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Impact of Social Media Marketing on Consumer Buying Behaviour

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ABSTRACT: ***The proliferation of social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp has fundamentally transformed the way brands communicate with consumers and the way consumers make purchasing decisions. In India, with over 760 million internet users and rapid smartphone penetration, social media has emerged as one of the most influential channels of marketing communication, particularly among urban youth. This research paper investigates the impact of social media marketing on consumer buying behaviour, with specific reference to the urban consumer segment in Maharashtra. The study employs a mixed-methods research design, combining a structured questionnaire survey of 220 respondents with qualitative insights from focus group discussions and in-depth consumer interviews. Findings reveal that social media advertising, influencer marketing, user-generated content, and interactive brand engagement are the most significant determinants of purchase intention and buying decision. The research further identifies that trust, social proof, content relevance, and platform type moderate the relationship between social media marketing activities and consumer buying behaviour. A Social Media Purchase Influence Framework (SMPIF) is proposed, and actionable recommendations are offered to marketing practitioners seeking to optimize social media strategies for consumer conversion and brand loyalty.***

Keywords: Social Media Marketing, Consumer Buying Behaviour, Influencer Marketing, Digital Marketing, Purchase Intention, User-Generated Content, Brand Engagement, Maharashtra.

I. INTRODUCTION

The global marketing landscape has undergone a seismic transformation over the last decade, driven primarily by the explosive growth of social media platforms. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, Twitter/X, and WhatsApp have evolved from social networking tools into powerful commercial ecosystems where brands and consumers interact, transact, and co-create value. According to IAMAI (2024), India is home to over 467 million social media users, making it one of the world's largest social media markets by volume. Within this ecosystem, marketing has become inseparable from social interaction: branded content, influencer endorsements, peer reviews, and viral campaigns influence purchasing decisions at every stage of the consumer journey.

Consumer buying behaviour — the decision-making process through which individuals identify needs, gather information, evaluate alternatives, and make purchase decisions — has traditionally been studied in physical retail and mass media contexts. The emergence of social media as a dominant channel of commercial communication has introduced new variables into this equation. Unlike one-way television or print advertising, social media marketing is interactive, participatory, and deeply personalized. Consumers are no longer passive recipients of brand messages; they are active participants in brand conversations, co-creators of brand narratives through user-generated content (UGC), and influential endorsers of products through peer recommendations that carry substantially more persuasive weight than traditional advertising.

In the Indian context, the impact of social media on consumer behaviour is particularly pronounced. India's young demographic profile — with a median age of 28 years and over 65% of the population below 35 — means that the dominant consumer segment is also the most digitally native, socially connected, and social-media-influenced cohort. For marketers in sectors ranging from fashion and FMCG to electronics and financial services, social media has become not merely an additional channel but often the primary theatre of brand building, consumer engagement, and purchase conversion.

Despite the strategic importance of social media marketing in shaping buying behaviour, the academic literature — particularly in the Indian context — has not kept pace with the pace of platform evolution and consumer adaptation.

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Most existing studies focus on specific platforms (Facebook or Instagram) or specific product categories, and few attempt a comprehensive, multi-dimensional analysis of how various social media marketing activities collectively influence the consumer decision-making journey. This research paper addresses this gap by systematically examining the impact of social media marketing on consumer buying behaviour in the Maharashtra urban market, with the goal of generating both theoretical insights and practical guidance for marketing practitioners.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1) Social Media Marketing: Definitions and Dimensions

Social media marketing (SMM) is broadly defined as the use of social media platforms and social networks to promote a product, service, or brand and to engage with current and prospective consumers. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) defined social media as a group of internet-based applications built on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, enabling the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Tuten and Solomon (2017) extended this by characterizing social media marketing as encompassing four zones: social community (brand communities and fan pages), social publishing (blogs, microblogs, content sites), social entertainment (games, music, social TV), and social commerce (shopping, marketplaces, reviews).

Godey et al. (2016) identified five key dimensions of social media marketing activities: entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization, and word of mouth. Their empirical study across luxury brand consumers in four countries found that all five dimensions significantly influenced brand equity and purchase intention, with interaction and word-of-mouth emerging as the most powerful drivers — findings that have been replicated across multiple product categories and geographies in subsequent studies.

