

Consumer Engagement as a Mediator Between Social Media Marketing and Purchase Behaviour in the Apparel Sector.

Anisha Anand^{1*}, Prabhat Kumar²

¹Designation: Research Scholar Affiliation -Swami Vivekanand Subharti University, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh
Email ID : Anisha.anand0@gmail.com

²Designation -Professor Affiliation -Swami Vivekanand Subharti University, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh
Email ID : prabhat.su202501196@subharti.co

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KEYWORDS

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Purchase behaviour,
Apparel brands,
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Consumer involvement,
PLS-SEM, Stimulus–
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O-R) model*

ABSTRACT

A great deal has changed since the emergence of social media as of late – in fact, the world of social media has revolutionized the way apparel brands communicate, attract, and retain customers. This study is an attempt to examine the mediation between social media marketing (SMM) activities and purchase behaviour of fashion and apparel products consumers with the help of consumer engagement. Based on the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) model and the theory of consumer involvement, a conceptual model was created, where five dimensions of social media marketing, namely entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization and word of mouth, act as antecedents of consumer involvement, which in turn affects purchase intention and actual purchase behaviour.

Data were gathered using a self-administered and structured questionnaire from 350 active social media users who follow at least one apparel brand on Instagram, Facebook, and/or TikTok. The proposed hypotheses were tested using the partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) and bootstrapped mediation analysis. The results of the study show that social media marketing activities have a significant positive impact on consumer engagement, $\beta = 0.61$, $p < 0.001$; consumer engagement, in turn, significantly predicts purchase behaviour, $\beta = 0.58$, $p < 0.001$. The mediation analysis also supports that social media marketing affects the purchase behaviour through consumer engagement, while the indirect effect represents a significant portion of the total effect. The mediated model accounted for significantly more variance in purchase behaviour ($R^2 = 0.52$) than did the direct-effects-only model ($R^2 = 0.28$).

The results indicate that social media should not be regarded as a broadcasting medium, but an instrument that fosters relationships with customers, and the business potential of which is more likely to be seen in the interactions it creates. Theoretical and managerial implications, limitations and directions for future research are discussed...

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

In the last decade, social media has been transformed from a marketing side-by-side communication channel to a key marketing strategy, especially in the apparel and fashion space. Apparel brands have never had so many chances to highlight their products, share their brand stories and engage directly with consumers in real-time on various platforms like Instagram, Facebook, TikTok and Pinterest. Social media is a platform that has the advantage of enabling consumers to be more than just passively receiving messages, but to be active co-creators of brand meaning through its participatory two way communication.

Social media marketing in the clothing industry is particularly befitting as clothing and fashion is a visual, expressive, socially engaged type of consumption and purchase. Through apparel, consumers act as a medium for expressing identity, communicating group affiliation and engaging in trends, which is intensified by the visual and social affordances (such as.....

Instagram and TikTok). Influencer collaborations, user-generated content marketing, shoppable posts, and engaging elements like polls, augmented-reality try-on videos, and livestream shopping events are among the efforts apparel brands have made to cultivate partnerships with influencers

Even with this significant investment, not all of the social media marketing-purchasing correlation is straightforward or instant. There are consumers that follow a brand, its posts or watch its videos without necessarily going to the brand's purchase site. Marketing academics have begun to claim that the missing link between marketing and behavioural response is the investment a consumer makes in a marketing interaction, especially in relation to a brand, which is called consumer engagement. Consumers who are engaged are more likely to trust a brand, feel an emotional connection with the brand and ultimately do something as a result of that connection – namely, purchase behaviour. This study thus suggests that consumer engagement should not be viewed as an add-on to the social media marketing but be regarded as the key enabler of the commercial impact of social media marketing.

1.2 Problem Statement

As apparel companies invest more in social media marketing, they are finding themselves in a situation where they can no longer clearly measure how many sales social media are generating—if any. Hundreds of vanity metrics, such as follower counts, likes and impressions, are often used as indicators of marketing success, but do not always reflect purchase behaviour. The challenge for marketing managers is that they now have to discover which particular types of social media marketing that lead to engagement, and if engagement does lead to sales.

