

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN BUILDING CONSUMER CONNECTIONS AND TRANSFORMING FASHION PREFERENCES: A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Gurleen Kaur

Khalsa College for Women, Amritsar

Pawanpreet Kaur

Khalsa College for Women, Amritsar

Sharina Mahajan

Associate Professor
Khalsa University, Amritsar

ABSTRACT

Social media platforms have significantly changed the global fashion industry. They reshape how consumers connect, influence fashion preferences, and redefine buying behavior. This review paper looks at how social media enhances consumer connections and changes fashion preferences worldwide, using findings from recent studies in the United States, India, China, the United Kingdom, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka. The reviewed literature shows that social media is a powerful tool for fashion brands to engage with consumers, build emotional connections, and establish trust through engaging content, influencer partnerships, user-generated content, and real-time communication. Influencer marketing is a key factor in shaping fashion preferences. The relatability, credibility, and emotional appeal of influencers greatly encourage purchase decisions, especially among less experienced shoppers. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Pinterest fit well with the visual nature of fashion. They help spread trends quickly, run viral marketing campaigns, and drive impulse buying through shoppable posts and interactive features. The studies also show that social media advertising elements—like entertainment value, brand familiarity, and social imaging— influence consumer choices positively, particularly in fast fashion. Furthermore, social media helps build communities and create personalized stories. This allows brands to develop authentic identities and engage consumers over time. Factors such as social passion, trust, shared interests, and perceived brand relevance enhance consumer-brand relationships and affect buying behavior across different markets. Overall, findings indicate that despite cultural and regional differences, social media's impact on consumer connections and fashion preferences remains strong worldwide. This review highlights how social media transforms modern fashion consumption and stresses the need for adaptive, genuine, and consumer-focused digital strategies in the changing global fashion landscape.

Keywords: Social media, Fashion consumer behavior, Influencer marketing, Consumer engagement, Digital connections, Changing consumer preferences

INTRODUCTION

The fashion apparel industry is one of the most dynamic and economically vital sectors globally, generating trillions of dollars in revenue and influencing cultural trends through innovative designs and marketing tactics. In recent years, advancements in technology, especially the rise of digital platforms, have transformed how brands connect with consumers. Social media sites like Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube have become

essential marketing tools, facilitating direct communication, real-time interaction, and targeted advertising (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). This shift has changed advertising from a traditional, one-way approach to interactive conversations driven by consumers, giving users the power to shape trends and purchasing behaviors (Victor et al., 2018).

The emergence of Web 2.0 technologies has made information sharing more accessible, enabling consumers to share reviews, experiences, and product recommendations, and effectively shifting the power dynamic from corporations to individuals (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). This change is especially noticeable in the fashion sector, where visual appeal and social validation significantly influence consumer decisions. Nowadays, shoppers look to social media for discovering trends, evaluating products, and seeking endorsements from peers before making purchases (Victor et al., 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic further expedited this digital shift as lockdowns required brands to adopt online channels, heightening the importance of social media for maintaining consumer engagement and driving sales (McKinsey & Company, 2020). Recent statistics reveal that social media use surged during the pandemic, particularly with platforms like TikTok encouraging impulse purchases in the fashion and beauty markets (Appel et al., 2020).

This literature review compiles existing research to examine the complex role of social media in influencing consumer buying behavior in the fashion apparel sector. It references an extensive range of scholarly articles, focusing on electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), influencer marketing, visual content, brand perception, and purchasing intentions. The review also acknowledges challenges such as negative feedback and information overload while identifying areas for future research. By analyzing studies published mainly between 2018 and 2025, this comprehensive review offers insights into how social media influences consumer choices, builds brand loyalty, and presents both advantages and challenges for fashion brands.

The fashion industry's dependence on social media is underscored by its economic impact, with global social media advertising spending in fashion projected to reach billions by 2024; these platforms are responsible for facilitating over 20% of e-commerce sales in various regions (Thein, 2022). However, this digital transition has brought about complexities, including ethical concerns regarding the promotion of fast fashion and sustainability (Ray & Nayak, 2023). As social media continues to evolve, particularly with new platforms like TikTok appealing to Gen Z, brands need to adapt to stay relevant (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2025).

