

The Double-Edged Role of Social Media Marketing in India: Consumer Engagement, Impulse Buying and Ethical Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how social media marketing (SMM) is increasingly influencing young Indian customers, with an emphasis on impulsive purchasing. Young people's everyday lives now concentrate around social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, where shoppable content, influencer endorsements, short-form videos, and targeted advertisements significantly impact consumer choices. The study emphasises how psychological factors, such as societal acceptance, peer pressure, emotional pleasure, and FOMO, drive impulsive purchasing. The study also critically analyses ethical issues that affect consumers such as privacy threats, deceptive advertising, phony reviews, and a lack of accessibility from influencers. Although social media marketing (SMM) provides businesses with useful tools to increase sales and brand engagement, the results show that innovation along with accountability must be balanced for long-term success

Keywords: “Social media, Social media marketing, Impulse buying, Young consumer, Challenges in Social media marketing”

1. INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, social media marketing (SMM) has become an immensely powerful force shaping consumer behaviours, especially the impulse purchasing habits of India's young consumers. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube are no longer just communication tools; they are persuasive marketplaces that leverage personalised content, emotional triggers, and influencer credibility to influence purchase decisions (Dubey, 2025). Recent Indian studies highlight how impulse buying spontaneous, unplanned purchases has surged in prominence. For instance, Goel and Sharma (2025) found a significant correlation between social media exposure and increased impulse buying behavior, noting the roles of targeted ads, influencer endorsements, and emotional stimuli in driving such purchases (Goel & Sharma, 2025)

Likewise, a study by Pal (2025) shows that the use of AI-based suggestions, customized advertisements, and simplified purchase services accelerate the urge to buy in Indian customers, as well as provokes ethical issues regarding the safety of personal data and its manipulation (Pal, 2025). And the impact of social presence such as live commerce and interactive services on stimulating a desire to buy can also be observed in the Indian e-commerce environment. An analysis based on the S-O-R model revealed that the utilization of platforms like Meesho and Flipkart Live leads to the enhancement of emotional arousal and social connectivity, which, in turn, promotes unplanned purchasing behavior by tech-savvy young customers (Rai and Srivastava, 2023).

In addition, industry-specific knowledge, e.g. in the food and beverage industry can be used to determine the impulse purchasing behavior in the Indian market. Sheoran (2024) noted that impulsive buying of F&B products

via social media is more often influenced by personal likes and brand affinities than by features of the products (Sheoran, 2024). And finally, the increasing role of influencers in social commerce has impacted impulse buying activities to a significant extent. Kumar et al. (2024) also discovered that over 54 percent of the variance in impulsive purchases in India can be explained by such factors as influencer authenticity, credibility, trust, and perceived value (Kumar et al., 2024).

By concentrating on the element of impulse buying, this paper discusses the implications that social media marketing (SMM) has on the purchasing habits of the young Indian consumers. It examines how strategies such as influencer marketing, reels, targeted ads, and personalised content impact instant purchases. Besides the following ethical issues as privacy, misleading marketing, the psychological aspects, like FOMO, peer pressure, etc., are also discussed in the study, and will prove useful to marketers and regulators.

2. SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media refers to internet-based applications and sites that enable users to produce, distribute and interact with user-generated content and to each other; in India, the sites have evolved out of the crude networking tools, to become the mighty socio-economic ecosystems that inform information flows, consumer culture, and discourse (Raj and Goswami, 2020). Research of Indian people during and after the COVID-19 pandemic has reported a steep rise in the use of platforms and content consumption on WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, especially to an extent that social media has now become the primary source of news, opinion, and consumption choices by citizens (Keelery, 2020; Singh et al., 2020). The two-sidedness of such growth is also emphasized by research: one side, the social media has made people more connected, companies and smaller sellers have the opportunity to find contact with customers inexpensively, but, on the other hand, it has provoked the emergence of risks such as misinformation and privacy concerns and contributed to an increase in screen-time or addictive behaviours among the young population (Raj & Goswami, 2020; Al-Zaman, 2021). Platforms Trend analyses of the Indian context indicate that functionality attributes such as instant messaging, short-form video, livestreaming and shoppable posts have changed both the pace and the antecedents of online activities and decreased the distance between the discovery and action and also made impulsive online responses (including purchases and shares) more common (Trend Analysis of Social Media in India, 2024). Taken together, these India-based studies determine that social media is not merely a technology, but a socially infused environment of communication that is a potent influence on modern consumer and civic behaviour.

3. SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING (SMM)

In recent years, social media marketing (SMM) has become an essential tool for Indian businesses to enhance visibility, build customer relationships, and drive sales. Small business owners and companies have gained especially because of the emergence of cheap internet and penetration of smartphones, through which they are able to utilize these low cost digital platforms to promote their brands and engage consumers (Padhi and Sharma, 2022). Studies have shown that MSMEs with the integration of social media strategies have gained more visibility and stronger connections with customers despite having limited resources (Kumar and Nanda, 2023). Influencer marketing has also become popular among SMEs, as well as outside of them in India. The study of influencer-led campaigns with a focus on lifestyle and authenticity has contributed greatly to the consumer trust and engagement rates, thus becoming one of the main approaches to the brands that are focused on young audiences (Tanwar et al 2021). Also, research has indicated that a small business organization enjoys more customer loyalty and brand awareness in the face of promotional strategies that are executed using social media but with some difficulties including measurement of ROI and consistency of content (Kapoor, 2023).

On a larger scale, the influence of SMM extends to certain industries like services and banking. Sanil (2023) concluded that social media activity among Indian banks has a positive impact on brand trust and loyalty because customers feel responsive and engaged with the bank, which is a sign of reliability. In regional studies, internet-based marketing (including social platforms) has been shown to significantly improve performance among SMEs, particularly micro-enterprises in Andhra Pradesh (Lankalapalli & Khare, 2023). Collectively, these studies suggest that SMM in India is not only reshaping consumer-brand interactions but also offering inclusive opportunities for businesses of varying scales, provided they adopt authentic and engaging digital strategies.

4. IMPULSE BUYING DECISIONS

Impulse buying is defined as the spontaneous purchase of products without prior planning. This has surged in recent years, especially among digitally active consumers. Tomar (2023) analyzed compulsive buying behavior among Indian youth and revealed that impulsive purchases are a dominant component of compulsive buying patterns, often driven by internal urges and emotional triggers. Complementing this, Agarwal et al. (2021) developed and validated a scale to measure online impulse buying behavior among small-town consumers, identifying factors such as hedonic motivation, marketing stimuli, impulse buying tendency, and situational triggers as significant determinants. At a more regional level, Rai et al. (2022) examined young customers in Patna and found that social media advertising and website features significantly influence their impulse buying tendencies—though privacy concerns showed a negative correlation. In the retail context, Sandilya et al. (2021) studied impulse buying behavior at Big Bazaar outlets in Bangalore, uncovering that discounts, in-store promotions, and shopper attributes like financial freedom and internal drive strongly correlated with impulsive purchase.

Collectively, these studies confirm that impulse buying in India arises from a fusion of emotional, situational, and digital stimuli, shaping consumer behavior across urban and semi-urban contexts.

5. YOUNG CONSUMERS AND ONLINE BEHAVIOUR

Indian young consumers (roughly aged 18–29) are increasingly mobile-first and always online, shaping a digital culture where social media drives both identity and consumption. The ICUBE 2024 report highlights that India now has 886 million internet users, with rural youth rapidly catching up to their urban peers, thereby narrowing digital divides and making social apps central to everyday life (ICUBE, 2024). Among platforms, WhatsApp, Instagram, and YouTube dominate, with studies reporting that nearly three-quarters of Indians aged 18–29 are active on WhatsApp, reflecting how instant messaging and short video content have become daily habits for young consumers (Statista, 2023). Behaviourally, Indian research shows that young users exhibit Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), which drives compulsive checking and intensive scrolling; higher social media use has been strongly associated with FoMO and reduced well-being in Indian college populations (Przybylski et al., 2019; Oberst et al., 2020). In terms of marketing influence, social media influencers play a pivotal role: exposure to influencer content significantly enhances product awareness, credibility, and purchase intention among Gen Z consumers in India (Kumar & Nanda, 2023; Singh & Sandhu, 2021). Additionally, short-form videos, reels, and shoppable posts in sectors such as fashion and lifestyle have been shown to shorten the path from discovery to purchase, reinforcing impulsive buying tendencies in Indian youth (Gupta & Sharma, 2022).

6. INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING ON IMPULSE BUYING

Social media marketing (SMM) has turned out to be a potent driver of impulse purchases, especially of young customers who devote significant amounts of time to social networks such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube. It is researched that the aesthetics and the interactive experience of social media advertising led to hedonic motivation and emotional involvement that tend to translate into impulsive purchasing (Kaur and Singh, 2017). Algorithm-driven personalisation and targeted advertisement have been found to aid impulse-based purchasing in India with the presentation of contextually suitable new offers resulting in immediate satisfaction (Agarwal et al., 2021). Similarly, influencer marketing has also massive potential effects on the impulse buying process because consumers get the impression that influencers are authentic and recognisable, which creates credibility and makes them want to buy and make impulse purchases (Singh and Sandhu, 2021).

Moreover, the study shows that social presence signals such as live streaming, limited-time offers, and shoppable posts increase urgency and make the consumer make a hasty choice without careful thinking (Rai and Srivastava, 2023). It influences especially the Indian Gen Z customers who have a higher probability of getting Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) when exposed to flash sales and influencer-related offers via social media (Pal, 2025). There are also cross-sectional indications that the motivation of impulse buying can be not only triggered by external promotions but also by psychological motivators, which include enjoyment, novelty-seeking, and peer validation, which are inherent in the social media context (Tomar et al., 2023). All these

combined prove that SMM has turned impulse buying into a habitual behaviour and is now entrenched in the digital lives of the young Indian consumer.

7. CHALLENGES AND ETHICAL CONCERNS IN SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

Social Media Marketing (SMM) is reported to be an effective tool in changing the consumer behavior, though it has serious challenges and ethical concerns at the same time. One of the greatest issues is data privacy and the abuse of personal information since the majority of platforms abuse their consumer data in hyper-targeted advertising, which is not performed with adequate consent, and this factor raises more mistrust among Indian users (Gupta and Dhami, 2021). The other issue is a wide-spread tendency in misleading and deceiving advertising, when hyperbolic statements along with disguised advertising obscure the boundary between the original content and the sponsored one (Chakraborty & Soodan, 2016). This has increased ethical issues related to the emergence of the influencer marketing style, especially when influencers do not provide a clear disclosure of sponsored content that raises questions of both transparency and manipulation of young consumers (Sharma and Roy, 2020).

Also, the psychological outcomes of Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) and compulsive browsing, frequently played on by advertisers by encouraging flash sales and urgency, may lead to the development of unhealthy consumption habits and financial worries in young people (Oberst et al., 2020). Consumer trust is compromised by the issue of artificial reviews and artificial social evidence as well, since the cases of the manipulated feedback are on the rise in the e-commerce platforms in India (Narang and Jain, 2019). Lastly, echo chambers of social media are algorithm-based and favor some brands over others, which casts doubts on how just and inclusive and consumer-oriented it is (Pal, 2025). These ethical issues have to be resolved by implementing more robust regulatory measures, more rigid rules on the disclosure of influencers, and the education of consumers to make SMM practices transparent, responsible, and sustainable.

8. CONCLUSION

This research suggests that influencer endorsement, short videos, and personalized advertisements are not the only forms that social media marketing (SMM) often promotes impulsive buying among young Indian consumers. Despite the effectiveness of these tactics in brands, they have problems of false advertising, privacy, and transparency. Marketers need to build trust by using real campaigns and legislators need to have more stringent rules on digital advertising. Future research should look at the long-term impacts of SMM on customer retention and finance. Balancing between consumer protection, ethics, and innovation is the ultimate determinant of the success of SMM.

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