Academically, although a considerable amount of research has focused on the direct effects of social media marketing on purchase intention, fewer have explicitly modelled and empirically tested social media marketing by consumer engagement as a mediation mechanism between these two, especially in the apparel industry in emerging markets. To meet this lacuna, this study aims to propose and test a mediation mechanism in which the engagement of consumers will be positioned between the two variables of the social media marketing activities and purchase behaviour.

1.3 Research Objectives

To analyze how social media marketing activities (entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization, word of mouth) affect the consumers' engagement in apparel industry.

To investigate how consumers' involvement can influence their purchasing behavior towards apparel.

- To examine the direct effect of social media marketing activities on purchase behaviour.
- To examine the mediating power of consumer engagement between relationship between social media marketing and social purchase behaviour.

To gain theoretical and managerial implications for apparel marketers wanting to maximize their social media marketing efforts.

1.4 Research Questions

RQ1: What is the relationship between social media marketing activities and consumers' involvement in apparel brands?

Whether consumers' involvement is a significant factor in their purchase behaviour?

Whether social media marketing directly affects purchase behaviour regardless of engagement or not is a question that is explored in RQ3. RQ3 examines whether there is a direct relationship between social media marketing and purchase behaviour, when engagement is not considered.

Whether the consumer engagement is a mediator between social media marketing and purchase behaviour or not (RQ4)?

1.5 Significance of the Study

There are several contributions of this study. In theory, it is an extension of the stimulus-organism-response theory into the apparel social media realm and empirically validates the role of the stimulus-response pathway between the marketing stimuli and the resulting behavioral responses. For apparel marketers, the findings provide real data to help inform social media marketing strategies and campaigns, enabling them to allocate marketing resources more effectively. The study supplies a data-driven groundwork for the guidelines and best practices for responsible and effective digital marketing in the fashion retail sector for policymakers and industry associations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Social Media Marketing

Social media marketing (SMM) is the time intentional marketing efforts for creating awareness of a brand, establishing

relationships with customers, and marketing products or services through social networking services. In the apparel industry, these SMM strategies typically involve creating content that's aesthetically pleasing, activating engagement campaigns, engaging influencers, and promoting user-generated content. Drawings on the previous conceptualisations of social media marketing in fashion and luxury industry, this study operationally defines SMM by five commonly used dimensions of SMM namely entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization and word of mouth.

The entertainment value of a brand's social media posts is how much they are seen as fun, enjoyable or aesthetically pleasing. Interaction reflects how well a brand allows for the exchange of information, opinions and dialogue between and amongst consumers. Trendiness is a measure of how up-to-date and trendy a brand's social media presence is viewed. Customization relates to giving a consumer a customized piece of information or the provision of a customized service to the consumer. Word of mouth is a measure of how much social media content is likely to be shared with and provide recommendations for consumers' social networks. In total, these dimensions reflect the content and relational aspects of the social media presence of a brand.

2.2 Consumer Engagement

The consumer engagement is a psychological state that is experienced by the customer when he/she interacts with a focal object (such as a brand) in a specific situation, and creates something together. It is generally understood as a multi-dimensional phenomenon consisting of cognitive, emotional and behavioral aspects. Cognitive engagement is defined as the consumer's level of concentration and interest in the brand; emotional engagement is the level of positive emotional feelings, pride and inspiration a consumer feels for the brand; and behavioural engagement is the level of energy, effort and time consumers put into brand related interactions like liking, commenting, sharing and creating content.

Engagement is a phenomenon that is observable both in terms of cognitive and affective states, e.g., 'attention' and 'emotional attachment' as well as in terms of observable actions, e.g., 'like' or 'comment'. It is believed that engagement is stronger predictor of downstream commercial outcomes than passive exposure measures such as reach or impressions as it is an active, volitional investment of psychological and behavioural resources in a brand relationship.

2.3 Purchase Behaviour

Purchase behaviour includes the decision-making processes and actions consumers engage in when choosing, purchasing and using products. Purchase behaviour, in the context of this study, is broadly defined as purchase intention, defined as the consumer's self-reported likelihood of purchasing the product from the brand in the near future; and self-reported actual purchase behaviour such as repeat purchase and additional spending due to social media exposure. The purchase process within the apparel industry is frequently impulsive and trendy, with social validation factors like peer suggestions, influencer endorsements and popularity indicators like likes and comments playing a big role.