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This literature review focuses on peer-reviewed articles, conference papers, and industry reports published from 2009 to 2026. It specifically investigates empirical and theoretical research on the impact of social media on consumer purchasing behavior within the fashion apparel sector. The review covers important concepts such as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), influencer marketing, visual content, brand engagement, and purchase intentions, while highlighting global perspectives and including insights from both developed regions (like Europe and the USA) and emerging markets (such as Thailand, India, Nepal, and Albania). Studies related to non-apparel industries (like general retail or beauty that do not overlap with fashion), non-English publications, and those published before 2009 that do not discuss Web 2.0 technologies are excluded. The review emphasizes quantitative and qualitative studies sourced from databases like Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, with the aim of synthesizing over 50 sources to highlight trends following COVID-19, while

also identifying methodological and contextual limitations in existing research (Thein, 2022; Appel et al., 2020; Ray & Nayak, 2023). This refined focus ensures an in-depth yet specific investigation of social media's influence, excluding broader digital marketing aspects such as email or search engine optimization unless they are directly linked to social media platforms.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND CONSUMER BUYING BEHAVIOR

Consumer buying behavior includes the various stages individuals go through, such as identifying needs, collecting information, assessing choices, and making final purchases (Darley et al., 2010). Social media has significantly transformed this process by allowing immediate access to a wide range of information, featuring both user-generated content and brand advertisements. These platforms empower consumers to move away from conventional search techniques, opting instead for algorithm-driven recommendations and social validation (Anil et al., 2020).

ELECTRONIC WORD-OF-MOUTH (eWOM)

A key factor in the influence of social media is electronic word of mouth (eWOM), which refers to the opinions, reviews, and recommendations shared by consumers online that affect trust and intent (Cheung et al., 2009). In the fashion industry, eWOM is often seen as more trustworthy than traditional advertisements due to its perceived genuineness, which can result in increased likelihood of purchases (Cheung et al., 2009). Recent research indicates that positive eWOM on platforms such as Instagram boosts brand trust and plays a significant role in purchase decisions in emerging markets (Alatawy, 2022). For example, in the fashion e-commerce sector in Saudi Arabia, elements of eWOM like credibility and user engagement have a strong correlation with purchasing intentions, with brand image acting as a mediator (Alatawy, 2022).

A key element of social media's impact is electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), which refers to the online sharing of consumer opinions, reviews, and recommendations that influence trust and purchasing intentions (Cheung et al., 2009). In the fashion industry, eWOM is regarded as more trustworthy than conventional advertisements due to its perceived genuineness, often resulting in increased likelihood of purchase (Cheung et al., 2009). Recent research indicates that positive eWOM on platforms like Instagram boosts brand trust and influences buying decisions, particularly in developing markets (Alatawy, 2022). For example, in Saudi Arabia's fashion e-commerce sector, elements of eWOM such as credibility and engagement are significantly linked to purchase intentions, with brand image acting as a mediator (Alatawy, 2022).

INFLUENCER MARKETING

Influencer marketing has become a significant force in driving consumer behavior, especially in the fashion industry, where influencers create relatable content to sway attitudes and purchasing intentions (Sudha & Sheena, 2017). Social media fashion influencers (SMFIs) particularly boost purchase intentions by establishing relatability and emotional connections, a process influenced by the level of consumer expertise (The impact of social media fashion influencers..., 2025). A systematic review indicates that influencers have a direct impact on purchasing decisions, especially in fast fashion, by fostering trust and social validation (Impact of social media influencer marketing..., 2025).

Research in emerging markets such as Indonesia and India reveals that influencers can positively influence fashion choices by projecting authenticity (The Effect of Influencer Marketing..., 2024). Regarding sustainable fashion, influencers advocate for ethical

consumption, which mediates the purchasing intentions of Gen Z consumers (Influencers Marketing and its Impacts..., 2024). However, challenges like market saturation and concerns about authenticity exist, with micro-influencers often generating stronger loyalty compared to their macro counterparts (Trust in influencers..., 2025).

