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The Impact of Social Media Marketing on Consumers' Purchase Intention in Fast Fashion Apparel: A Dual Mediation Model of Brand Trust and Consumer Engagement

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Abstract: This study explores how social media marketing influences consumers' purchase intention in the fast fashion apparel industry. Based on the S-O-R theory, a dual mediation model was constructed with brand trust and consumer engagement as mediators. Quantitative data from 200 valid online questionnaires were analyzed using SPSS. Results show that content quality, interactivity, and promotional activities all positively affect purchase intention, with interactivity having the strongest effect. Brand trust and consumer engagement play partial mediating roles, while content quality does not significantly affect consumer engagement. This study extends the S-O-R model and provides practical implications for fast fashion apparel brands.

Keywords: Social media marketing, purchase intention, brand trust, consumer engagement, fast fashion apparel.

1. Introduction

In the era of digital transformation, social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Xiaohongshu, and Weibo have evolved from simple information dissemination channels into integrated business ecosystems encompassing brand building, customer interaction, and sales conversion. In the fast fashion apparel industry, brands like Uniqlo, ZARA, H&M, and SHEIN are competing fiercely, and social media has become a core battlefield for attracting young consumers, rapidly launching new products, and shaping brand image.

Despite significant investments in social media marketing by many fast fashion apparel brands, research indicates that most brands still face challenges such as content homogenization, low interactivity, and poor return on investment. According to the 2023 Social Commerce Insight Report, 76% of consumers believe that social media interaction experiences directly affect their purchasing decisions, yet only 34% feel that current brand interactions are "warm and trustworthy." This gap highlights a critical pain point: fast fashion apparel brands need to move beyond simple posting and promotion to explore modern marketing methods that influence consumers' psychological cognition and promote purchase intention.

Therefore, this study aims to answer the following core research question: How does social media marketing influence consumers' purchase intention in the fast fashion apparel industry? Specifically, this study addresses four research objectives: (1) to empirically test the direct effects of content quality, interactivity, and promotional activities on purchase intention; (2) to compare the relative strength of these three dimensions; (3) to examine the mediating role of brand trust; and (4) to examine the mediating role of consumer engagement.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1. Social Media Marketing and Purchase Intention

Social media marketing refers to the use of social media platforms to promote products or services, build relationships with consumers, and facilitate brand communication. In fast fashion apparel, social media marketing is particularly important due to the industry's high visual dependency, fast consumption cycles, and young user base. Drawing on previous studies (Mao et al., 2014; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), this research conceptualizes social media marketing through three dimensions: content quality, interactivity, and promotional activities.

Content quality refers to the value, reliability, timeliness, and entertainment of brand-published content. Interactivity refers to the timeliness and depth of two-way communication between brands and users. Promotional activities refer to economic incentives provided by brands, such as discount codes and coupons.

Purchase intention is defined as the consumer's subjective likelihood of purchasing a product or service in the near future (Kim & Ko, 2012). According to the S-O-R model (Stimulus-Organism-Response), external stimuli (e.g., social media marketing) can influence an organism's internal state (e.g., trust, engagement), which in turn leads to a behavioral response (e.g., purchase intention). Thus, we propose:

H1a: Content quality has a significant positive effect on purchase intention.

H1b: Interactivity has a significant positive effect on purchase intention.

H1c: Promotional activities have a significant positive effect on purchase intention.

2.2. The Mediating Role of Brand Trust

Brand trust refers to consumers' beliefs in a brand's reliability, integrity, and goodwill (Hanaysha, 2022). In the context of social media, trust is essential for reducing perceived risk and facilitating purchase decisions. High-quality content and genuine interactions can enhance brand trust, which in turn increases purchase intention. Therefore:

H2a, H2b, H2c: Content quality, interactivity, and promotional activities each have a significant positive effect on brand trust.

H3: Brand trust has a significant positive effect on purchase intention.

H4: Brand trust mediates the relationship between social media marketing and purchase intention.

2.3. The Mediating Role of Consumer Engagement

Consumer engagement refers to consumers' behavioral and psychological involvement with a brand, including likes, comments, shares, and participation in brand activities (Chu & Kim, 2011). Engaged consumers are more likely to develop strong purchase intentions. Social media marketing, especially interactivity and promotions, can stimulate engagement, which in turn drives purchase intention. Thus:

H5a, H5b, H5c: Content quality, interactivity, and promotional activities each have a significant positive effect on consumer engagement.

H6: Consumer engagement has a significant positive effect on purchase intention.