2.4 Consumer Engagement as a Mediator

Research is increasingly suggesting that the link between marketing stimuli and behavioural responses is indirect rather than direct, and involves intervening psychological states. In the context of social media marketing, this means that the social media marketing activities serve as stimuli that attract consumers' attention and stimulate their interaction (engagement), before forming their attitudes and behavioural intentions towards the brand. In other words, social media marketing can't directly lead to a purchase, but it can help to create a relationship that's based on engagement, and it is the engagement that leads to the purchasing outcome.

In neighbouring industries, luxury goods, cosmetics, and hospitality, there are evidence supporting the mediation role of engagement or other constructs like brand trust and brand loyalty. Specific mechanism for engaging these five dimensions of SMM together to foster engagement and its mediating role in between SMM and purchase behaviour is comparatively under-researched in the apparel industry. This is a study to directly fill this gap.

2.5 Theoretical Foundation: The Stimulus-Organism-Response Framework

It is based on the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) paradigm which was first developed in the field of environmental psychology and has been extensively used in consumer behaviour and information systems studies. The S-O-R model of learning states that external stimuli (S) influence an individual's internal states (O) which then elicit behaviour (R). In the current model the stimulus (S) is the social media marketing activity, the internal organisms state (O) is the cognitive, emotional and behavioural response they elicited in the consumer, and the response (R) is the consumer's purchase behaviour in relation to the activity. The S-O-R framework offers solid theoretical support for modeling a mediating role of consumer engagement between marketing stimuli and behavioural outcomes, instead of modeling an unmediated relationship between SMM and purchase behavior.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Based on the S-O-R principles and the above literature, the conceptual model of this study is proposed in which five

dimensions of social media marketing (entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization and word of mouth) are used as antecedents of consumer engagement. The concept of consumer engagement is suggested as the main mediator that connects marketing stimuli with consumer purchasing behavior, with cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects. Additionally, the model is retained assuming a direct path from social media marketing to purchase behaviour to enable formal tests of full versus partial mediation. Figure 1 shows the conceptual model.

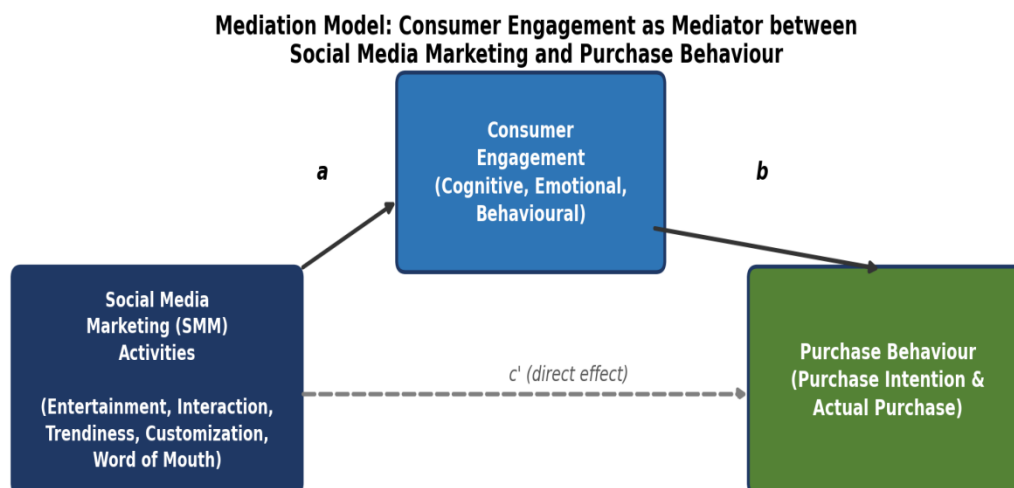


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of the Mediation Relationship Between Social Media Marketing, Consumer Engagement, and Purchase Behaviour

3.1 Hypotheses Development

H1: There is a positive relationship between the social media marketing activities and the engagement of consumers.

Previous studies have repeatedly shown that trendy, shareable, customized, interactive and entertaining brand content is more likely to capture a consumer's attention, elicit positive feelings and drive consumer interaction with a brand's social media presence. Brands that create more engaging, personalized and social content should then be expected to have higher levels of engagement.