VISUAL CONTENT AND ENGAGEMENT

The visually driven essence of fashion complements the image-centric nature of social media platforms. Visual electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), including images and videos, shapes how people perceive styles (How perceived eWOM..., 2024). The short videos on TikTok stimulate spontaneous purchases in clothing, enhancing hedonic tendencies (Hedonic and Impulsive..., 2025). Engagement indicators such as likes and shares help to foster community connections, which in turn boosts loyalty (Consumers' Journey..., 2023).

IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON BRAND IMAGE AND PURCHASE INTENTION

Social media enhances brand perception—the way consumers view a brand—by increasing visibility and facilitating interactions (Kim & Ko, 2012). Companies utilize these platforms for storytelling, which boosts brand awareness and value (Fashion's Digital Runway..., 2024). The likelihood of making a purchase is elevated through engaging content and endorsements (Majeed et al., 2021).

BRAND ENGAGEMENT AND LOYALTY

Engagement on social media—such as likes, comments, and shares—helps to cultivate relationships and brand loyalty (How Social Media Marketing Activities..., 2023). In the realm of luxury fashion, this engagement plays a crucial role in the success of brand extensions, impacting both parent and extended brand loyalty (Can consumer engagement..., 2024). Research indicates that social media marketing activities (SMMa) enhance loyalty by fostering self-brand connections and trust (Social media marketing and brand loyalty..., 2025).

Additionally, Instagram influencers contribute to loyalty in sustainable fashion through engagement, as highlighted by SOR theory (Seduced by Style..., 2025). Cross-country studies have identified variances, with COVID-19 intensifying the significance of SMM in building loyalty (Causes and Effects..., 2024). Engagement on social media—such as likes, comments, and shares—helps to cultivate relationships and brand loyalty (How Social Media Marketing Activities..., 2023). In the realm of luxury fashion, this engagement plays a crucial role in the success of brand extensions, impacting both parent and extended brand loyalty (Can consumer engagement..., 2024). Research indicates that social media marketing activities (SMMa) enhance loyalty by fostering self-brand connections and trust (Social media marketing and brand loyalty..., 2025).

CHALLENGES AND NEGATIVE ASPECTS

Although there are advantages, numerous challenges exist: unfavorable reviews can quickly circulate, harming brand reputation (Understanding the Impact..., 2024). The overwhelming amount of information and the spread of false information undermine consumer trust (The Impact of Social Media Marketing..., 2023). The promotion of fast fashion by influencers further compounds issues related to overconsumption and environmental harm (Ray & Nayak, 2023). Changes in regulations, such as possible restrictions on platforms, could threaten marketing strategies (Social Media Marketing for Fashion Brands..., 2026).

AREAS FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION

Despite the valuable insights provided by existing literature on the impact of social media on fashion consumer behavior, there are still several areas that need further exploration. Firstly, there is a significant contextual gap, as many studies focus on specific regions like Thailand, Nepal, Albania, or urban areas such as Copenhagen, while neglecting underrepresented markets like rural areas or non-Western cultures where social media usage varies (Thein, 2022; Chaudhary, 2023). This regional limitation underscores the necessity for comparative cross-cultural research to make findings applicable on a global scale.

Secondly, there are gaps in the variables studied; not all research thoroughly investigates important factors such as perceived usefulness, credibility, entertainment value, or product quality in relation to electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and the influence of social media personalities (Devkota et al., 2023). Additionally, emerging elements like the impact of big data analytics on understanding user behavior in the context of mass customization remain largely unexplored (Liu et al., 2023).

Methodologically, there is a lack of longitudinal and mixed-method approaches, with most studies relying on cross-sectional data that do not account for long-term behavioral changes following the COVID-19 pandemic or the changing dynamics of platforms like TikTok (Chaudhary, 2023; Devkota et al., 2023). Furthermore, there are demographic gaps, with insufficient focus on older consumers, male fashion behaviors, or underserved demographics beyond Gen Z.

Lastly, future research should address the integration of AI-driven personalization, the influence of the metaverse, and sustainability in social media strategies, as well as consider the long-term effects of regulatory changes on the industry's growth (Ray & Nayak, 2023; Influencer Marketing Hub, 2025). By addressing these gaps with empirical, region-neutral research, we could improve theoretical frameworks and practical applications within the fashion sector.

