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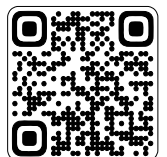


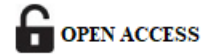
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IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING EFFECTIVENESS ON CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT AND PURCHASE DECISIONS: EVIDENCE FROM START-UP ECOSYSTEMS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the influence of perceived effectiveness of social media marketing (SMM) on consumer involvement and purchasing decisions in the start-up ecosystem. A quantitative cross-sectional design was employed to gather primary data from 108 respondents using a structured questionnaire. Descriptive statistics, Chi-square analysis, and logistic regression were utilised to examine the potential relationships. The results indicate that consumer involvement markedly affects purchase decisions ($\chi^2 = 16.03, p < 0.01$), and perceived social media marketing effectiveness likewise substantially impacts purchase behaviour ($\chi^2 = 9.42, p < 0.05$). The relation between perceived effectiveness and engagement was not significant ($\chi^2 = 13.44, p > 0.05$), indicating parallel rather than sequential impact pathways. Logistic regression indicates that engagement ($\text{Exp}(B) = 2.49, p < 0.01$) is a more significant predictor of purchase than perceived effectiveness ($\text{Exp}(B) = 1.97, p < 0.05$), with an overall model accuracy of 83.3%.

This study redefines customer engagement as a direct and independent predictor of purchase decisions, rather than a mediating factor, and introduces a parallel impact model in which both engagement and perceived effectiveness independently affect consumer behaviour. The paradigm expands Relationship Marketing and customer interaction theory to the inadequately examined domain of start-ups, providing practical insights for resource-limited digital enterprises.

Keywords: Social Media Marketing, Customer Engagement, Purchase Decision, Start-ups, Consumer Behaviour, Digital Marketing

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1. INTRODUCTION

The swift progression of digital technology has profoundly altered business-consumer interactions. Social media platforms—Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook—have become formidable marketing tools, especially for start-ups that depend on economical channels due to constrained resources. In contrast to conventional one-way communication, social media facilitates interactive and participatory engagement via likes, shares, comments, and reviews, rendering customer interaction important to consumer decision-making. Despite the extensive use of social media, the degree to which its perceived effectiveness converts into tangible consumer behaviour continues to be a subject of continuing research. Current research mostly focuses on buy intention rather than actual purchasing behaviour, and there is a scarcity of studies that incorporate perceived social media marketing effectiveness, engagement, and purchasing decisions into a cohesive framework, particularly in the start-up setting of emerging markets. This study investigates the following gaps: (i) the relationship between SMM effectiveness and customer engagement; (ii) the influence of engagement on purchase decisions; and (iii) the direct and indirect effects of SMM effectiveness on consumer behaviour. The study provides start-up practitioners with actionable insights by providing an integrated framework with practical, accessible empirical methodologies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Social Media Marketing and Its Effectiveness

Social media marketing (SMM) has transformed from a communication tool to a strategic platform for influencing consumer behaviour and establishing relationships. Foundational research has demonstrated that social media facilitates interactive, two-way communication, which enables businesses to engage consumers more effectively than traditional channels (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Interactivity, informativeness, personalization, and content quality are all factors that substantially influence consumer perceptions and behavioural responses (Tarhan & Dursun, 2023). Recent empirical evidence has confirmed that SMM activities have a positive impact on brand awareness, engagement, and purchase outcomes. Consumer decisions are increasingly influenced by electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), trendiness, and customization (Ahmad & Juhari, 2024; Islam & Sheikh, 2024; Zeqiri & Hasani, 2024).

2.2 Customer Engagement in the Social Media Context

The degree of consumer interaction, participation, and emotive connection with brand-related content is referred to as customer engagement. Brodie et al. (2013) conceptualized it as a multidimensional construct that encompasses cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions in their seminal work. Engagement is demonstrated through content creation, sharing, remarking, and favouring in social media contexts. Recent research has verified that interactive and personalized social media content has a substantial impact on user engagement and fortifies consumer-brand relationships (Hollebeek et al., 2022; Wijayanto et al., 2024). Engagement is a critical mediating mechanism that connects marketing endeavours to consumer behavioural outcomes.

