



**SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING AND CONSUMER PURCHASE
BEHAVIOUR AMONG GEN Z AND MILLENNIALS: A CONCEPTUAL
REVIEW**

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Abstract: *The explosive growth of Instagram and TikTok has fundamentally reshaped how brands engage consumers and how consumers make purchasing decisions. However, a comprehensive understanding of how multiple social media marketing (SMM) dimensions simultaneously shape the buying behaviour of Gen Z and Millennial consumers remains limited. This paper presents a conceptual review of the theoretical and empirical relationships between five SMM dimensions - content marketing, influencer marketing, social commerce features, user-generated content (UGC), and paid social advertising - and consumer buying behaviour among young adults aged 18 to 35. A narrative literature review approach is used, drawing on 20 peer-reviewed studies published between 1956 and 2023. Drawing on the Theory of Planned Behaviour, the Technology Acceptance Model, and parasocial relationship theory, the review develops an integrated conceptual framework and five research propositions. The review finds strong theoretical and empirical support for the positive influence of all five SMM dimensions on buying behaviour. Influencer marketing and content marketing emerge as the most powerful drivers. Paid*



advertising faces growing challenges from consumer advertising literacy. The paper concludes with a research agenda for future empirical investigation and strategic recommendations for practitioners.

Keywords: *social media marketing; consumer buying behaviour; Instagram; TikTok; influencer marketing; user-generated content; Gen Z; Millennials; conceptual review*

1. INTRODUCTION

We are living through one of the most significant shifts in commercial history. For the first time, a consumer can wake up, scroll through a social media feed, discover a product through a creator they admire, read peer reviews in the comment section, tap a shopping tag, and complete a purchase - all without ever leaving a single application. This seamless journey from discovery to transaction, driven entirely by social media content, has transformed the foundations of consumer buying behaviour ([Tuten & Solomon, 2017](#)).

Instagram and TikTok sit at the centre of this transformation. With over two billion monthly active users on Instagram and more than one billion on TikTok, these platforms reach a disproportionately large share of Gen Z consumers (born 1997–2012) and Millennials (born 1981–1996) — the two generational cohorts now representing the most commercially significant consumer segments on the planet ([Datareportal, 2023](#)). For these generations, social media is not merely entertainment. It is a primary source of product discovery, brand evaluation, peer recommendation, and increasingly, direct purchase completion.

Despite the commercial urgency of this topic, the academic literature remains fragmented. Many studies examine SMM on a single platform or a single dimension, making it difficult to build a comprehensive picture of how multiple SMM strategies interact to influence young consumer purchasing behaviour ([Alalwan et al., 2017](#)). This paper addresses that gap by synthesizing theoretical and empirical literature within an integrated, multi-dimensional conceptual framework.

This paper has four objectives: (1) to identify the key SMM dimensions operating on Instagram and TikTok; (2) to examine the theoretical relationships



between each SMM dimension and consumer buying behaviour; (3) to develop a conceptual framework with five research propositions for future empirical testing; and (4) to provide evidence-based recommendations for marketing practitioners. The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 reviews the methodology; Section 3 presents the theoretical framework; Section 4 reviews relevant empirical literature; Section 5 presents the conceptual framework and propositions; Section 6 discusses implications and limitations; and Section 7 concludes.

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Design

This paper uses a narrative literature review approach. A narrative review is a research method used to synthesize findings from multiple existing studies in order to build a broader understanding of a topic, identify patterns, and develop theoretical frameworks ([Snyder, 2019](#)). This approach is appropriate for this paper because the objective is not to collect primary data from respondents, but to map the existing theoretical and empirical landscape of SMM and consumer buying behaviour and derive an integrated conceptual model from it. This is a recognized and valid contribution type in the marketing and consumer behaviour literature.

A narrative review is distinguished from a systematic review in that it allows the author to draw on a wide range of theoretical and empirical sources without the strict protocol constraints of systematic searching. This flexibility is particularly suitable when the goal is to build a conceptual framework that integrates multiple theoretical traditions — in this case, the Theory of Planned Behaviour, the Technology Acceptance Model, and parasocial relationship theory - alongside empirical findings from diverse research contexts.