2) Social Media and Consumer Decision-Making

The classical consumer decision-making model, as conceptualized by Kotler and Keller (2016), describes a sequential five-stage process: problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase behaviour. Social media intervenes at every stage of this process. During the information search stage, consumers increasingly turn to social media platforms — Instagramhashtags, YouTube product reviews, Reddit forums, and Facebook groups — rather than brand websites or traditional retail staff. During the evaluation stage, peer reviews, influencer recommendations, and user-generated content function as trusted third-party endorsements that reduce perceived purchase risk.

Court et al. (2009), in their influential McKinsey study, proposed the Consumer Decision Journey (CDJ) as an alternative to the linear funnel model, identifying a cyclical loyalty loop and an active evaluation phase during which social media touchpoints play a decisive role. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) further developed the concept of the customer experience journey, identifying pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase touchpoints across owned, paid, and earned (social media) channels, and demonstrating that social media earned media has disproportionate influence relative to its cost, particularly in the pre-purchase awareness and consideration stages.

3) Influencer Marketing and Purchase Intention

One of the most significant developments in social media marketing has been the rise of influencer marketing — the practice of partnering with individuals who have established credibility and following on social media platforms to endorse brands and products. Influencer marketing operates on the principle of parasocial relationships: followers develop a sense of familiarity and trust with influencers that resembles interpersonal trust, making influencer endorsements substantially more persuasive than traditional celebrity advertising.

Ki and Kim (2019) found that influencer authenticity, content quality, and follower identification with the influencer are the primary drivers of influencer marketing effectiveness, and that micro-influencers (10,000-100,000 followers) consistently generate higher engagement rates and purchase conversion than macro-influencers, despite lower reach. In the Indian market, a FICCI-EY report (2023) estimated that the influencer marketing industry had reached INR 1,275 crore and was growing at 25% annually, with fashion, beauty, food, and technology being the highest-spend categories.

4) User-Generated Content and Social Proof

User-generated content (UGC) — comprising reviews, ratings, photographs, unboxing videos, and testimonials created by consumers rather than brands — has emerged as one of the most powerful drivers of purchase intention in digital commerce.

Cheung and Thadani (2012) demonstrated that electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) transmitted through social media significantly influences consumer purchase decisions, with perceived credibility, review volume, and review valence all contributing to persuasive impact.

Hennig-Thurau et al. (2010) identified social media as a fundamental disruptor of traditional marketing communication models, arguing that the shift from one-to-many broadcast communication to many-to-many networked communication gives consumers unprecedented power to shape brand reputations and influence peer purchase decisions. In India, a Nielsen (2023) consumer trust report found that 83% of respondents trusted recommendations from people they know over any other form of advertising, and 66% trusted consumer opinions posted online — affirming the strategic importance of UGC as a marketing asset.

5) Social Media Advertising and Buying Behaviour

Paid social media advertising — encompassing sponsored posts, story ads, carousel ads, and shoppable content — has grown rapidly as brands seek to supplement organic reach with targeted paid distribution. The targeting capabilities of social media advertising platforms, which allow granular audience segmentation based on demographics, interests, behaviours, and purchase history, give marketers unprecedented ability to deliver relevant messages to high-intent consumer segments. Alalwan (2018) found that social media advertising informativeness, entertainment value, and personalization are the strongest predictors of consumer attitudes toward social media ads and purchase intention in the Jordanian context — findings corroborated by Indian studies including Srivastava and Sharma (2022).

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

A. *Primary Objectives*

1) To identify the key social media marketing activities that most significantly influence consumer buying behaviour among urban consumers in Maharashtra.
2) To examine the relationship between social media marketing dimensions (advertising, influencer marketing, UGC, brand engagement) and consumer purchase intention.
3) To assess the moderating role of trust, content relevance, and platform type in the social media marketing–buying behaviour relationship.
4) To identify the barriers and negative factors that reduce the effectiveness of social media marketing on purchase decisions.