H2: Consumer involvement is correlated with purchase behaviour. H2: Consumer involvement is significantly positively correlated to purchase behaviour.

Consumers who are cognitively absorbed, emotionally attached, and behaviourally active with a brand are thought to have greater purchase intentions and are more likely to make purchases, because they trust and feel familiar with the brand and have higher perceived relationship quality with the brand.

H3: Social media marketing activities (SMMAs) have a high direct positive impact on purchase behaviour.

Apart from the indirect effect of engagement, social media marketing activities also can directly affect purchase behaviour by sharing information about products, price promotions and purchase cues (such as shoppable posts), which can shorten the route to purchase without engaging users.

H4: This hypothesis was confirmed with a substantial mediating effect of consumer engagement between social media marketing and purchase behaviour.

This study is based on the S-O-R hypothesis, which suggests that a significant part of the overall impact of social media

marketing on consumer purchase behavior is mediated by consumer engagement rather than just directly influencing purchase behavior.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

This study uses the quantitative, cross-sectional survey design approach with the positivist research paradigm that can be applied to test the relationship between the hypothesised latent variables. The method used was a deductive approach which involved the development of hypotheses from the existing theories and literature, followed by testing the hypotheses with the empirical data obtained from the apparel consumers that actively use social media.

4.2 Population and Sampling

The target population consisted of social media users between the ages of 18 and 45, who follow any apparel or fashion brand on Instagram, Facebook, and/or TikTok and have made at least one purchase related to clothing or fashion within the last year. As it is difficult to get the whole population of the users of social media, non-probability purposive sampling technique was used, supplemented with snowball sampling. The survey was sent via an online questionnaire with the help of social platforms, university mailing lists and messaging apps for a period of six weeks.

412 responses were received, 350 of which were kept for analysis (after discarding incomplete, straight-lined and failed attention checklist responses). The final sample size is larger than the recommended 10 times the number of predictor paths in the structural model estimated in this study (the ten-times rule) and meets the criteria for the statistical power for the model estimated in this study.

4.3 Data Collection Instrument

A structured questionnaire with four sections, namely screening questions to establish eligibility, as well as demographic questions (gender, age, education, social media usage), was used to collect the data. Measurement items for the five social media marketing dimensions were adapted from scales used in previous luxury and fashion-brand social media marketing research, while the scales for consumer engagement (cognitive, emotional, and behavioural sub-dimensions) and purchase behaviour (purchase intention and actual purchase) were adapted from previously validated scales. Each of the substantive items was rated on a five point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Before collecting the data in the large scale, the questionnaire was pretested with 30 respondents to check the clarity and reliability of the items. Some minor wording changes were made based upon pilot feedback, and no items were eliminated at this point, because all items had a minimum acceptable Cronbach's alpha (greater than 0.70) in the pilot sample.

4.4 Measures and Constructs

Social media engagement (4 items) – e.g., “It's fun to follow this clothing brand on social media.”

This brand's social media enables users to easily share opinions with others (4 items).

Experienced use of social media (3 items) – e.g., “It has been more than a year since I last used social media.”

Possibility to customize (3 items) – e.g., “I can customize this brand's social media.”

Social Media (2 items) – e.g., “I would follow this brand on social media.”

Consumer Engagement (cognitive, emotional and behavioural sub dimensions – 9 items): “I feel emotionally connected to this apparel brand.”

Purchase Behaviour (6 items, purchase intention and actual/repeat purchase) – e.g., “I want to buy from this brand when I see their posts on social media.”

4.5 Data Analysis Technique

The data was analysed in two phases; descriptively with SPSS and preliminary with SmartPLS for SEMs. Descriptive statistics were calculated to get a summary of the respondents' demographic profile. Second, the internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability), convergent validity (average variance extracted), and discriminant validity (Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio) of the measurement model were examined. Third, partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) was used to estimate the structural model and bootstrapping method was used to test the significance of the path coefficients with 5,000 resamplings. Finally, the mediating effect of consumer involvement was examined using variance accounted for (VAF) approach and bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence intervals (BCCIs) for the indirect effect was calculated.

5. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

5.1 Educational Background of Respondents

The demographic profile of the 350 respondents that were included in the final analysis are summarised in Table 1. The sample was mostly female (59.4%) a trend that has been seen in previous studies with higher engagement of women with apparel related content on social media, and was focused in the 18 to 34 age group (77.2% combined), which resonates with previous studies that showed that this is the age range with the highest engagement on social media. Most respondents had at least an undergraduate degree and said they used social media at least several times daily, indicating that the sample was made up of social media entrants with high frequency of use and to meet the study's goals.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 350)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	136	38.9
	Female	208	59.4
	Prefer not to say	6	1.7
Age Group	18–24 years	142	40.6
	25–34 years	128	36.6
	35–45 years	80	22.8
Education	Undergraduate	189	54.0
	Postgraduate	131	37.4
	Other	30	8.6
Social Media Use	Several times a day	241	68.9
	About once a day	79	22.6
	A few times a week	30	8.5
Total	—	350	100.0

5.2 Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model was assessed for reliability and validity before going to hypothesis testing. Cronbach's alpha and the composite reliability for all constructs exceeded the recommended cut-off point of 0.70, with the values ranging from 0.81 to 0.92. Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability for all constructs were well above the recommended threshold of 0.70; ranging from 0.81 to 0.92. The average variance extracted for all constructs were greater than 0.50, which indicates

that the constructs had acceptable convergent validity. To build discriminant validity the ratio of correlation between the constructs was calculated (Heterotrait-Monotrait, HTMT) and all values were below 0.85, which is the conservative value for establishing discriminant validity. All of the predictor constructs were below collinearity statistics (VIF) of 3.3, thus common method bias and multicollinearity were not a serious problem with this data set.

5.3 Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

The PLS-SEM was used to estimate the structural model and the bootstrapping procedure of 5000 samples was employed to assess statistical significance of path coefficients. Standardised path coefficients, t values, p values and decisions for each hypothesised relationship are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Structural Path Coefficients and Mediation (Bootstrapped Results, N = 350)

Hypothesised Path	β	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1: SMM $\rightarrow$ Consumer Engagement	0.61	14.27	< 0.001	Supported
H2: Consumer Engagement $\rightarrow$ Purchase Behaviour	0.58	12.85	< 0.001	Supported
H3: SMM $\rightarrow$ Purchase Behaviour (direct)	0.21	4.63	< 0.001	Supported
H4: SMM $\rightarrow$ Engagement $\rightarrow$ Purchase Behaviour (indirect)	0.35	10.42	< 0.001	Supported (Partial Mediation)
Total Effect (SMM $\rightarrow$ Purchase Behaviour)	0.56	—	—	VAF = 62.5%

Table 2 measures the statistical significance of the relationship between social media marketing activities and consumer engagement, with the results indicating that the relationship between the two is positive and significant ($\beta = 0.61$, $t = 14.27$, $p < 0.001$), thus supporting H1. Consumer engagement, in turn, was found to positively and significantly affect purchase behaviour ($\beta = 0.58$, $t = 12.85$, $p < 0.001$), thus supporting H2. The path directly from social media marketing to purchase behaviour was also found to be statistically significant, albeit small ($\beta = 0.21$, $t = 4.63$, $p < 0.001$), and thus H3 was supported.

5.4 Mediation Analysis

Consumer engagement via the a-path (SMM $\rightarrow$ Engagement = 0.61) was multiplied by the b-path (Engagement $\rightarrow$ Purchase Behaviour = 0.58) to determine the indirect effect of SMM on purchase behaviour, which was found to be 0.35. The indirect effect of the mediation was significant (0.27 to 0.44) as the results of the bootstrap 95% confidence interval did not contain zero. The variance accounted for (VAF) value was computed as 62.5%, which implies that consumer



engagement has a mediating effect on the relationship between social media marketing and purchase behaviour with less than two-third variance. Even after the mediator was statistically controlled, the direct effect ($c' = 0.21$) was statistically significant, indicating a partial mediation. H4 is thus endorsed.

The mediated model had a higher explanatory power than a direct-effects-only model (in which consumer engagement was not included). The direct model accounted for only 28% of the variance in purchase behaviour ($R^2 = 0.28$) while the full mediated model accounted for 52% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.52$), which represented a 24% increase due to the addition of the mediating variable, consumer engagement. The word of mouth and trendiness were the dimensions of social media marketing that were rated the highest by the respondents, followed by the dimensions of entertainment, interaction and customization, as shown in Figure 2(a).