2.2 Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted using three main academic databases: Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science. The following keywords and combinations were used in the search: "social media marketing," "consumer buying behaviour," "Instagram marketing," "TikTok marketing," "influencer marketing," "user-generated content," "social commerce," "Gen Z," "Millennials," "purchase



intention," "parasocial relationship," and "Theory of Planned Behaviour." Searches were conducted in English and focused on publications between 2000 and 2023, with older foundational works (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Ajzen, 1991; Davis, 1989) included because of their theoretical importance to the study.

2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included in the review if they: (1) were published in peer-reviewed journals or by reputable academic publishers; (2) addressed at least one of the five SMM dimensions examined in this paper; (3) were relevant to consumer behaviour, purchase intention, trust, or brand loyalty outcomes; and (4) were written in English. Studies were excluded if they focused solely on offline or traditional marketing without a digital component, were not peer-reviewed, or were not directly relevant to the research questions addressed by this paper.

2.4 Data Extraction and Synthesis

After selecting relevant studies, key findings were identified and organized according to five thematic categories: (1) content marketing, (2) influencer marketing, (3) social commerce features, (4) user-generated content, and (5) paid social advertising. Findings within each theme were compared and synthesized to identify convergent patterns, empirical agreements, and remaining research gaps. A total of 19 key references were selected for this review, combining foundational theoretical works with recent empirical studies published between 2017 and 2023. This combination ensures the review is grounded in established theory while reflecting the most current research in the SMM and consumer behaviour field.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Theory of Planned Behaviour

Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) is one of the most applicable frameworks for understanding social media-influenced purchasing. TPB posits that behavioural intentions — the direct precursors of actual behaviour — are shaped by three factors: attitudes toward the behaviour, subjective norms (perceived social pressure from peers and reference groups), and perceived behavioural control. In the social media environment, all three factors are heavily shaped by platform-



mediated content ([Ajzen, 1991](#)). A persuasive influencer video shapes attitudes toward a product; visible peer purchases and enthusiastic comment sections create subjective norms; and seamless in-app shopping features enhance perceived behavioural control by reducing barriers to purchase completion.

3.2 Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

The Technology Acceptance Model, developed by [Davis \(1989\)](#), proposes that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use are the primary determinants of technology adoption intention. Applied to Instagram Shopping and TikTok Shop, TAM predicts that consumers who find these tools genuinely useful for product discovery and evaluation, and who find them easy and intuitive to navigate, will be significantly more likely to complete purchases through the platform. This prediction is supported by [Zhang et al. \(2019\)](#), who applied TAM specifically to social commerce adoption and confirmed perceived usefulness as the dominant driver.

3.3 Parasocial Relationship Theory

The concept of parasocial relationships, first described by Horton and Wohl (1956) and extended to the influencer marketing context by [Sokolova and Kefi \(2020\)](#), refers to one-sided emotional bonds that media audiences develop with personalities they follow. These bonds feel personal and deeply trustworthy despite being fundamentally one-directional. On Instagram and TikTok, parasocial relationships form naturally between followers and content creators through consistent content exposure over time, and they carry significant commercial implications: consumers who feel a strong parasocial bond with a creator are substantially more likely to trust their product recommendations and act on them.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

4.1 Social Media Marketing: Concept and Evolution

Social media marketing can be broadly defined as the strategic use of social media platforms to promote products, services, and brands through both paid and organic activities ([Tuten & Solomon, 2017](#)). Unlike traditional one-way brand communication, SMM enables two-way dialogue, real-time community formation, and peer-to-peer content sharing. The concept has evolved dramatically since [Kaplan](#)



[and Haenlein's \(2010\)](#) foundational paper defining social media as internet-based applications enabling user-generated content creation and exchange.

Instagram pioneered the visual-first social commerce model and evolved into a full-funnel marketing platform where consumers can move from visual inspiration to completed purchase within a single session ([Chen et al., 2021](#)). TikTok's algorithm-driven For You Page creates an unparalleled content discovery engine that exposes users to products and creators with remarkable precision and reach ([Teng et al., 2021](#)). Together, these platforms define the contemporary SMM landscape for young consumers.