B. *Secondary Objectives*

1) To propose a Social Media Purchase Influence Framework (SMPIF) integrating the study's empirical findings with insights from the literature.
2) To provide actionable, platform-specific recommendations for digital marketing practitioners in the Maharashtra consumer market.
3) To contribute empirical evidence from an emerging market context to the growing literature on social media marketing effectiveness.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. *Research Design*

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative insights from focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. The mixed-methods approach is appropriate for a research domain characterized by complex, multi-dimensional consumer motivations that cannot be fully captured through survey instruments alone. The quantitative component enables statistical testing of hypothesized relationships between social media marketing activities and buying behaviour outcomes, while the qualitative component provides contextual richness and consumer language that enriches interpretation of the statistical findings.

B. *Study Area and Sample*

Primary data was collected from urban consumers across Nashik, Pune, and Chh. Sambhaji Nagar — three cities representing the diversity of Maharashtra's urban consumer market in terms of digital literacy, income profile, and social media consumption patterns. Respondents were selected using purposive sampling, with the criterion that they must be active social media users (minimum 1 hour daily usage) who had made at least one purchase influenced by social media content in the preceding six months.

A total of 220 valid survey responses were collected. The demographic profile is as follows: 52% female, 48% male; age distribution predominantly in the 18–35 bracket (76%); educational background comprising undergraduate students (31%), postgraduate students (28%), and employed professionals (41%); income distribution spanning below INR 3 lakh (22%), INR 3–8 lakh (46%), and above INR 8 lakh (32%). Additionally, three focus group discussions (8–10 participants each) and 20 in-depth consumer interviews were conducted to supplement the survey data.

C. Data Collection Instruments

The primary quantitative instrument was a structured questionnaire comprising six sections: respondent demographics and social media usage profile; exposure to social media marketing (advertising, influencer content, UGC, brand posts); perceived influence of each marketing type on purchase decisions; trust and credibility perceptions; overall purchase behaviour outcomes (purchase intention, actual purchase, brand loyalty); and open-ended questions exploring negative experiences with social media marketing. All attitudinal items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Reliability analysis confirmed satisfactory internal consistency for all constructs (Cronbach's Alpha > 0.80 for all scales).

D. Data Analysis

Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analysis, multiple regression, and chi-square tests using SPSS v26. Regression models were used to identify the predictive relationships between social media marketing dimensions and consumer purchase outcomes. Qualitative data was analyzed thematically using inductive coding, with emerging themes triangulated against quantitative findings to identify areas of convergence and divergence.

V. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

A. Social Media Usage Patterns Among Respondents

The survey reveals high social media engagement among respondents, consistent with Maharashtra's urban digital adoption profile. The following table presents platform usage and marketing-influenced purchase frequency:

Platform	% Daily Active Users	% Made Purchase via Platform	Avg. Time Spent (hrs/day)
Instagram	91%	67%	2.8
YouTube	86%	59%	2.5
Facebook	74%	44%	1.6
WhatsApp	97%	38%	3.1
Twitter/X	41%	18%	0.9
LinkedIn	34%	11%	0.7
Snapchat	28%	12%	0.6

Instagram emerged as the platform most strongly associated with social media-driven purchases (67%), followed by YouTube (59%). The high WhatsApp daily active user rate (97%) but comparatively lower purchase conversion (38%) reflects its primary function as a personal communication channel, though its growing role in informal commerce through WhatsApp Business and broadcast lists is noteworthy. These findings have direct implications for platform-specific marketing strategy allocation.

B. Impact of Social Media Marketing Activities on Purchase Intention

Regression analysis identified five primary social media marketing activities as significant predictors of consumer purchase intention, ranked by standardized regression coefficient (beta):

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SMM Activity	Beta Coefficient	Significance	Mean Influence Score (1-5)
Influencer Recommendations	0.58	$p < 0.001$	4.1
User-Generated Content (Reviews/Photos)	0.51	$p < 0.001$	4.3
Social Media Advertisements (Targeted)	0.44	$p < 0.001$	3.8
Brand-Owned Content (Posts/Stories/Reels)	0.39	$p < 0.001$	3.6
Peer Sharing / Social Recommendations	0.36	$p < 0.01$	4.0
Live Commerce / Social Shopping Events	0.29	$p < 0.01$	3.4
Brand Contests and Interactive Campaigns	0.22	$p < 0.05$	3.1

Influencer recommendations emerged as the strongest predictor of purchase intention (beta = 0.58), though user-generated content received the highest mean influence score (4.3/5), suggesting that while influencer content is structurally more persuasive, consumers place the highest conscious value on peer reviews and authentic customer photographs. This distinction between structural persuasion and conscious attribution has important implications for marketing strategy design.

