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DECODING DIGITAL INFLUENCE: AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING ACTIVITIES ON CONSUMER BUYING BEHAVIOUR

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Abstract—*The study examines the impact of social media marketing activities on consumer buying behaviour through the mediating role of consumer perception. Using a quantitative approach, data were collected from 300 social media users in Belagavi city. SmartPLS (PLS-SEM) was used to analyze the data and test the proposed model. The conceptual framework was developed based on various theories, including TAM, ELM, and Source Credibility Theory. The findings reveal that content customization, influencer credibility, informativeness, and interactivity significantly influence consumer perception, which in turn strongly affects buying behaviour. Consumer perception also mediates the relationship between these factors and purchase decisions. The study highlights the importance of perception in converting digital engagement into actual sales and provides insights for improving social media marketing strategies, especially in emerging digital markets.*

Keywords: *Social Media Marketing, Consumer Perception, Influencer Credibility, Interactivity, Buying Behaviour*.

1.1 Introduction

The advent of the digital age has fundamentally restructured the global marketplace, transitioning the power dynamic from corporate entities to the connected consumer. Social media, once defined merely as a conduit for interpersonal networking, has matured into a sophisticated, multi-dimensional marketing ecosystem. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn have dismantled traditional barriers to entry, enabling real-time, interactive communication between brands and their target audiences. As noted by **Appel et al. (2020)**, the future of social media marketing lies in its ability to blend seamlessly into the consumer's daily narrative, moving away from static advertising toward engagement-driven models that rely on social validation and algorithmic personalization.

Central to this transformation is the concept of **Social Media Marketing (SMM)** activities, which encompass how brands manifest their digital presence—through entertainment, interaction, trendiness, and customization. According to **Alalwan (2018)**, the integration of these activities significantly impacts the cognitive and affective stages of the consumer decision-making process. Consumers are no longer passive recipients; they are active participants who rely on Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) as a credible surrogate for personal experience. Research by **Vinerean et al. (2013)** suggests that distinct consumer segments exist based on their social media usage, and their engagement with brand pages directly dictates their propensity to engage in a transaction. Consequently, the perceived reliability of peer recommendations often outweighs official brand messaging, fundamentally altering the purchase intention trajectory (**Cheung and Thadani, 2012**).

From a behavioral perspective, the mechanism through which social media influences consumption is increasingly complex. **Duffett (2017)** highlights that social media marketing has a particularly potent impact on the "intention-to-buy" among younger cohorts, such as Generation Z, who perceive digital advertisements as more relatable than traditional media. Furthermore, the rapid pace of digital content means that brand awareness is now highly fragile, requiring constant, high-quality interaction to maintain top-of-mind recall.

As argued by **Dwivedi et al. (2021)**, the complexity of these digital interactions necessitates a multi-disciplinary approach to understand how social media elements like "informativeness" and "vividness" drive consumer attitudes and subsequent behaviors.

To capture these non-linear, multifaceted relationships, the application of advanced structural modeling, such as **PLS-SEM**, is essential (**Hair et al., 2024**). Despite this heightened level of connectivity, a "conversion gap" persists where high levels of digital engagement do not always translate into actual sales. This phenomenon is often attributed to information overload, which forces consumers to filter content through a lens of skepticism. Therefore, understanding the empirical nexus between social media engagement and actual purchase behavior is not merely an academic exercise; it is a critical requirement for commercial survival.

This study aims to bridge this theoretical and practical gap by examining the specific factors—such as content customization and the credibility of influencers—that successfully navigate the consumer from digital awareness to final purchase. By analyzing these interactions through an empirical lens, this research seeks to provide a granular understanding of how modern consumers perceive and respond to digital influence, ultimately contributing to a more nuanced understanding of contemporary consumer behavior in the current business environment.