Table 1. Dimensions of Social Media Marketing on Instagram and TikTok

Dimension	Definition	Platform Example
Content Marketing	Creating & sharing value-driven posts, videos, and stories	Instagram Reels, TikTok videos
Influencer Marketing	Collaborations with creators to endorse products authentically	TikTok creators, Instagram ambassadors
Social Commerce Features	In-app purchasing tools enabling direct transactions	Instagram Shopping, TikTok Shop
User-Generated Content	Consumer-created reviews, photos, and testimonials	Instagram tags, TikTok product reviews
Paid Social Advertising	Targeted promotional ads served to defined audience segments	Instagram Ads, TikTok For You Page ads

Source: Adapted from Tuten & Solomon (2017); Chopra et al. (2021); Teng et al. (2021)

4.2 SMM and Consumer Buying Behaviour: Empirical Evidence

[Alalwan et al. \(2017\)](#) conducted a landmark study finding that social media advertising — when perceived as informative, entertaining, and credible —



significantly predicts purchase intention. Their structural equation model revealed that perceived usefulness mediated the relationship between ad characteristics and consumer buying behaviour, establishing a clear psychological pathway from SMM exposure to purchasing decisions.

[Shareef et al. \(2019\)](#) demonstrated that SMM activities positively influence brand awareness, consumer trust, and purchase behaviour, with trust functioning as a significant mediator. This finding shows that the route from SMM exposure to actual purchase runs largely through the consumer's assessment of brand credibility rather than through direct persuasion alone.

Research on influencer marketing has expanded considerably. [Chopra et al. \(2021\)](#) found that influencer trustworthiness is the strongest predictor of purchase intention among Instagram users - more powerful than either expertise or attractiveness. This aligns with parasocial relationship theory: the emotional bond followers develop with influencers they perceive as genuine translates directly into receptivity to product recommendations.

[Teng et al. \(2021\)](#) found that TikTok's short-form video format and recommendation algorithm create a powerful environment for triggering impulse purchase behaviour. Hedonic motivations - enjoyment, entertainment, and novelty — are particularly strong drivers, distinguishing TikTok's influence pathway from the more information-driven patterns observed on platforms like Facebook. More recently,

Supporting these findings, [Flecha-Ortiz et al. \(2023\)](#) demonstrated that TikTok-native content significantly enhances Gen Z's brand engagement and purchase intent, particularly when campaigns are built around platform-specific creative formats rather than repurposed conventional advertising. Similarly, [Barta et al. \(2023\)](#) found that humor-driven influencer content on TikTok generates significantly higher hedonic engagement among followers, which in turn elevates purchase intention — an effect driven by the platform's entertainment-first culture that distinguishes it from more information-oriented social media channels.



[Cheung et al. \(2021\)](#) demonstrated that user-generated content significantly reduces perceived purchase risk by providing authentic social proof that professional brand communications cannot replicate. Because UGC is perceived as free from commercial motivation, it carries a credibility premium that makes it disproportionately influential in consumer evaluation and decision-making.

Recent evidence further supports the strategic importance of UGC in shaping young consumer behaviour. [An and Ngo \(2025\)](#) found that eWOM generated through social media significantly predicts Gen Z's purchase intentions for organic products, with content credibility and social value being the primary drivers of UGC adoption and purchase behaviour. [Dorie and Loranger \(2024\)](#) further demonstrate that critical product experiences shared by Millennial and Gen Z consumers on social media directly trigger eWOM behaviour and shape channel preference, underscoring UGC's role as both a consumer expression tool and a strategic brand asset.

Table 2. Summary of Key Empirical Studies on SMM and Consumer Buying Behaviour

Author(s) & Year	Context	Key Variable	Main Finding
Alalwan et al. (2017)	Jordan consumers	Social media ads & purchase intention	Social media ads significantly predict purchase intention via perceived usefulness
Shareef et al. (2019)	Facebook users, UK	SMM effectiveness	Brand awareness and trust mediate the SMM-behaviour link
Chopra et al. (2021)	Instagram, India	Influencer credibility	Influencer trustworthiness is the strongest purchase predictor



Teng et al. (2021)	TikTok users, Asia	Short-form video & impulse buying	TikTok hedonic content triggers impulse purchase behaviour
Sokolova & Kefi (2020)	Instagram & YouTube	Parasocial relationships	Parasocial bonds with influencers increase purchase intention
Cheung et al. (2021)	Social shopping communities	User-generated content	UGC reduces perceived risk and increases purchase likelihood

Source: Compiled by author from reviewed literature

4.3 Research Gaps

Despite this rich body of literature, three important gaps remain. First, most existing studies examine SMM on a single platform, without considering how multiple platforms work together - or differently - to shape consumer buying decisions. The combined Instagram and TikTok ecosystem has received very limited direct empirical attention as an integrated environment.