CONCLUSION

Social media has fundamentally altered consumer purchasing habits in the fashion industry by enabling electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), influencer partnerships, and interaction, which in turn enhances brand perception and customer intentions (Majeed et al., 2021). It gives consumers more power, influences trends, and fosters brand loyalty, but it also brings challenges such as potential backlash and issues related to sustainability (Ray & Nayak, 2023). Brands need to develop ethical strategies to effectively manage these complexities.

Future research should investigate the unique impacts of different platforms (such as TikTok versus Instagram), psychological influences like the fear of missing out (FOMO), and cultural differences in developing markets (Exploring the influence..., 2023). Long-term studies on the shifts occurring post-pandemic and the role of AI in personalizing experiences are necessary (Digital marketing strategies..., 2024). As the fashion industry continues to change, incorporating sustainability into social media strategies will be essential for achieving lasting success.

REFERENCES

1. Alatawy, K. S. (2022). The role social media marketing plays in customers' purchase decisions in the context of the fashion industry in Saudi Arabia. **International Journal of Business and Management*, 17*(1), 117–129. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ijbm.v17n1p117>

2. Anil, A., Sinha, B., & Bhatt, V. (2020). Impact of social media marketing in consumer buying behavior towards apparel. *Journal of University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, 22*(12), 722–733.
3. Appel, G., Grewal, L., Hadi, R., & Stephen, A. T. (2020). The future of social media in marketing. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 48*(1), 79–95. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-019-00695-1>
4. Cheung, C. M. K., Lee, M. K. O., & Rabjohn, N. (2009). The impact of electronic word-of-mouth: The adoption of online opinions in online customer communities. *Internet Research, 19*(3), 229–247. <https://doi.org/10.1108/10662240910981332>
5. Darley, W. K., Blankson, C., & Luethge, D. J. (2010). Toward an integrated framework for online consumer behavior and decision making process: A review. *Psychology & Marketing, 27*(2), 94–116. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.20323>
6. Influencer Marketing Hub. (2025). *Influencer marketing benchmark report 2025*. <https://influencermarketinghub.com/influencer-marketing-benchmark-report>
7. Kim, A. J., & Ko, E. (2012). Do social media marketing activities enhance customer equity? An empirical study of luxury fashion brand. *Journal of Business Research, 65*(10), 1480–1486. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2011.10.014>
8. Majeed, M., Owusu-Ansah, W., & Aduku-Armah, A. (2021). The influence of social media on purchase intention: The mediating role of brand equity. *Cogent Business & Management, 8*(1), Article 1944008. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2021.1944008>
9. Mangold, W. G., & Faulds, D. J. (2009). Social media: The new hybrid element of the promotion mix. *Business Horizons, 52*(4), 357–365. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2009.03.002>
10. McKinsey & Company. (2020). *The state of fashion 2020: Coronavirus update*. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/retail/our-insights/the-state-of-fashion-2020-coronavirus-update>
11. Park, D.-H., Lee, J., & Han, I. (2007). The effect of on-line consumer reviews on consumer purchasing intention: The moderating role of involvement. *International Journal of Electronic Commerce, 11*(4), 125–148. <https://doi.org/10.2753/JEC1086-4415110405>
12. Ray, S., & Nayak, L. (2023). Marketing sustainable fashion: Trends and future directions. *Sustainability, 15*(7), Article 6202. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15076202>
13. Sudha, M., & Sheena, K. (2017). Impact of influencers in consumer decision process: The fashion industry. *SCMS Journal of Indian Management, 14*(3), 14–30.
14. Thein, W. M. (2022). A review of the literature on the effects of social media on buying fashion apparel intention and decision. *OpenSPACES@UNK*.
15. Victor, V., Thoppan, J. J., Jeyakumar Nathan, R., & Fekete-Farkas, M. (2018). Factors influencing consumer behavior and prospective purchase decisions in a dynamic pricing environment—An exploratory factor analysis approach. *Social Sciences, 7*(9), Article 153. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci7090153>