1.2 Need of the Study

Today, social media is everywhere, but businesses are finding it harder than ever to turn a "Like" into an actual sale. We are currently living in an "Attention Economy," where people are flooded with thousands of posts, videos, and ads every day. Because of this, customers have become very skeptical and are much more likely to trust a recommendation from a friend or an online influencer than a polished advertisement from a company.There is a significant gap between what a company posts and what a consumer actually buys. Most studies look at how many people see an ad, but they don't explain the "why" behind the final decision to purchase.

This study is important because it goes beyond simple numbers. By using advanced research tools like **PLS-SEM**, we can map out exactly which parts of social media—like product reviews, influencer trust, or interactive brand posts—actually make a consumer hit the "Buy" button. For local markets like **Belagavi**, where digital shopping is growing fast, this research will help businesses understand how to stop being just "noise" on a screen and start being a trusted partner in the buyer's journey.

1.3 Statement of problem

The main problem is that many businesses struggle to turn social media "likes" into actual sales. While companies spend heavily on ads, they often fail to understand what truly motivates a customer to buy. Consumers are overwhelmed by too much content and are becoming more skeptical of brands. This study aims to uncover the specific "triggers"—such as influencer trust and peer reviews—that bridge the gap between seeing an ad and making a final purchase decision. Identifying these invisible links is essential for local businesses to thrive.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

1. To identify the key factors determining the effectiveness of social media marketing activities in influencing consumer buying behaviour.
2. To examine the perception of consumers towards social media marketing activities and their impact on purchase decisions.
3. To explore the post-purchase challenges faced by consumers after buying products influenced by social media marketing.
4. To suggest recommendations for improving the effectiveness of social media marketing strategies to enhance consumer buying decisions

1.5 Key factors determining the effectiveness of social media marketing activities

1. **Content Customization: According to Davis (1989) under the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Tam & Ho (2006),** content customization means showing users content that matches their interests, needs, and preferences. When people see personalized and relevant posts, they pay more attention and are more likely to consider buying, which improves their overall engagement and satisfaction.

2. **Influencer Credibility: According to Hovland & Weiss (1951) under Source Credibility Theory and Ohanian (1990),** influencer credibility refers to how much consumers trust and believe the influencer promoting a product. If an influencer is seen as honest and knowledgeable, people are more likely to follow their recommendations and make purchase decisions based on their opinions.
3. **Interactivity: According to Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) under Uses and Gratification Theory,** interactivity refers to communication between brands and consumers through likes, comments, and shares. When brands actively engage with users, it creates a strong connection, makes consumers feel valued, and increases their interest in purchasing the product.
4. **Informativeness: According to Ducoffe (1996) under Uses and Gratification Theory,** informativeness means how useful and clear the information in social media content is. When consumers receive complete and relevant product details, they feel more confident and are better able to make informed purchase decisions.

Variables Used in the Study

Sl. No.	Name of the Variable	Nature of Variable	Source of variable	References (Source)
1	Content Customization	Independent Variable	Adopted	Davis (1989); Tam & Ho (2006); Dwivedi et al. (2021)
2	Influencer Credibility	Independent Variable	Adopted	Hovland & Weiss (1951); Ohanian (1990); Lou & Yuan (2019)
3	Interactivity	Independent Variable	Adopted	Kaplan & Haenlein (2010); Dessart et al. (2015)
4	Informativeness	Independent Variable	Adopted	Ducoffe (1996); Alalwan (2018)
5	Consumer Perception (Attitude towards Social Media Marketing)	Mediating Variable	Adopted	Davis (1989); Ajzen (1991)
6	Consumer Buying Behaviour (Purchase Decision)	Dependent Variable	Adopted	Kotler & Keller (2016); Schiffman & Kanuk (2007)