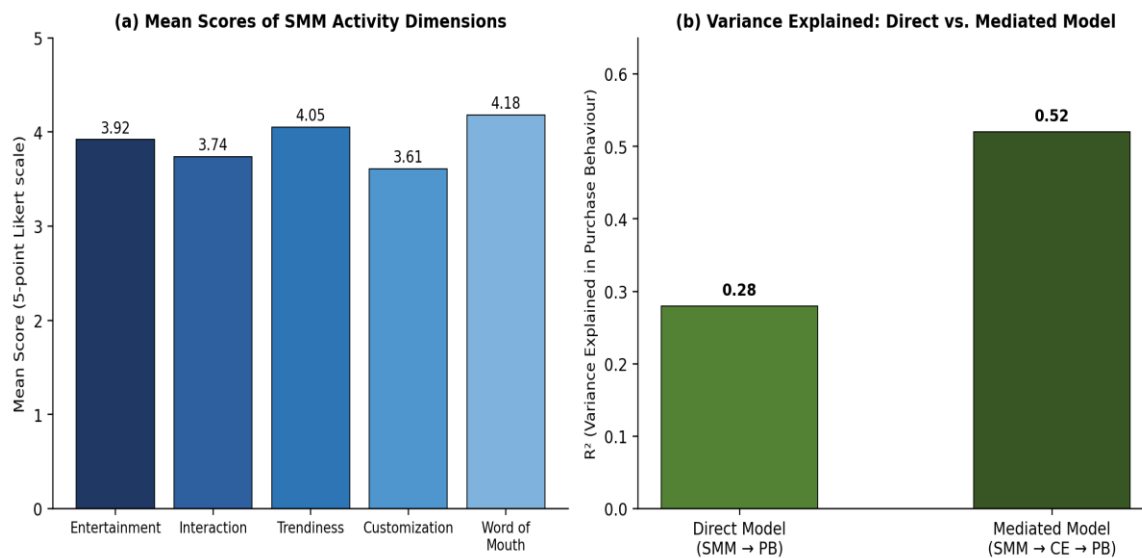


Figure 2. (a) Mean Scores of SMM Dimensions and (b) Variance Explained by the Direct versus Mediated Model

6. DISCUSSION

The results of this study support the hypothesis that consumer engagement acts as an important partial intermediary between social media marketing and purchase intentions among the apparel industry. Unlike the stimulus-organism-response paradigm, it seems that the social media marketing activities may not necessarily affect purchase behaviour directly and immediately, but rather by establishing an internal organismic response of engagement, and then a behaviour of purchase.

The relatively high standardised path coefficient ($\beta = 0.61$) of social media marketing and consumer engagement indicates the significance of content quality and interactivity in the apparel industry, where decisions are largely driven by the visual aspect of products, the relevance of the content to trends and social sharing. The finding of word of mouth and trendiness as the two most highly supported dimensions of SMM indicates that apparel consumers are more responsive to entertaining content and customizing content as part of word of mouth than to word of mouth or entertaining content alone or customizing alone.

The partial mediation, instead of complete mediation that is seen here, is theoretically significant. It shows that there is some direct effect of social media marketing activities, such as the immediate purchase cues (one example being the shoppable post) and promotional codes and limited-time buys, that do not rely on the more in-depth engagement-building process. For practitioners, this nuance is important because it indicates that short-term, conversion-focused tactics and longer-term, content-focused tactics, both have a role to play but that the latter makes a much greater contribution to a purchase behaviour.

The results align with previous mediation research in related areas like cosmetics, luxury products, and hospitality services, which have also demonstrated that constructs related to engagement have a significant indirect impact on the commercial effect of social media marketing, compared to a model that only considers direct effects. The variance explained by the mediated model in this study ($R^2 = 0.52$) compared with the direct model ($R^2 = 0.28$) further supports the idea of treating the social media marketing and purchase behaviour as directly connected, thereby failing to capture the full power of the social media investment and potentially misleading in resource allocation.

