

# Digital Nudges and the Marketplace: How Social Media Reshapes Consumer Purchasing Power in Tier-II India

Raushan Kumar, Dr. Navneet Seth  
Guru Kashi University Punjab.

**Abstract-** The rapid growth of social media platforms has significantly transformed consumer behavior and purchasing patterns across India. While extensive research has examined the influence of social media marketing in metropolitan regions, limited attention has been given to its impact on consumers residing in Tier-II cities. This study explores the effect of key social media marketing factors, namely influencer endorsements, online reviews, targeted advertisements, brand interaction, and user-generated content (UGC), on consumers' purchase intentions in Bathinda city. A quantitative research approach was adopted, and primary data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to 150 respondents, primarily college students aged between 18 and 35 years, who constitute one of the most active segments of social media users. The data were analyzed using multiple linear regression techniques to determine the relationship between social media marketing variables and purchase intention. The findings reveal that all five variables exert a significant positive influence on consumers' buying intentions, explaining a substantial proportion of the variation in purchase behavior ( $R^2 = 0.68$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Among the examined factors, influencer endorsements ( $\beta = 0.41$ ) and online reviews ( $\beta = 0.33$ ) emerged as the most influential predictors of purchase intention. Furthermore, reliability analysis demonstrated strong internal consistency across all measurement constructs, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.79. The study enriches the existing literature by providing empirical evidence from a Tier-II Indian city and highlights the growing importance of social media marketing in shaping consumer decisions beyond major urban centers. The findings offer valuable insights for marketers and businesses seeking to develop effective digital marketing strategies targeted at increasingly connected and socially engaged consumers.

**Keywords-** Social Media Marketing, Purchase Intention, Influencer Marketing, Online Reviews, User-Generated Content, Consumer Behaviour, Bathinda.

## I. INTRODUCTION

India's digital landscape has undergone a seismic transformation over the past decade. With more than 700 million active internet users and a smartphone penetration rate that continues to outpace global averages, the country has become one of the most dynamic arenas for digital commerce and social media activity (Keeley, 2023). What was once the exclusive province of metropolitan consumers the fluency with Instagram Reels, the reflexive scroll through Facebook Marketplace, the reliance on YouTube unboxings before a purchase decision has now permeated Tier-II and Tier-III cities with remarkable speed and depth. Bathinda, a mid-sized city in Punjab, exemplifies this phenomenon. Once known primarily as an agricultural and industrial hub, it is today home to a vibrant, digitally connected youth population whose

purchasing behaviour is increasingly shaped not by traditional brick-and-mortar advertising but by the immersive, participatory world of social media. The intersection of social media and consumer behaviour has attracted substantial scholarly attention since the early 2010s. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) offered one of the earliest definitional frameworks for social media, describing it as internet-based applications that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Subsequent research rapidly established that these platforms do far more than facilitate communication they actively construct the informational environment within which purchasing decisions are made. Mangold and Faulds (2009) argued that social media constitutes a new hybrid element of the promotion mix, simultaneously enabling company-driven communication and consumer-to-consumer dialogue that companies can neither control nor predict with precision. This

dual nature simultaneously a marketing channel and a social ecosystem distinguishes social media from all prior advertising media and makes it uniquely powerful as a behaviour-shaping force. Influencer marketing, in particular, has emerged as one of the most economically significant channels within the broader social media ecosystem. Freberg et al. (2011) characterised social media influencers as a new type of independent third-party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and other social media channels. The trust that consumers repose in influencers often perceived as peers rather than brand spokespersons translates into measurable shifts in purchase intention (Lou & Yuan, 2019). For young Indian consumers, many of whom are first-generation digital natives with limited disposable incomes but high aspirational orientations, influencer endorsements serve as critical credibility signals. A recommendation from a relatable content creator carries persuasive weight that a conventional television advertisement rarely achieves among this demographic.