Qualitative interview data enriched this finding considerably. Multiple respondents described a two-stage social media influence process: initial discovery through influencer content or targeted advertising, followed by validation through UGC before committing to purchase. One respondent from Pune articulated this clearly: 'I see the influencer and I get curious. Then I search the reviews. If real people say it's good, I buy.' This two-stage discovery-validation dynamic suggests that integrated strategies combining influencer reach with robust UGC cultivation are more effective than either approach in isolation.

C. Consumer Trust in Social Media Marketing Content

Trust in social media marketing content is a critical moderator of purchase behaviour. Respondents were asked to rate their trust in different types of social media content on a scale of 1–5:

Content Type	Mean Trust Score (1-5)	Standard Deviation	% High Trust (4-5)
Verified Customer Reviews (Text + Photos)	4.2	0.71	78%
Peer Recommendations from Known Contacts	4.4	0.64	84%
Micro-Influencer Reviews (Authentic Niche)	3.8	0.82	62%
Expert / Professional Blogger Reviews	3.7	0.88	58%
Macro-Influencer / Celebrity Endorsements	2.9	1.04	38%

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Content Type	Mean Trust Score (1-5)	Standard Deviation	% High Trust (4-5)
Brand-Created Sponsored Ads	2.6	1.08	29%
Brand Official Posts (Non-Sponsored)	3.2	0.96	47%

Peer recommendations from known contacts (mean: 4.4/5) and verified customer reviews (4.2/5) command the highest trust, significantly outperforming macro-influencer endorsements (2.9/5) and brand-sponsored ads (2.6/5). This trust hierarchy has profound implications for marketing budget allocation: despite the high visibility of celebrity influencer campaigns, their trust impact is substantially lower than the organic word-of-mouth and authentic UGC that brands can cultivate through community-building strategies. The data suggests that brands investing in customer advocacy programmes, easy review mechanisms, and referral incentives are generating higher trust ROI than those concentrating budgets on high-cost macro-influencer campaigns.

D. Social Media Marketing Impact Across the Purchase Journey

The study examined the relative influence of social media marketing at different stages of the consumer decision journey, revealing that different types of content are most effective at different stages:

Purchase Journey Stage	Most Influential SMM Type	Mean Influence (1-5)	% Respondents Citing SMM Impact
Awareness / Discovery	Paid Social Ads & Influencer Reels	4.0	82%
Interest / Consideration	Brand Content & Influencer Reviews	3.9	79%
Evaluation / Comparison	UGC Reviews & Peer Recommendations	4.3	88%
Purchase Decision	Offers via Social Media & UGC	4.1	74%
Post-Purchase / Loyalty	Community Engagement & Brand Posts	3.5	61%

Social media influence is highest at the evaluation stage (88% of respondents citing SMM impact), confirming that UGC and peer recommendations function as the dominant decision-making inputs at the critical moment of purchase commitment. Social media's influence is relatively lower at the post-purchase loyalty stage (61%), suggesting an opportunity for brands to develop more robust social media-based community and loyalty strategies to improve customer retention.

E. Negative Factors and Trust Erosion in Social Media Marketing

Thematic analysis of qualitative data identified the following as the most frequently cited factors that reduce social media marketing effectiveness or erode consumer trust:

- Disclosure fatigue: Over-saturation of sponsored content that blurs the distinction between genuine recommendation and paid promotion, reducing the perceived authenticity of influencer content.
- Fake reviews and manipulated ratings on e-commerce-linked social media content, detected by respondents through inconsistent reviewer profiles, unnatural language, or implausible review volumes.
- Misleading product representations in social media advertising, including filtered photography, overstated product capabilities, and undisclosed limitations.
- Privacy concerns related to hyper-targeted advertising, with multiple respondents describing discomfort at advertisements for products they had only discussed in private conversations.