2.3 Social Media Marketing, Purchase Intention, and Purchase Behaviour

Early research demonstrated that purchase intention is substantially influenced by eWOM and social media interactions as a result of perceived content credibility and peer influence (Erkan & Evans, 2016; Hajli, 2015). This was further explored in subsequent research, which revealed that Generation Z consumers are particularly susceptible to peer interactions and influencer recommendations (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021).

More recent evidence suggests that SMM activities, such as trendiness and eWOM, positively influence purchase intention through mediating variables such as perceived value and customer satisfaction. Post-pandemic research emphasizes trust and loyalty as significant mediators (Faisal et al., 2024; Rahman et al., 2023).

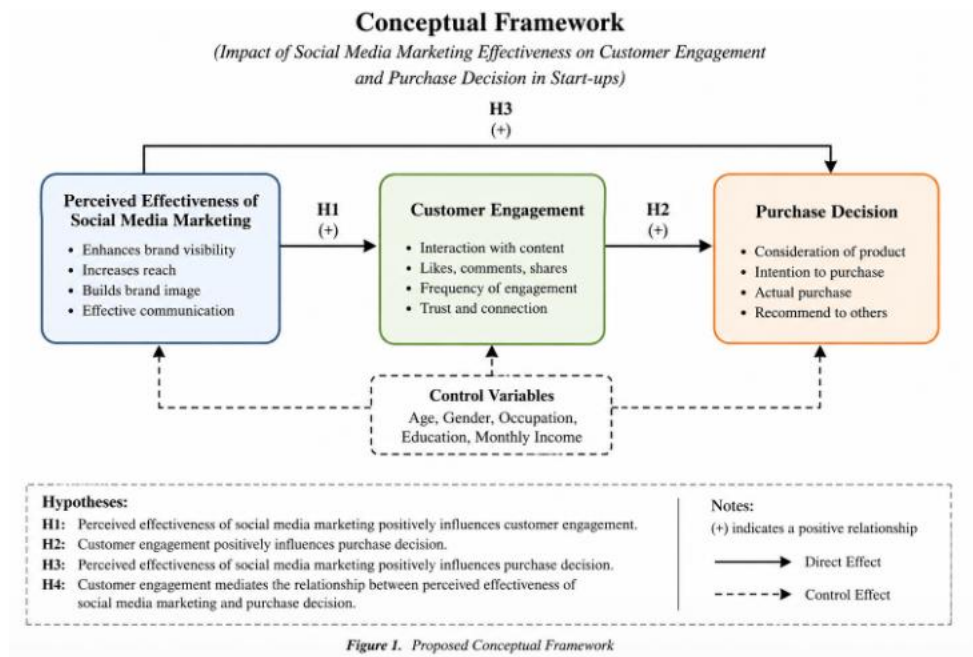
2.4 Role of Customer Engagement in Purchase Decisions

The relationship between consumer engagement and purchase behaviour is robustly supported in both recent and foundational literature. Engaged consumers establish emotional connections, trust, and favourable attitudes toward brands, which results in an increased likelihood of making a purchase. A systematic review has confirmed that engagement serves as a bridge variable linking marketing activities with consumer outcomes such as trust, satisfaction, and purchase behaviour (Mubiru & Goyal, 2024), and it has been demonstrated to significantly mediate the relationship between SMM activities and purchase intention (Wijayanto et al., 2024).

2.5 Research Gaps and Conceptual Framework

The following gaps persist, despite the extensive research: (i) the majority of studies concentrate on purchase intention rather than actual purchase behaviour; (ii) limited research integrates perceived SMM effectiveness, engagement, and purchase decisions within a single framework; (iii) the start-up ecosystem—particularly in emerging economies—remains underexplored; and (iv) few studies adopt simple, practice-oriented empirical approaches. The present study addresses these voids by utilizing an integrated framework that is based on customer engagement theory and Relationship Marketing.

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The framework identifies perceived SMM effectiveness as the independent variable, customer engagement as a mediating variable, and purchase decision as the dependent variable. Four hypotheses are put forth:

- H1: Perceived effectiveness of social media marketing significantly influences customer engagement.
- H2: Customer engagement significantly influences purchase decisions.
- H3: Perceived effectiveness of social media marketing significantly influences purchase decisions.
- H4: Customer engagement mediates the relationship between SMM effectiveness and purchase decisions.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design employed in this study is quantitative, descriptive, and explanatory. A structured questionnaire was employed to conduct a cross-sectional survey, which included demographic questions and assessments of social media usage, engagement behaviour, and purchase decisions. 108 valid responses were obtained after screening for incomplete entries using a non-probability convenience sampling technique. This method is suitable for exploratory behavioural research that concentrates on students and young professionals, a critical demographic for analysing social media engagement and purchase activity. Three constructs were assessed.