Second, existing research tends to examine individual SMM dimensions in isolation, making it difficult to assess their relative importance or understand how they interact. Managers need to know which SMM investments yield the greatest returns in consumer behaviour outcomes - a question requiring an integrated, multi-dimensional analytical framework.

Third, while Gen Z and Millennials are frequently cited in the SMM literature, few studies have examined these two cohorts together within a unified framework. Despite their shared platform preferences, these groups display meaningfully different media consumption patterns, purchasing psychologies, and responses to marketing stimuli that warrant simultaneous comparative attention.

5. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH PROPOSITIONS



Based on the theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence reviewed above, this paper proposes an integrated conceptual framework. The five SMM dimensions serve as independent variables that positively influence consumer buying behaviour through three mediating mechanisms: brand awareness, consumer trust, and perceived value. The consumer context - specifically the Gen Z and Millennial demographic characterized by high social media engagement, visual content preference, and peer influence - moderates the strength of these relationships.

Five research propositions are advanced for future empirical testing:

P1: Content marketing on Instagram and TikTok positively influences consumer buying behaviour among Gen Z and Millennials, mediated by brand awareness and perceived value ([Chen et al., 2021](#); [Shareef et al., 2019](#)).

P2: Influencer marketing positively influences consumer buying behaviour through the formation of parasocial relationships and trust transfer from creator to brand ([Sokolova & Kefi, 2020](#); [Chopra et al., 2021](#)).

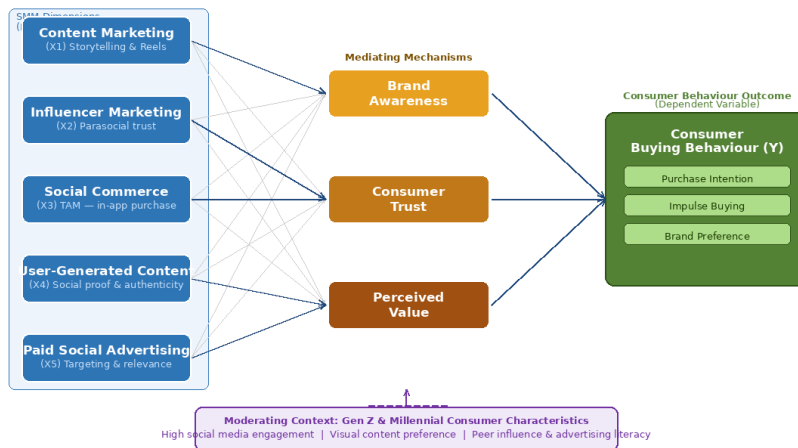
P3: Social commerce features positively influence consumer buying behaviour by enhancing perceived ease of use and reducing transactional friction ([Zhang et al., 2019](#); [Davis, 1989](#)).

P4: User-generated content positively influences consumer buying behaviour by reducing perceived purchase risk through authentic social proof ([Cheung et al., 2021](#)).

P5: Paid social advertising positively influences consumer buying behaviour, but its effectiveness is moderated by perceived ad relevance and consumer advertising literacy ([Alalwan et al., 2017](#)).

Figure 1 below illustrates the proposed conceptual framework, showing how the five SMM dimensions influence consumer buying behaviour through the three mediating mechanisms, moderated by the Gen Z and Millennial consumer context.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework: SMM Dimensions and Consumer Buying Behaviour Among Gen Z and Millennials on Instagram and TikTok



Source: Developed by author based on Ajzen (1991); Davis (1989); Sokolova & Kefi (2020); Tuten & Solomon (2017)

Table 3. Research Propositions and Theoretical Basis

Proposition	SMM Dimension	Theoretical Basis	Expected Direction
P1	Content Marketing	Chen et al. (2021); Shareef et al. (2019)	Positive (+)
P2	Influencer Marketing	Sokolova & Kefi (2020); Chopra et al. (2021)	Positive (+)
P3	Social Commerce Features	Davis (1989); Zhang et al. (2019)	Positive (+)
P4	User-Generated Content	Cheung et al. (2021)	Positive (+)
P5	Paid Social Advertising	Alalwan et al. (2017)	Positive, moderated (+/-)

Source: Developed by author from reviewed literature

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 Integrated Analysis of SMM Dimensions



The review presents a coherent picture of how SMM shapes buying behaviour among Gen Z and Millennials. Across all five dimensions, strong theoretical and empirical support exists for a positive influence on purchasing decisions. The hierarchy of perceived influence - with influencer marketing and content marketing leading, followed by UGC, social commerce features, and paid advertising - reflects the primacy of trust and authentic storytelling among these consumer cohorts.