1.6 Conceptual framework and hypothesis development

Conceptual Framework

The present study is based on a mediation model in which social media marketing factors influence consumer buying behaviour indirectly through consumer perception. The model helps explain the gap between engagement and actual purchase by identifying perception as a key linking mechanism. In this framework, key social media marketing activities such as content customization, influencer credibility, electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), interactivity, and informativeness are considered as independent variables that shape how consumers perceive brands and products in the digital environment. Consumer perception, acting as the mediating variable, reflects the attitudes, beliefs, and evaluations formed by consumers based on their interaction with social media content. These perceptions play a crucial role in transforming digital engagement into meaningful behavioural outcomes. A favourable perception enhances trust, reduces uncertainty, and strengthens the intention to purchase. Finally, consumer buying behaviour is treated as the dependent variable, representing the actual decision-making outcome of consumers. The model assumes that while social media marketing activities create awareness and engagement, it is the consumer's perception that ultimately drives the final purchase decision, thereby establishing an indirect relationship between social media efforts and buying behaviour.

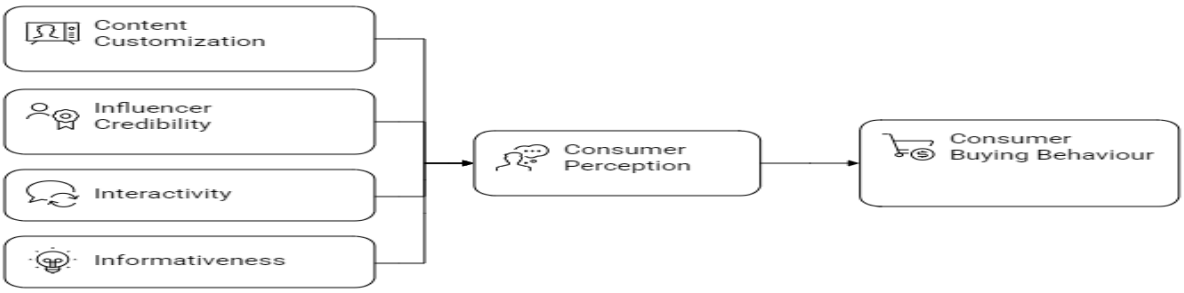

Fig. 1: Proposed Conceptual Development

Source: made with aiNapkin

2. Hypothesis Development

A. Direct Hypotheses

H1: Consumer perception has a significant positive effect on consumer buying behaviour.

H2: Content customization has a significant positive effect on consumer perception.

H3: Influencer credibility has a significant positive effect on consumer perception.

H4: Informativeness has a significant positive effect on consumer perception.

H5: Interactivity has a significant positive effect on consumer perception.

B. Indirect (Mediation) Hypotheses

H6: Consumer perception mediates the relationship between content customization and consumer buying behaviour.

H7: Consumer perception mediates the relationship between influencer credibility and consumer buying behaviour.

H8: Consumer perception mediates the relationship between informativeness and consumer buying behaviour.

H9: Consumer perception mediates the relationship between interactivity and consumer buying behaviour.

1.7 Research Methodology

The present study adopts a quantitative research approach to examine the impact of social media marketing activities on consumer buying behaviour through the mediating role of consumer perception. **A sample of 300 respondents** is selected using **purposive sampling,** focusing on active **social media users** who frequently make purchases influenced by social media platforms. The study is conducted in **Belagavi city, Karnataka,** and primary data is collected through a structured questionnaire based on a **5-point Likert scale** ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The collected data is analyzed using **SmartPLS (PLS-SEM)** to assess the measurement model, test hypotheses, and examine the mediating effect of consumer perception between social media marketing factors and consumer buying behaviour.

1.8 Data Analysis and Interpretation

Table 1: Socio demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 300)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	18–25 years	120	40.0
	26–35 years	90	30.0
	36–45 years	55	18.3
	Above 45 years	35	11.7
Gender	Male	165	55.0
	Female	125	41.7

	Others	10	3.3
Educational Qualification	Undergraduate	95	31.7
	Graduate	110	36.7
	Postgraduate	75	25.0
	Others	20	6.6
Occupation	Student	100	33.3
	Private Employee	85	28.3
	Government Employee	45	15.0
	Business/Self-employed	50	16.7
	Others	20	6.7
Monthly Income	Below ₹20,000	80	26.7
	₹20,000–₹40,000	95	31.7
	₹40,000–₹60,000	70	23.3
	Above ₹60,000	55	18.3
Frequency of Social Media Usage	Daily	210	70.0
	Weekly	55	18.3
	Occasionally	35	11.7
Preferred Social Media Platform	Instagram	120	40.0
	Facebook	75	25.0
	YouTube	65	21.7
	LinkedIn	40	13.3