The Likert-scale items that captured brand visibility and communication effectiveness were used to evaluate the perceived effectiveness of SMM (independent variable). The self-reported frequency of interaction (likes, shares, comments, and viewing) was used to measure customer engagement (mediating variable). The dependent variable, purchase decision, was operationalized as a binary outcome (1 = Yes, 0 = No). Education, occupation, gender, and age were utilized as control variables. All scale items were evaluated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 'Strongly Disagree' to 'Strongly Agree.'

Cronbach's Alpha was employed to establish reliability, with SMM effectiveness and customer engagement both exceeding the prescribed threshold of 0.70 at 0.81 and 0.78, respectively. Construct validity was substantiated by alignment with established theoretical frameworks, content validity was guaranteed through the adaptation of items from prior studies, and face validity was confirmed through expert review and prototype testing. The data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics, which employed descriptive statistics, Chi-square tests for categorical associations, and logistic regression to evaluate predictors of purchase decisions. Participation was voluntary, respondents were apprised of the study's objectives, and confidentiality and anonymity were preserved throughout. Ethical standards were upheld.

4. RESULTS AND DATA ANALYSIS

4.1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age	20–30	80	74.1
	Below 20	27	25.0
	31–40	1	0.9
Gender	Female	56	51.9
	Male	52	48.1
Occupation	Student	87	80.6
	Employee	11	10.2
	Start-up Founder	8	7.4
	CEO / Self-Employed	2	1.8

The predominant demographic of responders is between the 20–30 age range, indicating a digitally engaged population. The gender representation is equitable, and the majority of respondents are either students or early-career professionals—an apt group for examining social media involvement and purchasing behavior.

4.2 Social Media Usage and Engagement Patterns

Table 2: Engagement Frequency with Start-up Content

Engagement Level	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Weekly	34	31.5
Daily	28	25.9
Rarely	24	22.2
Monthly	16	14.8
Never	6	5.6

Note. Engagement frequency categories are self-reported interaction levels with start-up content. Percentages are based on valid responses.(N = 108).

Most respondents engage with start-up content on a weekly or daily basis (57.4% combined), indicating active involvement in digital platforms.

4.3. Perceived Effectiveness and Brand Visibility

Table 3: Perceived Effectiveness of Social Media Marketing

Rating	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Highly Effective	49	45.4
Somewhat Effective	46	42.6
Neutral	10	9.3
Not Effective	3	2.8

Note. Ratings reflect respondents' perceptions of SMM effectiveness on a 5-point Likert scale. Percentages are based on valid responses (N = 108).

Table 4: Perceived Brand Visibility through Social Media

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	52	48.1
Agree	38	35.2
Neutral	14	13.0
Disagree	4	3.7

Note. Responses measured on a 5-point Likert scale (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree). Percentages are based on valid responses (N = 108).

Approximately 88% of respondents evaluate social media marketing as extremely or moderately successful (Table 3), and more than 83% agree that it improves the brand's visibility (Table 4), highlighting its strategic significance for start-ups.

4.4 Content Types Influencing Purchase Behaviour

Table 5: Content Types Influencing Purchase Decisions

Content Type	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Customer Testimonials/Reviews	42	38.9
Informative Content	25	23.1
Video Advertisements	21	19.4
Discounts & Promotions	20	18.5

Note. Frequencies represent respondents' selection of the most influential content type. Percentages are based on valid responses (N = 108).

Customer testimonials and reviews constitute the most impactful content category (38.9%), underscoring the significance of social evidence and authenticity in customer decision-making.

4.5 Chi-Square Test Results

Table 6: Chi-Square Test Results

Hypothesis	Variables	χ^2 Value	df	p-value	Result
H1	Effectiveness \times Engagement	13.44	12	0.338	Not Significant
H2	Engagement \times Purchase Decision	16.03	4	0.003	Significant
H3	Effectiveness \times Purchase Decision	9.42	3	0.024	Significant

Note. χ^2 = Chi-square statistic; df = degrees of freedom; p = probability value. Significance determined at $p < .05$.