- Algorithm-driven echo chambers that limit exposure to diverse perspectives on products, creating over-reliance on a narrow range of influencers or content creators.
- Post-purchase product quality not matching the social media representation, leading to returns and negative word-of-mouth that undermines brand credibility.
- Excessive retargeting — repeated display of the same ad after a product has already been purchased — generating consumer annoyance rather than loyalty.

VI. BARRIERS TO SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING EFFECTIVENESS

A. Credibility and Authenticity Deficit

The most pervasive barrier to social media marketing effectiveness is the growing credibility deficit created by the widespread use of undisclosed paid promotions, fake reviews, and strategically filtered content. As consumers become more sophisticated social media users, their ability to detect commercial intent in nominally organic content increases, reducing the persuasive impact of influencer marketing and brand-owned content. Survey data indicates that 68% of respondents agree or strongly agree with the statement 'I find it difficult to tell which social media content is genuine and which is paid promotion,' reflecting a systemic trust challenge that affects the entire social media marketing ecosystem.

B. Information Overload

The exponential growth in branded social media content has created severe attention competition, with consumers exposed to thousands of brand messages daily. Information overload reduces the cognitive bandwidth available for processing marketing messages and increases consumers' reliance on heuristics — such as follower count, brand familiarity, and social proof signals — rather than substantive content evaluation. For smaller or newer brands without established recognition, cutting through the content noise to achieve meaningful consumer engagement represents an increasingly formidable challenge.

C. Platform Algorithm Dependency

The algorithmic mediation of social media content distribution creates significant uncertainty and strategic risk for brands. Changes to platform algorithms — which determine what content is organically distributed and to whom — can dramatically reduce the reach of brand content overnight, without advance notice or transparent explanation. This dependency on opaque third-party algorithms makes social media marketing an inherently unstable long-term channel and underscores the importance of building owned marketing assets (email lists, brand communities, direct messaging subscribers) alongside social media presence.

D. Digital Divide and Accessibility Gaps

Despite India's rapid digital expansion, significant disparities in digital literacy, internet access quality, and smartphone capability persist across income, age, and geographic segments. Social media marketing strategies optimized for high-bandwidth video content and algorithmically sophisticated targeting may fail to reach or engage consumers in lower-income urban segments or those with older devices. Marketers must design social media strategies that are inclusive of the full diversity of their target consumer base rather than optimized exclusively for the most digitally capable segments.

E. Measurement and Attribution Complexity

Accurately measuring the contribution of social media marketing to actual purchase outcomes remains a significant challenge, due to the multi-touchpoint nature of the consumer journey and the difficulty of attributing sales to specific social media interactions. Without reliable attribution, marketing budget allocation decisions are made under significant uncertainty, and the ROI of social media marketing investments relative to other channels is difficult to establish with confidence. This measurement challenge affects the strategic prioritization of social media within the overall marketing mix.

VII. PROPOSED SOCIAL MEDIA PURCHASE INFLUENCE FRAMEWORK (SMPIF)

Drawing on the empirical findings of this study and the theoretical foundations established in the literature review, this research proposes the Social Media Purchase Influence Framework (SMPIF) for consumer marketing in the Indian urban context. The framework is organized around four interconnected pillars:

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A. Discovery Pillar (Reach and Awareness)

The first pillar encompasses the social media marketing activities that generate initial consumer awareness and product discovery: targeted paid advertising, influencer-created awareness content (Reels, YouTube Shorts, Unboxing Videos), branded hashtag campaigns, and viral content creation. The Discovery Pillar's primary metrics are reach, impressions, and new audience growth. Investment in this pillar is most critical for new product launches, brand building in new consumer segments, and time-sensitive promotional campaigns.

B. Validation Pillar (Social Proof and Trust)

The second pillar addresses the trust and social proof mechanisms that convert consumer awareness into purchase consideration: UGC cultivation, verified customer review programmes, micro-influencer community partnerships, and third-party editorial coverage. The Validation Pillar is the most critical for purchase conversion, as the data confirms that consumers rely primarily on social proof at the evaluation stage of the decision journey. Brands that invest systematically in UGC generation — through post-purchase review requests, community photo challenges, and referral programmes — build a self-reinforcing trust asset that appreciates over time as the review corpus grows.