H7: Consumer engagement mediates the relationship between social media marketing and purchase intention.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Data Collection

A cross-sectional quantitative survey design was adopted. The target population was active social media users who had followed at least one fast fashion apparel brand (e.g., Uniqlo, ZARA, H&M, SHEIN) in the past six months. A combination of convenience and snowball sampling was used. The questionnaire was distributed online via Wenjuanxing. A total of 235 responses were collected, and after screening, 200 valid responses remained, yielding an effective response rate of 85.1%. Among the respondents, 68.4% were female, 82.6% were aged 18–30, and 85.1% held a bachelor's degree or higher.

3.2. Measurement

All constructs were measured using established scales adapted to the fast fashion apparel context. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Social media marketing was measured with 12 items: content quality (4 items, e.g., "The brand's content provides valuable fashion information"), interactivity (4 items, e.g., "The brand actively replies to my comments or private messages"), and promotional activities (4 items, e.g., "The brand often provides exclusive discount codes on social media"). Brand trust and consumer engagement were each measured with 4 items. Purchase intention was measured with 3 items.

3.3. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS 26.0. The analysis proceeded in three steps: (1) reliability and validity testing, (2) correlation analysis, and (3) regression analysis and mediation effect testing using Baron and Kenny's (1986) stepwise method and Sobel tests.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

Table 4-1 presents the demographic characteristics of the sample (N = 200). Females accounted for 68.4% (n = 137), and 82.6% (n = 164) were aged 18–30. The majority (85.1%) held a bachelor's degree or higher, consistent with the typical fast fashion social media user profile.

Table 4-1. Sample Demographic Characteristics (N = 200)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	63	31.6
	Female	137	68.4
Age	Under 18	8	5.1
	18–25	108	53.8
	26–30	56	28.2
	31 and above	28	12.9
Education	High school or below	15	7.7
	Associate degree	15	7.7
Variable	Bachelor's degree	123	61.5
	Master's or above	47	23.1

4.2. Reliability and Validity

Cronbach's αcoefficients for all variables ranged from 0.85 to 0.91 (Table 4-2), exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). The KMO value was 0.87, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2 = 1246.32$, $p < 0.001$), indicating suitability for factor analysis. All factor loadings exceeded 0.60, and cross-loadings were below 0.40, confirming good structural validity.

Table 4-2. Reliability Analysis Results (N = 200)

Variable	Dimension	Number of Items	Cronbach's α
Social media marketing	Content quality	4	0.89
	Interactivity	4	0.91
	Promotional activities	4	0.85
Mediators	Brand trust	4	0.88
	Consumer engagement	4	0.87
Dependent variable	Purchase intention	3	0.90

4.3. Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis (Table 4-3) showed that content quality, interactivity, and promotional activities were all significantly positively correlated with brand trust, consumer engagement, and purchase intention ($p < 0.01$). Interactivity had the highest correlation with purchase intention ($r = 0.782$).

Table 4-3. Pearson Correlation Matrix (N = 200)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Content quality	1					
2. Interactivity	0.612**	1				
3. Promotional activities	0.534**	0.581**	1			
4. Brand trust	0.663**	0.721**	0.598**	1		
5. Consumer engagement	0.587**	0.749**	0.645**	0.672**	1	
6. Purchase intention	0.645**	0.782**	0.623**	0.701**	0.735**	1

Note: $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed).

4.4. Hypothesis Testing

4.4.1. Direct Effects

Multiple regression analysis (Table 4-4) showed that content quality ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$), interactivity ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$), and promotional activities ($\beta = 0.19$, $p = 0.001$) all had significant positive effects on purchase intention. The model explained 57% of the variance (adjusted $R^2 = 0.57$, $F = 93.20$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, H1a, H1b, and H1c were supported.

Table 4-4. Regression Analysis of SMM Dimensions on Purchase Intention

Variable	β	t-value	p-value
Content quality	0.28	4.77	<0.001
Interactivity	0.48	8.19	<0.001
Promotional activities	0.19	3.57	0.001

Model: $F = 93.20$, $p < 0.001$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.57$

4.4.2. Mediation Effects

Following Baron and Kenny's (1986) stepwise approach, we first tested the effects of the independent variables on the mediators (Table 4-5). Content quality ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < 0.001$), interactivity ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$), and promotional activities ($\beta = 0.21$, $p = 0.008$) all significantly affected brand trust, supporting H2a, H2b, and H2c. For consumer engagement, interactivity ($\beta = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$) and promotional activities ($\beta = 0.31$, $p = 0.002$) had significant effects, but content quality did not ($\beta = 0.15$, $p = 0.076$). Thus, H5b and H5c were supported, while H5a was not.