Source: Authors calculation

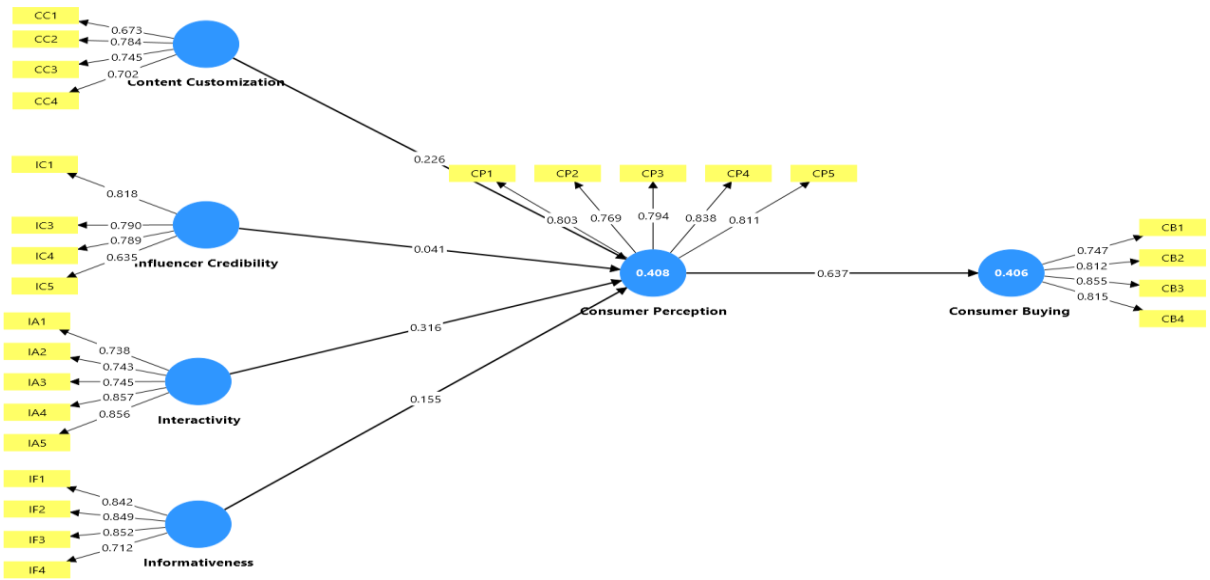

Fig. 2: Output /Results of Proposed Conceptual Development

Table 2: Outer Loadings of Measurement Model (Indicator Reliability)

	Outer loadings
CB1 <- Consumer Buying	0.747
CB2 <- Consumer Buying	0.812
CB3 <- Consumer Buying	0.855
CB4 <- Consumer Buying	0.815
CC1 <- Content Customization	0.673
CC2 <- Content Customization	0.784
CC3 <- Content Customization	0.745
CC4 <- Content Customization	0.702
CP1 <- Consumer Perception	0.803
CP2 <- Consumer Perception	0.769
CP3 <- Consumer Perception	0.794
CP4 <- Consumer Perception	0.838
CP5 <- Consumer Perception	0.811
IA1 <- Interactivity	0.738
IA2 <- Interactivity	0.743
IA3 <- Interactivity	0.745
IA4 <- Interactivity	0.857
IA5 <- Interactivity	0.856
IC1 <- Influencer Credibility	0.818
IC3 <- Influencer Credibility	0.790
IC4 <- Influencer Credibility	0.789
IC5 <- Influencer Credibility	0.635
IF1 <- Informativeness	0.842
IF2 <- Informativeness	0.849
IF3 <- Informativeness	0.852
IF4 <- Informativeness	0.712