Influencer marketing emerges as the most powerful driver, grounded in parasocial relationship theory ([Sokolova & Kefi, 2020](#)). Consumers who feel a genuine personal connection to an influencer are significantly more likely to act on their recommendations. Content marketing ranks second, reflecting the importance of high-quality, emotionally engaging, and platform-native content in building brand awareness and triggering purchase consideration ([Chen et al., 2021](#)). Paid advertising faces the greatest structural challenge: Gen Z and Millennial consumers have developed sophisticated advertising literacy and strong authenticity preferences that reduce the persuasive effectiveness of overtly commercial messaging ([Alalwan et al., 2017](#)).

6.2 Practical Implications

First, brands should prioritize long-term partnerships with influencers whose values and audiences align authentically with their brand identity. Trust built through honest, consistent, and personally felt content is the primary engine of influencer-mediated commercial influence ([Chopra et al., 2021](#)). A micro-influencer with ten thousand deeply engaged followers will consistently outperform a mega-influencer whose endorsements are perceived as transactional.

This hierarchy of influencer effectiveness is confirmed by [Conde and Casais \(2023\)](#), who systematically examined micro, macro, and mega-influencers on Instagram and found that parasocial relationship strength - rather than audience size - is the primary mechanism through which influencer endorsements translate into purchase behaviour. Their findings confirm that micro-influencers, whose audiences perceive them as relatable and accessible, consistently generate stronger consumer



trust and brand loyalty than macro- or mega-influencers. [Poh et al. \(2024\)](#) further demonstrated that TikTok's social commerce features amplify this effect, with Gen Z consumers showing significantly higher purchase conversion when influencer content is combined with seamless in-app shopping tools such as TikTok Shop.

Second, content investment on Instagram and TikTok should focus on platform-native production that feels organic within each platform's user experience. Storytelling content that communicates brand values - rather than product features alone - generates stronger engagement and purchase intention ([Tuten & Solomon, 2017](#)). Third, brands should develop systematic strategies for generating and amplifying user-generated content, recognizing UGC as a strategically important and cost-effective complement to paid and creator-led content. Fourth, paid advertising strategies should leverage advanced targeting and native creative formats to maximize relevance and minimize intrusiveness among these advertising-literate consumers.

6.3 Limitations

This paper has important limitations. As a conceptual review, it does not provide original empirical data, which constrains the ability to make causal claims or test the proposed propositions with primary statistical evidence. All five propositions remain to be empirically verified. Additionally, the review draws primarily on studies from Asian, UK, and Jordanian consumer contexts, and findings may not translate uniformly to all geographic markets. Future empirical research should focus specifically on Gen Z and Millennial consumers within Indonesian and Central Asian digital market contexts, given the rapid growth of e-commerce in these regions.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper reviewed the theoretical and empirical literature on the impact of social media marketing on consumer buying behaviour among Gen Z and Millennial users of Instagram and TikTok. Using a narrative literature review methodology and drawing on the Theory of Planned Behaviour, Technology Acceptance Model, and



parasocial relationship theory, the paper developed an integrated conceptual framework and five research propositions for future empirical testing.

The review finds strong support for the positive influence of all five SMM dimensions - content marketing, influencer marketing, social commerce features, user-generated content, and paid social advertising - on consumer buying behaviour. Influencer marketing and content marketing emerge as the most powerful drivers, reflecting the central importance of trust, authenticity, and compelling visual storytelling in the Instagram and TikTok environments. Paid advertising, while effective, faces the growing challenge of reaching young consumers who have developed sophisticated advertising literacy and strong authenticity expectations.

For marketing practitioners, the core strategic insight is clear: trust - built through authentic creator relationships, platform-native content, and genuine consumer community - is the most powerful driver of commercial influence among Gen Z and Millennial consumers. Future empirical research testing the proposed framework, particularly in Southeast Asian and Central Asian e-commerce contexts, will contribute substantially to both academic knowledge and practical marketing guidance in this rapidly evolving domain.

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