Online consumer reviews represent another potent vector of social media influence. Cheung and Thadani (2012) demonstrated that electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) significantly affects both attitudes toward products and purchase intentions, with review valence, volume, and perceived source credibility serving as key moderating variables. In the Indian context, where interpersonal trust and social proof hold deep cultural resonance, the persuasive power of peer reviews is arguably even more pronounced than in Western markets (Gupta & Harris, 2010). Targeted advertising, enabled by the sophisticated algorithmic architectures of platforms such as Meta and Google, further amplifies this dynamic by serving consumers with product content calibrated to their browsing histories, stated preferences, and demographic profiles. Yet despite the richness of the global literature, a conspicuous lacuna persists with respect to Tier-II Indian cities. The overwhelming majority of Indian consumer behaviour studies are anchored in metropolitan centres such as Delhi, Mumbai, and Bengaluru, where higher average incomes, greater brand exposure, and more developed logistics infrastructure may produce purchasing dynamics that are not straightforwardly generalisable to secondary cities. Bathinda's consumer base occupies a distinct socioeconomic position: comparatively lower disposable incomes, strong community and family influences on decision-making, and an experience of rapid digital adoption that is still consolidating into stable

consumption patterns. Studying social media's influence in this specific context is therefore not merely an academic exercise in geographic diversification; it addresses a substantive gap in our understanding of how digital marketing operates when the infrastructural, cultural, and economic variables differ from those of the metropolitan norm. This study sets out to fill that gap. Its primary objective is to examine the influence of five social media marketing dimensions influencer endorsements, online reviews, targeted advertisements, brand interaction, and user-generated content on consumer purchase intentions in Bathinda city. Secondary objectives include assessing the reliability of the measurement instrument across these dimensions and identifying which variables exercise the strongest independent influence on purchase behaviour when other factors are held constant. By grounding its empirical inquiry in a Tier-II Indian context, the study aims to contribute theoretically to the social commerce and digital marketing literature while simultaneously providing practitioners with evidence-based guidance on how to configure their social media strategies for non-metropolitan Indian consumers.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Social Media as a Marketing Instrument

The scholarly understanding of social media as a marketing tool has evolved considerably since Kaplan and Haenlein's (2010) foundational taxonomy, which classified social media platforms into six categories collaborative projects, blogs, content communities, social networking sites, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds. Subsequent literature has moved beyond taxonomic description to interrogate the mechanisms through which these platforms shape consumer cognition and behaviour. Mangold and Faulds (2009) positioned social media as a hybrid promotional tool that merges traditional integrated marketing communication with consumer-to-consumer information exchange, arguing that its most distinctive feature is the extent to which it enables consumers to bypass corporate messaging entirely. This insight has been empirically substantiated by numerous studies showing that peer-generated content consistently exerts greater persuasive influence than brand-generated content, particularly among younger demographics (Heinonen, 2011).

Tuten and Solomon (2017) offered a more instrumentally useful framework by conceptualising social media marketing around four zones: social community, social publishing, social entertainment, and social commerce. The social commerce zone encompassing product reviews, ratings, group-buying features, and social shopping platforms has attracted the greatest volume of recent scholarly attention, reflecting the rapid commercial monetisation of social media platforms. Zhou et al. (2013) defined social commerce as a form of e-commerce that involves using social media to assist in the online buying and selling of products and services, and demonstrated that social commerce intentions are significantly predicted by social support (both informational and emotional), trust, and social presence.

### **Influencer Marketing and Purchase Intention**

The literature on influencer marketing has expanded rapidly since Freberg et al.'s (2011) conceptualisation of social media influencers as independent endorsers. The dominant theoretical lens applied to this phenomenon has been the two-step flow model of communication (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), updated for the digital era: influencers function as opinion leaders whose endorsements are perceived as authentic because they are not, ostensibly, financially motivated in the same direct way as traditional celebrity endorsements. However, the growing disclosure requirements around paid partnerships have introduced what Boerman et al. (2017) termed the persuasion knowledge activation effect the awareness that an endorsement is commercially motivated can significantly reduce its persuasive efficacy. This effect appears to be moderated by para-social relationship strength, with consumers who feel a close affective bond with an influencer remaining persuaded even after disclosure (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

In the Indian context, Yadav and Rahman (2017) demonstrated that social media marketing activities including content produced by influencers positively affect brand equity and purchase intention among young Indian consumers. Their study, conducted across multiple Indian cities, found that interactivity, information sharing, and word-of-mouth components of social media activities were the strongest predictors of purchase intention. Notably, they found that these relationships held across income levels, suggesting that even consumers with constrained purchasing power are subject to the persuasive mechanisms of influencer content.