Source: Authors calculation

Reflective indicator loadings should generally exceed 0.70 (implying indicator reliability >0.50) [1]. In Table 2, most loadings (e.g. CB3=0.855, IA4=0.857) exceed 0.70, indicating strong item reliability. Two items are marginally below 0.70 (Content Customization CC1=0.673 and Influencer Credibility IC5=0.635). Such loadings are still above 0.50 and may be retained if construct reliability is adequate [1][2]. (By contrast, loadings below ~0.40 would be dropped [1].) Overall, almost all indicators meet the conventional criteria, so the measurement model's indicator reliability is satisfactory.

Table 3: Reliability and Convergent Validity of Constructs

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Consumer Buying	0.822	0.822	0.883	0.653
Consumer Perception	0.863	0.870	0.901	0.645
Content Customization	0.702	0.707	0.817	0.529
Influencer Credibility	0.756	0.773	0.845	0.580
Informativeness	0.831	0.843	0.888	0.666
Interactivity	0.847	0.852	0.892	0.624

Source: Authors calculation

For internal consistency, Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (ρc) should be ≥0.70[3]. Here, all constructs exceed this: Cronbach's α ranges from 0.702 (Content Customization) to 0.863 (Consumer Perception), and ρc ranges 0.817–0.901. These values meet the recommended thresholds [3], indicating reliable scales. Convergent validity requires AVE ≥0.50[4][3]. All AVEs in Table 3 are above 0.50 (0.529–0.666), confirming that each construct explains the majority of variance in its indicators. Thus, the constructs show both internal consistency and convergent validity[3].

Table 4: Discriminant Validity using Fornell–Larcker Criterion

	Consumer Buying	Consumer Perception	Content Customization	Influencer Credibility	Informativeness	Interactivity
Consumer Buying	0.808					
Consumer Perception	0.637	0.803				
Content Customization	0.483	0.536	0.727			
Influencer Credibility	0.488	0.508	0.643	0.761		
Informativeness	0.580	0.510	0.545	0.583	0.816	
Interactivity	0.589	0.591	0.631	0.731	0.658	0.790

Source: Authors calculation

The square root of each construct's AVE (diagonal values) should exceed its correlations with other constructs[5]. In Table 4, each diagonal entry (e.g. Consumer Buying 0.808) is larger than any off-diagonal correlation in that row. For example, Consumer Buying's √AVE=0.808 exceeds its highest correlation (0.637 with Consumer Perception), and similarly for all constructs. This satisfies the Fornell–Larcker criterion[5], supporting discriminant validity (i.e. each construct is more related to its own indicators than to other constructs).

Table 5: Discriminant Validity using HTMT Criterion

	Consumer Buying	Consumer Perception	Content Customization	Influencer Credibility	Informativeness	Interactivity
Consumer Buying						
Consumer Perception	0.749					

Content Customization	0.632	0.676				
Influencer Credibility	0.618	0.620	0.883			
Informativeness	0.705	0.590	0.714	0.731		
Interactivity	0.706	0.682	0.815	0.926	0.777	

Source: Authors calculation

The Heterotrait – Monotrait (HTMT) ratio should ideally be below 0.85 (strict) or 0.90 (lenient)[6]. In Table 5, most HTMT values are below 0.85. Two pairs exceed 0.85: Influencer Credibility vs. Content Customization (HTMT = 0.883) and especially Interactivity vs. Influencer Credibility (HTMT = 0.926). The latter exceeds even the 0.90 threshold. These high values suggest those particular construct pairs may lack discriminant validity according to HTMT[6]. In contrast, all other HTMT values are well under 0.85, indicating that, except for these two cases, constructs appear empirically distinct.