Table 4-5. Regression of Independent Variables on Mediators

Independent variable	Dependent: Brand trust		Dependent: Consumer engagement	
	β	p-value	β	p-value
Content quality	0.35	<0.001	0.15	0.076
Interactivity	0.42	<0.000	0.52	<0.001
Promotional activities	0.21	0.008	0.31	0.002

Next, we regressed purchase intention on the mediators while controlling for the SMM dimensions (Table 4-6). Brand trust ($\beta = 0.26$, $p < 0.001$) and consumer engagement ($\beta = 0.39$, $p < 0.001$) both had significant positive effects on purchase intention, supporting H3 and H6.

Table 4-6. Regression of Mediators on Purchase Intention (Controlling for SMM)

Variable	β	t-value	p-value
Content quality	0.12	2.16	0.032
Interactivity	0.25	4.45	<0.001
Promotional activities	0.08	1.15	0.133
Brand trust	0.26	4.66	<0.001
Consumer engagement	0.39	6.19	<0.001

Model: $F = 72.15$, $p < 0.001$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.64$

Finally, Sobel tests confirmed that brand trust partially mediated the "interactivity → purchase intention" path ($Z = 4.62$, $p < 0.001$), and consumer engagement mediated both the "interactivity → purchase intention" ($Z = 5.52$, $p < 0.001$) and "promotional activities → purchase intention" ($Z = 4.27$, $p < 0.001$) paths. Thus, H4 and H7 were partially supported. A summary of all hypothesis test results is presented in Table 4-7.

Table 4-7. Summary of Hypothesis Test Results

Hypothesis	Content	Result
H1a	Content quality → Purchase intention (+)	Supported
H1b	Interactivity → Purchase intention (+)	Supported
H1c	Promotional activities → Purchase intention (+)	Supported
H2a	Content quality → Brand trust (+)	Supported
H2b	Interactivity → Brand trust (+)	Supported
H2c	Promotional activities → Brand trust (+)	Supported
H3	Brand trust → Purchase intention (+)	Supported
H4	Content quality → Consumer engagement (+)	Partially supported
H5a	Interactivity → Consumer engagement (+)	Not supported
H5b	Interactivity → Consumer engagement (+)	Supported
H5c	Promotional activities → Consumer engagement (+)	Supported
H6	Consumer engagement → Purchase intention (+)	Supported
H7	Consumer engagement mediates	Partially supported

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1. Key Findings

This study empirically examined how social media marketing influences consumers' purchase intention in the fast fashion apparel industry. Three main findings emerged. First, all three dimensions of social media marketing—content quality, interactivity, and promotional activities—

positively affect purchase intention, with interactivity being the strongest predictor (β = 0.48). Second, brand trust partially mediates the relationship between interactivity and purchase intention. Third, consumer engagement mediates the effects of both interactivity and promotional activities on purchase intention. Notably, content quality did not significantly affect consumer engagement, suggesting that in fast fashion apparel, high-quality content may be considered a basic expectation rather than a driver of active participation.

5.2. Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several theoretical contributions. First, it extends the S-O-R model by simultaneously examining two distinct mediating mechanisms—brand trust (cognitive pathway) and consumer engagement (behavioral pathway). Second, it provides empirical evidence from the fast fashion apparel industry, an under-researched yet highly relevant context for social media marketing. Third, it deepens understanding of promotional activities by revealing their indirect effect through consumer engagement, challenging the view of promotions as merely short-term economic incentives.

5.3. Practical Implications

For fast fashion apparel managers, this study offers actionable insights. First, strategic priority should shift from content publication to relationship-driven interaction. Brands should invest in community management, timely responses, and interactive campaigns. Second, a dual-path marketing approach should be adopted, simultaneously building brand trust (e.g., through authentic user feedback and expert reviews) and stimulating consumer engagement (e.g., through styling challenges and UGC campaigns). Third, performance measurement should go beyond sales conversion to include process indicators such as net promoter score (NPS), interaction rates, and UGC volume.

5.4. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. Although the sample size (N = 200) meets basic requirements, the use of convenience and snowball sampling limits generalizability. The cross-sectional design prevents strong causal inference. Future research should collect larger, more balanced samples and adopt longitudinal or experimental designs. In addition, the non-significant effect of content quality on consumer engagement warrants further investigation. Future studies could refine the measurement of content quality by distinguishing between informativeness, entertainment, emotional resonance, and social currency value.

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