### **Electronic Word-of-Mouth and Online Reviews**

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has been extensively theorised as a digitally mediated form of the classic word-of-mouth construct. Cheung and Thadani (2012), in a systematic review of the eWOM literature, identified message characteristics (credibility, quality, quantity), source characteristics (expertise, trustworthiness), and receiver characteristics (involvement, prior knowledge) as the primary determinants of eWOM influence. Their synthesis revealed that perceived source credibility and review valence (positive versus negative) are the most consistent predictors of attitude change and purchase intention. Subsequent work by Filieri et al. (2018) extended this framework by examining the role of information quality, specifically demonstrating that consumers distinguish between reviews that merely express sentiment and those that provide specific, verifiable product information, with the latter exerting disproportionate influence on high-involvement purchases.

In the Indian digital marketplace, eWOM operates within a cultural context that foregrounds collectivist values and interpersonal trust. Gupta and Harris (2010) found that Indian consumers demonstrate a stronger propensity to seek and act on social recommendations than their Western counterparts, attributing this to the cultural premium placed on consensus-based decision-making. This finding has significant implications for brands operating in markets like Bathinda, where community networks remain tightly knit and peer recommendations circulate through both digital and face-to-face channels.

### **Targeted Advertising and Impulse Buying**

The algorithmic targeting capabilities of social media platforms represent a qualitatively distinct advertising mechanism from all prior media. Unlike broadcast advertising, which reaches heterogeneous audiences with undifferentiated messages, social media advertising can serve highly personalised content based on demographic, behavioural, and psychographic data. Goldfarb and Tucker (2011) showed that online advertising effectiveness is significantly enhanced by targeting, but that overly intrusive targeting triggers privacy concerns that can produce advertising avoidance. Subsequent research has focused on optimising the targeting-intrusiveness tradeoff, with Bleier and Eisenbeiss (2015) demonstrating that personalised advertising is most effective when it is perceived as contextually relevant rather than surveillance-based.

The relationship between targeted social media advertising and impulse buying has been examined by Amos et al. (2008), who found that exposure to visually appealing, scarcity-framed advertisements triggers urge-to-buy tendencies that can override deliberative decision-making processes. For young Indian consumers, whose aspirational consumption patterns frequently outpace their disposable incomes, limited-time offers and flash sales promoted through social media represent a particularly potent trigger for unplanned purchases. This phenomenon has been empirically documented in the e-commerce context by Madhavaram and Laverie (2004), who found that the ease and immediacy of online purchasing amplifies impulse buying tendencies already stimulated by advertising stimuli.

### Social Media in Tier-II Indian Markets

Academic inquiry into social media's influence on Tier-II Indian consumer markets remains nascent. The available literature tends to address either the metropolitan Indian context or the aggregate national context, with limited granular attention to cities such as Bathinda, Ludhiana, or Amritsar. Singh and Bansal (2019) examined digital marketing adoption among small and medium enterprises in Punjab, finding that social media platforms were rapidly displacing traditional advertising channels but that the strategic sophistication of social media marketing lagged behind adoption rates. Their study highlighted a paradox characteristic of Tier-II digital markets: high platform penetration coupled with low marketing optimisation, creating a significant opportunity for brands willing to invest in context-specific digital strategies.