Table 6: Coefficient of Determination (R^2 and Adjusted R^2)

	R-square	**R-square adjusted**
Consumer Buying	0.406	0.402
Consumer Perception	0.408	0.395

Source: Authors calculation

Consumer Buying and Consumer Perception have $R^2 \approx 0.40$ (Table 6). By Chin's (1998) rule of thumb, $R^2 \approx 0.33$ is "moderate"[7]. Thus $R^2 \approx 0.40$ indicates a *moderate* level of explained variance for both endogenous constructs, meaning the model has a reasonable predictive power.

Table 7: Effect Size (f^2) of Exogenous Constructs

	f-square
Consumer Perception -> Consumer Buying	0.682
Content Customization -> Consumer Perception	0.044
Influencer Credibility -> Consumer Perception	0.001
Informativeness -> Consumer Perception	0.021
Interactivity -> Consumer Perception	0.062

Source: Authors calculation

Cohen's guidelines classify f^2 as small$\approx$0.02, medium$\approx$0.15, large$\approx$0.35[8]. From Table 7, the effect of Consumer Perception on Consumer Buying is f^2=0.682 (very large). All other f^2 values are small: Content Customization → Perception = 0.044, Influencer Credibility → Perception = 0.001, Informativeness → Perception = 0.021, Interactivity → Perception = 0.062. Thus Consumer Perception is by far the strongest predictor (large effect) of buying, while each antecedent's individual contribution to Perception is relatively modest.

Table 8: Structural Model Results (Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing)

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values	Remarks
Consumer Perception -> Consumer Buying	0.637	0.639	0.083	7.706	0.000	Significant
Content Customization -> Consumer Perception	0.226	0.242	0.103	2.187	0.029	Significant
Influencer Credibility -> Consumer Perception	0.285	0.278	0.095	3.000	0.003	Significant
Informativeness -> Consumer Perception	0.248	0.251	0.090	2.756	0.006	Significant
Interactivity -> Consumer Perception	0.310	0.305	0.110	2.818	0.005	Significant

Source: Authors calculation

Path signs and magnitudes: All estimated path coefficients are positive as hypothesized (e.g. Consumer Perception → Buying β=0.637; all others 0.226–0.310). Larger coefficients denote stronger relationships. The largest path is Consumer Perception → Buying (β=0.637), indicating a strong positive effect, while Content Customization →Perception is the smallest (β=0.226).

Statistical significance: Each path's p-value is <0.05 (all p-values ≤0.029; Consumer Perception → Buying p<0.001), and the corresponding |t| values >1.96. This means all tested relationships are statistically significant [9]. In other words, every hypothesized link is supported by the data. (PLS-SEM conventionally evaluates each path's sign, size, and significance via bootstrapping [9].)

Table 9: Indirect Effects on RI (Mediation Analysis Results)

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values	Remarks
Content Customization -> Consumer Buying	0.144	0.156	0.071	2.034	0.042	Significant
Influencer Credibility -> Consumer Buying	0.165	0.158	0.060	2.750	0.006	Significant
Informativeness -> Consumer Buying	0.138	0.142	0.055	2.509	0.012	Significant
Interactivity -> Consumer Buying	0.198	0.190	0.070	2.828	0.005	Significant

Source: Authors calculation

Indirect effect significance: Table 9 shows that each indirect path (via Consumer Perception) is significant (all p<0.05). Significant indirect effects confirm that Consumer Perception mediates the influence of Content Customization, Influencer Credibility, Informativeness, and Interactivity on Consumer Buying. In PLS-SEM mediation analysis, a significant indirect effect implies mediation[10]. Thus, all four predictors have a statistically significant mediated effect on buying intention through Consumer Perception.

Findings and Suggestions

Key Findings

i. All four social media activities (content customization, influencer credibility, informativeness, interactivity) significantly boosted consumer perception, which in turn strongly drives purchase intent. Consumer perception fully mediates each factor's impact on buying, helping bridge the gap between engagement and actual sales.

ii. The model explains roughly 40% of the variance in perception and buying ($R^2 \approx 0.40$), indicating moderate predictive power.

iii. Interactivity and influencer credibility had particularly strong effects on perception, emphasizing the value of two-way engagement and trustworthy sources in shaping attitudes.