Perceived SMM effectiveness is significantly related to purchase decisions (H3: $\chi^2 = 9.42$, $p < 0.05$), and customer engagement is significantly associated with purchase decisions (H2: $\chi^2 = 16.03$, $p < 0.01$). Conversely, the relationship between engagement and perceived effectiveness is not statistically significant (H1: $\chi^2 = 13.44$, $p > 0.05$), indicating that perceived effectiveness may directly influence purchase behaviour rather than through engagement.

4.6 Logistic Regression Analysis

The logistic regression model was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 24.78$, $p < 0.001$), accounting for 21–29% of the variance in purchase decisions (Nagelkerke R^2). The likelihood of purchase was more than doubled by customer engagement ($\text{Exp}(B) = 2.49$, $p < 0.01$), while perceived SMM effectiveness also had a significant positive effect ($\text{Exp}(B) = 1.97$, $p < 0.05$). This was the strongest predictor. 83.3% of the cases were accurately classified by the model.

Table 7: Logistic Regression Coefficients

Variable	B	S.E.	Wald	p-value	Exp(B)
Constant	-1.965	0.641	9.39	0.002	—
Customer Engagement	0.912	0.298	9.36	0.002	2.49
Perceived Effectiveness	0.678	0.285	5.66	0.017	1.97

Note. B = unstandardized coefficient; S.E. = standard error; Wald = Wald chi-square statistic; Exp(B) = odds ratio. * $p < .05$ indicates statistical significance.

Table 8: Classification Table

Observed / Predicted	No Purchase	Purchase	Accuracy (%)
No Purchase	20	8	71.4
Purchase	10	70	87.5
Overall Accuracy	—	—	83.3

Note. Accuracy percentages represent the correct classification of observed versus predicted purchase decisions. Overall model accuracy = 83.3%.

4.7 Hypothesis Testing Summary

Table 9: Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Statement	Test	p-value	Decision
H1	SMM effectiveness → Customer engagement	Chi-square	0.338	Rejected
H2	Customer engagement → Purchase decision	Chi-square / Logistic	0.003 / 0.002	Supported
H3	SMM effectiveness → Purchase decision	Chi-square / Logistic	0.024 / 0.017	Supported
H4	Engagement mediates Effectiveness → Purchase	Not supported	—	Not Supported

Note. Hypotheses tested using Chi-square and logistic regression. Significance determined at $p < .05$. Mediation not supported.

5. DISCUSSION

The results offer a nuanced understanding of the relationship between social media marketing and consumer behaviour, partially corroborating the existing literature while also highlighting significant discrepancies. Brodie et al. (2013) have conceptualized engagement as reflecting deeper consumer involvement that enhances trust, affective connection, and purchase likelihood. This confirms that customer engagement is a strong and significant driver of purchase decisions. Purchase decisions are also substantially influenced by perceived SMM effectiveness, which is consistent with Hajli's (2015) assertion that social media enables informed decision-making through peer influence and user-generated content.

The non-significant relationship between perceived effectiveness and engagement is a significant departure from the prior literature. Hollebeek et al. (2022) conceptualize engagement as a direct consequence of effective marketing stimuli; however, the current findings indicate that consumers may perceive social media as effective without actively participating. This may indicate a lack of personal relevance, content saturation, or passive consumption behaviour, emphasizing the importance of distinguishing between consumer perception and action.

Relationship Marketing principles that prioritize ongoing interaction over mere exposure are further supported by logistic regression, which demonstrates that engagement is a more reliable predictor of purchase than perceived effectiveness. It is crucial to note that the investigation reveals that SMM operates through parallel pathways, rather than sequential ones:

purchase decisions are independently influenced by both effectiveness and engagement. This presents a challenge to conventional linear models and implies a more intricate consumer decision-making process in digital contexts.

The descriptive finding that consumer testimonials and reviews are the most influential content type reinforces the role of credibility and social proof, thereby supporting Mangold and Faulds' (2009) arguments on user-generated content. In general, the research indicates that engagement is more effective as an independent behavioural predictor than as a mediating mechanism. This is a particularly pertinent insight for start-ups, as marketing must actively encourage consumer interaction rather than merely raising awareness.