### III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional research design. The target population comprised college students and young professionals in Bathinda city, aged 18–35, who use social media platforms regularly. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select 150 respondents, a sample size consistent with the guidelines for multiple regression analysis suggested by Hair et al. (2014), which recommend a minimum of 10 observations per predictor variable the study's five-predictor model thus requires a minimum of 50 observations, making 150 a conservative and adequate sample. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire developed on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree), with items adapted from validated scales in prior literature for each construct: influencer marketing (Lou & Yuan, 2019), online reviews (Cheung & Thadani, 2012), targeted advertisements (Goldfarb & Tucker, 2011), brand interaction (Mangold & Faulds, 2009), user-generated content (Filiari et al., 2018), and purchase intention (Yadav & Rahman, 2017). Internal consistency of all constructs was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple linear regression were conducted using SPSS 26. All data collection adhered to the ethical guidelines of Guru Kashi University, with informed consent obtained from all participants and respondent anonymity ensured throughout.

### IV. DATA ANALYSIS

#### Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 150 respondents.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 150)

Variable	Category	Frequency (%)
Gender	Male	58%
	Female	42%
Age Group	18–25 years	71%

	26–35 years	21%
	36+ years	8%
Education	Undergraduate	54%
	Postgraduate	38%
	Other	8%
Social Media Usage	< 2 hrs/day	22%
	2–4 hrs/day	49%
	> 4 hrs/day	29%

The sample was predominantly male (58%) and young (71% aged 18–25), consistent with the study's purposive focus on digitally active college students. Nearly half the respondents (49%) reported social media usage of 2–4 hours per day, with a substantial proportion (29%) exceeding four hours daily a usage intensity that prior research associates with heightened

susceptibility to social media advertising effects (Amos et al., 2008).

**Reliability Analysis**

Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all six constructs are reported in Table 2.

Table 2: Reliability Statistics (Cronbach's Alpha)

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's $\alpha$
Influencer Marketing	6	0.87
Online Reviews	5	0.83
Targeted Advertisements	5	0.81
Brand Interaction	4	0.79
User-Generated Content	5	0.84
Purchase Intention (DV)	6	0.88

All constructs demonstrated satisfactory to excellent internal consistency ( $\alpha$  ranging from 0.79 to 0.88), meeting the

threshold of  $\alpha \geq 0.70$  recommended by Nunnally (1978). The dependent variable, purchase intention, recorded the highest

alpha (0.88), indicating strong measurement reliability for the outcome variable.

**Correlation Analysis**

Pearson correlation analysis confirmed positive, statistically significant associations between all five social media marketing predictors and purchase intention (r values ranging from 0.41 to 0.63, all  $p < .01$ ). Influencer marketing showed

the strongest bivariate correlation with purchase intention ( $r = 0.63$ ), followed by online reviews ( $r = 0.57$ ). Importantly, inter-predictor correlations remained below 0.70, indicating that multicollinearity does not constitute a serious threat to the regression model's stability (Field, 2013).

**Multiple Linear Regression Analysis**

Table 3 presents the results of the multiple linear regression analysis with purchase intention as the dependent variable

Predictor Variable	B	Se	T-Value	P-Value
Influencer Marketing	0.41	0.06	6.83	< .001
Online Reviews	0.33	0.07	4.71	< .001
Targeted Ads	0.27	0.08	3.38	.001
Brand Interaction	0.19	0.07	2.71	.007
Social Proof (Ugc)	0.22	0.06	3.67	< .001
<i>R<sup>2</sup> = 0.68, Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = 0.66, F(5,144) = 61.2, P &lt; .001</i>				

The overall regression model was statistically significant,  $F(5, 144) = 61.2, p < .001$ , explaining 68% of the variance in purchase intention ( $R^2 = 0.68, Adjusted R^2 = 0.66$ ). This represents a large effect size by Cohen's (1988) conventions. All five predictors made statistically significant independent contributions to the model. Influencer marketing emerged as the strongest predictor ( $\beta = 0.41, p < .001$ ), followed by online reviews ( $\beta = 0.33, p < .001$ ), targeted advertisements ( $\beta = 0.27, p = .001$ ), user-generated content ( $\beta = 0.22, p < .001$ ), and brand interaction ( $\beta = 0.19, p = .007$ ). The standardised beta coefficients indicate the relative magnitude of each predictor's contribution when the effects of the other four predictors are controlled.

