.
- Higher screen time means greater susceptibility to impulse buying, especially when exposed to influencer promotions or trending products.
- This group is also more vulnerable to mental health effects such as comparison and FOMO (Fear of Missing Out).

This category reflects heavy but common usage among young adults in the digital era.

iii). More Than 5 Hours: Predominantly Young Users

A noticeable number of respondents reported spending more than 5 hours per day on social media.

Patterns observed:

- Mostly 18–25-year-olds fall into this category.
- These users show signs of high dependence or excessive social media engagement.
- Their buying behaviour is strongly influenced by constant exposure to:
 - Lifestyle influencers
 - Daily vlogs
 - Product hauls
 - Skincare routines
 - Fashion trends
- They are also the most susceptible to mental exhaustion, comparison, anxiety, and emotional instability resulting from social media.

This category highlights how younger users rely heavily on social media for entertainment, communication, and trends.

iv). Less Than 1 Hour: Least Common Usage

Very few respondents reported using social media for less than 1 hour daily.

This group typically includes:

- Older respondents (26+ or 36+ age groups)
- Working professionals with busy schedules
- Individuals who prefer offline interactions
- Users who consciously limit screen time for mental health reasons

These users are least influenced by online advertising and are generally more resistant to digital consumerism.

Interpretation

The distribution of daily time spent clearly shows that the majority of respondents fall into the moderate to heavy usage categories (1–5+ hours). As a result:

- Exposure to advertisements is extremely high,
- Influencer-based content is constantly seen,
- Impulse buying behaviour increases,
- Mental health is affected, especially among high-usage groups.

Thus, screen time is directly connected to both consumer spending patterns and psychological impact.

6.3. Influence on Spending Patterns

Are purchases made after seeing social media content?

Majority — Yes

Table 2: Top Product Categories Influenced by Social Media

| Rank | Category | Influence Level |
|------|--------------------|-----------------|
| 1 | Clothing & Fashion | Very High |
| 2 | Beauty & Skincare | High |
| 3 | Food Delivery | Moderate |
| 4 | Electronics | Moderate |
| 5 | Travel | Some |

Major Influence Sources

- Influencer promotions
- Sponsored ads
- E-commerce advertisements
- Friends and family content

Interpretation:

Digital influencers have replaced traditional celebrities in shaping purchase behaviour.

6.4. Impact on Mental Health

Respondents reported both positive and negative effects.

Positive Impacts

- Inspiration (fashion, art, fitness, recipes)
- Learning opportunities
- Entertainment

Negative Impacts

- Comparison
- Overthinking

- Anxiety
- Pressure to match lifestyle trends
- Impulse buying guilt

Mental health impact scores (1–5) show many respondents selecting 4 or 5, indicating substantial psychological influence.

6.5. Coping Strategies Used

Users adopt strategies like:

- Ignoring online ads
- Limiting screen time
- Following only meaningful accounts
- Avoiding influencers that cause comparison
- Taking digital detox breaks

These strategies help reduce emotional stress and unnecessary spending.

7. Key Findings

- Among the social media platforms, Instagram has had the greatest influence over purchasing decisions.
- People aged 18–25 are experiencing the highest levels of influence by this platform on their purchasing behaviour, which includes Clothing, Beauty and Food Delivery.
- Social media influencers aid in encouraging impulse purchasing behaviour.
- Overuse of social media can lead to anxiety, constant comparison to others and emotional strain.
- Coping mechanisms help some people cope with their impulse purchases but many continue to struggle with the urge to buy on impulse.

8. Discussion

The study revealed that social media platforms have developed a unique and persuasive marketing strategy characterized by an environment that relies heavily on psychological conditioning. Each day users of these networks see or experience thousands of visual images through advertisements, influencer posts and product promotions. Over time, individuals develop a composite understanding of what is desirable, needed or acceptable within their social group.

As a result, one of the significant outcomes of the research was to identify the extent to which social media creates a pressure to purchase trending items. With their highly visual capabilities, platforms, such as Instagram and YouTube, allow advertisers and influencers to market and promote products in visually attractive ways that create an impression for consumers that each item is a necessity for fitting in with the latest trends. This type of influence is particularly prevalent among younger adults, who tend to be more susceptible to content related to a particular lifestyle.

A second outcome of the research is that social media increases the likelihood of impulse purchasing due to emotional triggers associated with boredom, solitude or stress. The continuous scrolling of content and the algorithm-based nature of platforms provide opportunities for impulsivity in purchasing decisions. A user may not necessarily be purchasing an item based on their need but rather to alleviate emotions created as a result of social comparison or the persuasive power of advertising.

Social media is an effective tool for generating consumerism through curated, filtered content. The idealization of lifestyles, including perfect physical appearances, flawless skin care, extravagant vacations, and expensive luxury items,

leads to false expectations regarding what we can achieve. Unrealistic lifestyle expectations result in decreased self-worth and increased feelings of poor self-image.

The findings show that consumers lose control of their impulse purchases. Technologies that allow for immediate purchase methods (e.g., integrated shopping tools) have exacerbated consumer behaviour. By providing convenient means to purchase "visually appealing" products, as well as persuasive visual marketing, the combined effect of this ease of use makes social media an extremely powerful engine for influencing consumer behaviour.

Influencers are an important psychological component of social media. They create a sense of relatability and therefore generate trust and emotional closeness, which leads to increased credibility as compared to conventional advertising. Many users feel that they know influencers personally, so their endorsements carry much more weight than standard advertising recommendations. As a result, this relationship model, also known as para-social relationships, is a significant predictor of willingness to buy endorsed products.

Moreover, excessive screen time can play a role in emotional exhaustion and mental stress; people can feel overwhelmed when constantly seeing contrasting lifestyles and inadvertently "competing" with others on an ongoing basis due to social media. Constant comparisons, massive amounts of information, and the pressure to live up to the "perfect" life that others portray online can create significant emotional challenges, including low self-worth, anxiety, and compulsive online activity.

This research highlights the evolution of social media as a psychological marketing tool rather than simply a means of communicating. The combination of emotional triggers, visual stimuli, and influencers creates a new environment in which the products/services being marketed are filtered through the lens of their effect on our emotional and psychological health, as well as the financial pressure that they exert on consumers.

9. Conclusion

Ultimately, this study establishes us as both a Creator and Consumer in the age of Social Media. On one hand, we encourage and inspire creativity, collaboration, and communication among our peers; on the other hand, we can create conditions that lead to impulsive spending, emotional stress, and mental health problems. Thus, the findings demonstrate the direct relationships between consumer spending habits and emotional well-being as a result of exposure to social media.

To reduce negative impacts, digital literacy and mental health awareness must be promoted.

10. Recommendations

- i). **Limit Screen Time:** Use apps to restrict daily social media usage.
- ii). **Avoid Impulsive Purchases:** Verify products before buying.
- iii). **Follow Positive Content:** Unfollow accounts that cause stress.
- iv). **Increase Digital Awareness:** Educate users on how ads and algorithms work.
- v). **Practice Digital Detox:** Take regular breaks from social media.
- vi). **Mental Health Support:** Encourage counseling and emotional support if needed.

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