6. THEORETICAL AND MANAGERIAL CONTRIBUTIONS

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

Four significant theoretical contributions are made by this investigation. Initially, it challenges the presumptive sequential relationship between the effectiveness of social media marketing (SMM) and engagement, illustrating that perceived effectiveness does not necessarily equate to active engagement—a critical distinction between perception and action. Secondly, it refines the conceptual role of customer engagement within digital marketing frameworks by repositioning it from a mediating variable to a direct and independent predictor of purchase decisions. Third, it suggests and empirically validates a parallel influence model in which the effectiveness and engagement of social media marketing (SMM) independently influence purchase decisions. This model provides a more sophisticated alternative to conventional mediation-based models. Fourth, the study broadens the scope of Relationship Marketing and customer engagement theories to emergent business environments that are digitally dependent and resource-constrained by situating the analysis within the start-up context.

6.2 Managerial Contributions

The results provide a variety of practical insights for digital marketers and start-up founders. Start-ups should prioritize interactive and participatory experiences—such as polls, live sessions, user-generated content campaigns, and prompt responses—over inert content dissemination, as consumer engagement is the most significant factor in purchase determination. The discrepancy between engagement and perceived effectiveness suggests that visibility alone is insufficient; content must be personalized and emotionally pertinent to encourage active participation.

The strategic importance of social proof is emphasized by the strong preference for customer testimonials and reviews. In order to establish trust, start-ups should actively encourage satisfied consumers to share their experiences and utilize authentic user-generated content. Lastly, managers should implement a dual strategy, which involves simultaneously improving the quality and credibility of content and promoting engagement through interactive initiatives, as both effectiveness and engagement independently predict purchase. These engagement-driven strategies are cost-effective and are particularly well-suited to the resource constraints of start-ups.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

It is imperative to recognize a number of constraints. The generalizability of the study is limited by the use of a non-probability convenience sample, which is predominantly composed of students and young professionals. The cross-sectional design restricts the capacity to monitor behavioural change over time and to infer causal relationships. The single-context focus on start-ups may not reflect dynamics in larger or more established firms, and self-reported data may introduce response bias.

Although these limitations restrain the generalizability and causal inference of the current findings, they also emphasize significant opportunities for future research. The cross-sectional design, self-reported measures, and reliance on a student-dominated convenience sample encourage the use of more rigorous methods, such as probability sampling, longitudinal monitoring, and the integration of behavioural data, to extend and validate the framework in a variety of contexts. In this manner, the constraints not only establish the limits of the present investigation but also provide opportunities for future research on the ways in which the effectiveness and engagement of social media marketing influence consumer behaviour across industries, cultures, and organizational stages.

In order to validate and expand the current framework, future research should implement more rigorous designs, which should be based on these constraints. Probability sampling across a variety of demographic and professional groups would improve generalizability, while longitudinal or experimental methods could establish causal relationships between the effectiveness of social media marketing, engagement, and purchase behaviour. The integration of behavioural data, such as clickstream analytics, transaction records, or platform-level engagement metrics, in conjunction with self-reports would enhance validity and mitigate bias. Comparative studies between start-ups and established firms, as well as cross-cultural analyses,

would further elucidate the manner in which organizational maturation and market context moderate the parallel influence pathways identified in this study.

8. CONCLUSION

This study examined the influence of perceived social media marketing effectiveness on consumer engagement and purchase decisions within the start-up ecosystem. The results verify that perceived SMM effectiveness and customer engagement are substantial independent predictors of purchase behaviour. It is important to note that the lack of a substantial correlation between perceived effectiveness and engagement implies that social media marketing operates through parallel rather than sequential pathways, which challenges traditional mediation-based frameworks.

The strategic imperative for start-ups to invest in interactive, credibility-driven content strategies rather than relying solely on promotional presence is reinforced by the emergence of customer engagement as the dominant predictor of purchase decisions. The effectiveness of social proof in reducing perceived risk and promoting conversions is further emphasized by the preference for customer testimonials and reviews.

In summary, the successful implementation of social media marketing for start-ups is not solely about generating visibility; it is also about cultivating meaningful engagement that results in tangible consumer actions and sustainable business growth. Moving forward, future research should continue to refine parallel influence models to capture the changing dynamics of digital consumer behaviour, ensuring that both established and start-up firms can adjust to the changing landscape of social media engagement and purchase decisions.

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