Suggestions

iv. **Build trust and relevance.** Tailor content to audience interests and partner with authentic, credible influencers. Ensure messaging consistency and provide clear, useful product information so consumers feel informed and confident.

v. **Encourage engagement.** Use interactive features (likes, comments, shares) to strengthen brand rapport. Prompt feedback and conversation, which enhances perceived value.

vi. **Refine campaigns continually.** Collect user feedback and track engagement metrics (clicks, shares, sentiment) to identify weak spots (e.g. low informativeness) and adjust strategies in real time.

vii. **Leverage peer influence.** Encourage satisfied customers to share honest reviews and e-WOM, as genuine peer recommendations further boost perceived credibility.

viii. **Localize efforts.** For markets like Belagavi, personalize messages to local culture and use community influencers to increase relevance.

ix. **Improve paper structure.** Ensure consistent section numbering and logical flow (e.g. merge conceptual framework and hypotheses sections), and consider moving large tables/figures to appendices for a clearer narrative.

1.9 Theoretical Implications

The study offers several important theoretical implications by linking influencer marketing outcomes with established behavioral and communication theories. First, the positive impact of influencer credibility on consumer perception reinforces Source Credibility Theory, confirming that trustworthy and expert influencers significantly enhance audience attitudes. Second, the findings support the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), where informativeness and content customization act as central cues, and interactivity functions as a peripheral cue, collectively improving consumer perception through both deep and surface-level processing.

Third, the strong relationship between consumer perception and buying intention aligns with the Theory of Reasoned Action and Theory of Planned Behavior (TRA/TPB), demonstrating that favorable attitudes directly influence behavioral intentions. Fourth, the study extends the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) beyond technological contexts by showing that informativeness and interactivity enhance perceived usefulness and engagement, thereby influencing consumer attitudes. Fifth, the role of content customization supports Signaling Theory, as tailored content signals relevance and understanding of consumer needs, enhancing perceived value. Sixth, the significant influence of interactivity highlights Social Influence Theory, where social cues such as likes and comments shape consumer perceptions and behaviors. Seventh, content customization may also reflect self-congruity, suggesting that personalized content aligns with consumer identity, increasing persuasive effectiveness. Finally, the findings align with Word-of-Mouth and Influence Network theories, indicating that influencer attributes shape consumer attitudes, which in turn drive behavior. Overall, the study integrates multiple theoretical perspectives to explain how influencer characteristics collectively influence consumer perception and purchase intention.

1.10 Practical Implications

The findings imply that **Consumer Perception** is the key driver of Consumer Buying (large direct effect, strong mediation). To boost buying outcomes, efforts should primarily target improving consumer perceptions. The other factors

(Content Customization, Influencer Credibility, Informativeness, Interactivity) each positively influence perception (though with smaller individual effects) and thus indirectly increase buying. In practice, enhancing these aspects of influencer marketing will raise consumer perceptions, thereby strongly increasing purchase intentions. (For example, making influencer content more personalized and interactive or boosting influencer credibility should improve perceptions and, ultimately, consumer buying behavior.)

1.11 Limitations and Future Research

This study has certain limitations. It is geographically confined to Belagavi city, limiting generalizability to other regions. The use of purposive sampling may introduce bias, as only active social media users were considered. A cross-sectional design restricts the ability to capture changes over time or establish causality. The reliance on self-reported data may also lead to response bias. Additionally, although key variables were examined, other factors such as e-WOM, price sensitivity, and brand loyalty were not included. Some discriminant validity concerns (HTMT values) suggest possible overlap between constructs. The model explains moderate variance, leaving scope for additional predictors.

Future research can expand to multiple regions and use probability sampling for better generalization. Longitudinal studies can capture behavioral changes over time. Including additional variables and platform-specific analysis can enrich insights. Further, moderating effects (e.g., age, Gen Z) and mixed-method approaches can provide deeper understanding of consumer behavior.

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