**V. FINDINGS**

The empirical analysis yields five principal findings that together constitute a coherent narrative about how social media shapes consumer purchasing in Bathinda city. First, and

most consequentially, influencer marketing is the single most powerful driver of purchase intention, with a beta coefficient of 0.41 that substantially exceeds all other predictors a finding that corroborates Lou and Yuan (2019) and underscores the unique persuasive architecture of para-social trust that influencers construct with their audiences. Second, online reviews exert the second-largest independent influence on purchase intention ( $\beta = 0.33$ ), reflecting the deep cultural resonance of peer validation in Indian consumer contexts and aligning with Cheung and Thadani's (2012) eWOM framework. Third, targeted advertisements, despite mounting consumer awareness of personalisation mechanisms, continue to significantly drive purchase behaviour ( $\beta = 0.27$ ), suggesting that relevance and convenience outweigh privacy concerns for this demographic. Fourth, user-generated content independently predicts purchase intention ( $\beta = 0.22$ ), confirming that organic, consumer-created content retains persuasive power distinct from brand-sponsored material. Fifth, brand interaction the responsiveness of brands to consumer queries and comments while the weakest predictor in the model ( $\beta = 0.19$ ), is nonetheless statistically significant,

indicating that even within a predominantly content-consumption context, interactive brand communication meaningfully shapes purchase disposition. Collectively, these findings establish that social media functions as a multidimensional influence system in which no single channel exhausts its persuasive capacity; a comprehensive social media strategy must simultaneously invest in influencer partnerships, review facilitation, algorithmic advertising, UGC cultivation, and responsive brand communication.

## VI. CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate a question that is simultaneously economically consequential and academically underexplored: how does social media influence consumer purchasing power in Tier-II Indian cities, using Bathinda as an empirical case? The answer that emerges from the data is unambiguous in its broad contours and instructive in its fine-grained detail. Social media is not merely a peripheral supplement to the Bathinda consumer's decision-making process it is central to it. The regression model's explanatory power (Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.66$ ) indicates that social media marketing variables account for the majority of explained variance in purchase intention, a finding that would have been extraordinary two decades ago and is perhaps still underappreciated by businesses that continue to weight their marketing investments toward traditional media. The primacy of influencer marketing in the model is particularly noteworthy for its implications regarding trust architecture in digital markets. In Bathinda, as in other Tier-II Indian cities undergoing rapid digital transition, the traditional sources of product guidance family elders, neighbourhood shopkeepers, trusted community members are being supplemented and in some cases supplanted by digitally proximate influencers whose authority derives not from institutional credentials but from perceived authenticity and relational proximity. This is a profound structural shift with consequences that extend well beyond marketing into questions of cultural authority and information governance. The strength of the online review effect corroborates the deep cultural logic of collective validation that characterises Indian consumer behaviour and suggests that platforms enabling transparent peer evaluation review sites, social commerce features within Instagram and Facebook, YouTube comment sections are sites of substantial commercial influence that brands cannot afford to neglect or leave unmanaged. The significant contribution of targeted

advertising to purchase intention, even in a climate of growing privacy awareness, suggests that the convenience logic of algorithmic relevance remains compelling for consumers whose informational environments are cluttered and whose time is scarce. For marketers, this implies that the ethical and strategic challenge is not whether to target but how to target in ways that feel assistive rather than surveillance-oriented.

### Future Research Directions

Future research should extend this inquiry longitudinally to capture how social media's influence on purchasing behaviour evolves as Tier-II markets mature digitally. Comparative studies across multiple Tier-II cities encompassing different regional cultures, linguistic contexts, and industrial bases would help establish whether the Bathinda findings are generalisable to the broader category of non-metropolitan Indian urban markets. Additionally, qualitative and mixed-methods approaches could illuminate the experiential and motivational dimensions of social media's persuasive influence that quantitative survey instruments cannot fully capture, including the phenomenology of influencer trust, the social dynamics of review-seeking, and the emotional trajectories of impulse-buying episodes triggered by targeted advertising.

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