7. THE THEORETICAL AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS ARE DISCUSSED.

7.1 Theoretical Implications

This study makes a number of contributions to the marketing literature. To begin with, it expands the stimulus-organism-response paradox to the case of apparel social media marketing, and offers empirical evidence to support the assertion that consumer engagement is the organismic mechanism that connects marketing stimuli with the behavioural response. Second, the study has been able to model both direct and indirect relationships between the SMM and purchase behaviour, thus providing a more comprehensive and statistically sound description of the relationship than studies that model direct only relationships. Thirdly, the five dimensions of social media marketing provide a more detailed theoretical understanding of the key characteristics of the type of content that is most likely to foster engagement in the apparel category, rather than product categories used in previous studies.

7.2 Managerial Implications

It has several implications for those involved in apparel marketing. Since most of the impact that social media marketing has on purchase behaviour comes from consumer engagement, marketing teams should focus their strategies on engaging with their consumers rather than just reaching or impressing. Considering the importance of word of mouth and trendiness as the most crucial dimensions of SMM, the brands that sell clothes should put efforts into trends and content that consumers are likely to want to share among their peers – e.g. how-to guides, trends, try-on photos from their users.

Meanwhile, as direct conversion remained a factor in purchases, brands should not stop employing direct conversion strategies like shoppable posts, time-limited offers or CTAs, as they also play a significant role in purchase outcomes, even outside of engagement. A well-rounded content strategy will therefore be best suited to return maximum commercial value, with content that is designed to engage the visitor (entertainment, interactivity, personalisation) as well as have a conversion focus (promotions, product tags, direct purchase links).

Last, since the engagement that can be measured in this study is so multidimensional, there is a need to measure engagement through metrics that extend beyond Likes and Shares, and include measures of emotional engagement (such as sentiment analysis of comments) as well as cognitive engagement (such as time spent looking at the content, click-through to product pages).

8. LIMITATIONS/ DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH.

However, like all empirical studies, the following limitations should be considered when interpreting the results of this study. First, the cross-sectional design does not allow for definitive causal inferences because it was not an experimental or longitudinal design that would provide such evidence of the causal ordering suggested by the S-O-R framework. Secondly, the non-probability purposive sampling and snowball sampling used to reach the respondents, were useful in reaching the active social media users, however, it did not provide a representative sampling of the total population of apparel consumers, some of whom may not be as active on social media.

Third, self-reported survey measures were used to assess all constructs and this self-report may be confounded by social desirability bias and common method bias, although there were no evidence of this becoming a serious problem in the current data set (VIF statistics). Fourth, the study examined consumers of apparel in general, rather than specific apparel platforms (e.g., Instagram vs. TikTok) or specific apparel sub-categories (e.g., fast fashion vs. luxury apparel), each of which may impact the strength of the relationships examined.

Future research may address these limitations on the use of longitudinal designs where engagement and purchase behaviour is tracked over time; the use of behavioural or platform-analytics data to supplement scales of engagement; and testing of the proposed model separately across social media platforms and sub-segments of apparel. Further, future research could explore other mediators and/or moderators, such as brand trust, brand attachment, and perceived value, to create a more comprehensive knowledge of the psychological pathways between social media marketing and consumer purchasing in the apparel industry.

9. CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to explore if the consumer engagement is a mediator between social media marketing and purchase behaviour in the apparel industry. The results were obtained using survey data of 350 active social media users and PLS-SEM with bootstrapped mediation analysis and found to be statistically significant for a partial mediation model; that is, the social media marketing activities significantly influenced the consumer engagement, which in turn significantly affected the consumer purchase behaviour, whereas a smaller but statistically significant direct effect was found from the social media marketing to consumer purchase behaviour, in addition to this indirect effect.

The substantial increase in the model's explanatory power of $R^2 = 0.52$ compared with a direct-effects-only model of $R^2 = 0.28$ highlights that consumer engagement is not a by-product of social media marketing, but rather a core process in the

ability of social media marketing to create commercial value within the apparel industry context. These findings imply that apparel marketers should focus on specific ways to enhance their social media content and social media campaigns to increase cognitive, emotional and behavioural engagement and should still ensure that the campaign includes direct conversion mechanisms to capture the residual direct effect observed in this study. Putting them all together, the results provide a theoretically informed and actionable explanation of the relationship between social media marketing and purchase behavior via the engagement social media offers...

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