C. Engagement Pillar (Interaction and Community)

The third pillar encompasses the social media activities that build ongoing consumer relationships beyond individual purchase transactions: branded community management, interactive content (polls, Q&As, live sessions), personalized consumer responses, loyalty programme communication through social channels, and co-creation initiatives that involve consumers in brand development. The Engagement Pillar drives post-purchase loyalty and brand advocacy, converting satisfied customers into active promoters whose organic social sharing reduces customer acquisition costs and amplifies the Discovery Pillar's effectiveness.

D. Conversion Pillar (Commerce and Action)

The fourth pillar addresses the direct commerce and conversion mechanisms embedded within social media platforms: social shopping features (Instagram Shopping, Facebook Marketplace), live commerce events, social-exclusive discount offers, retargeting campaigns for high-intent consumers, and seamless checkout integration. The Conversion Pillar bridges the gap between social media engagement and actual purchase transaction, reducing the friction between consumer intent and purchase action. Effective conversion strategies leverage the insights generated by Discovery and Validation activities to reach consumers at the optimal moment in their purchase journey with compelling, relevant offers.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research findings and the proposed SMPIF, the following practical recommendations are offered to marketing practitioners managing social media strategies in the Indian consumer market:

1) Prioritize Micro-Influencer Partnerships: Shift marketing investment from high-cost macro-influencer campaigns to strategic micro-influencer partnerships in relevant niche communities. Micro-influencers generate higher trust, higher engagement, and more authentic audience relationships, resulting in superior conversion rates relative to reach.
2) Build a UGC Engine: Design a systematic post-purchase content generation programme — through review request emails, packaging inserts encouraging social sharing, community photo challenges, and review incentive programmes — to continuously grow the brand's pool of authentic UGC.
3) Invest in Platform-Native Content Formats: Create content specifically designed for each platform's native formats — Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts, Facebook Stories — rather than repurposing the same content across platforms. Platform-native content performs significantly better algorithmically and resonates more authentically with platform-specific user expectations.
4) Integrate Social Commerce Features: Activate and optimize social commerce features on Instagram and Facebook — shoppable posts, product tags, and Instagram Checkout — to minimize the friction between social media discovery and purchase completion.
5) Develop a Social Listening and Response Programme: Implement systematic social media monitoring tools to track brand mentions, customer comments, and sentiment trends. Proactive, personalized responses to consumer inquiries and complaints on social media build relational trust and convert potential detractors into advocates.

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6) Establish Transparent Influencer Disclosure Practices: Require all influencer partners to clearly disclose paid partnerships in compliance with ASCI guidelines. Transparent disclosure, counterintuitively, enhances rather than reduces influencer content effectiveness among informed consumers, as it signals brand confidence in product quality.

7) Create Platform-Specific Content Calendars: Develop monthly social media content plans that balance brand-owned content (40%), UGCresharing (30%), influencer collaborative content (20%), and paid advertising (10%), ensuring a mix that delivers consistent reach while maintaining authenticity.

8) Measure Beyond Vanity Metrics: Shift social media measurement frameworks from reach and engagement metrics (likes, comments, followers) to outcome-linked metrics (social media-attributed website visits, add-to-cart rates, purchase conversions, and customer lifetime value of social-media-acquired customers).

IX. CONCLUSION

This research has demonstrated that social media marketing is a multi-dimensional and deeply influential force in shaping consumer buying behaviour among urban consumers in Maharashtra. The evidence confirms that social media platforms have transformed every stage of the consumer decision journey — from initial product discovery through targeted advertising and influencer content, to purchase validation through UGC and peer recommendations, to post-purchase brand engagement and loyalty building through community interaction.

The Social Media Purchase Influence Framework proposed in this study offers a structured approach for marketing practitioners to diagnose their current social media marketing posture, identify priority investment areas across the Discovery, Validation, Engagement, and Conversion pillars, and design integrated strategies that address the full complexity of social media's influence on consumer behaviour. The empirical evidence from the Maharashtra urban market confirms that consumer trust — built through authentic UGC, credible influencer partnerships, and transparent brand communication — is the central determinant of social media marketing effectiveness.

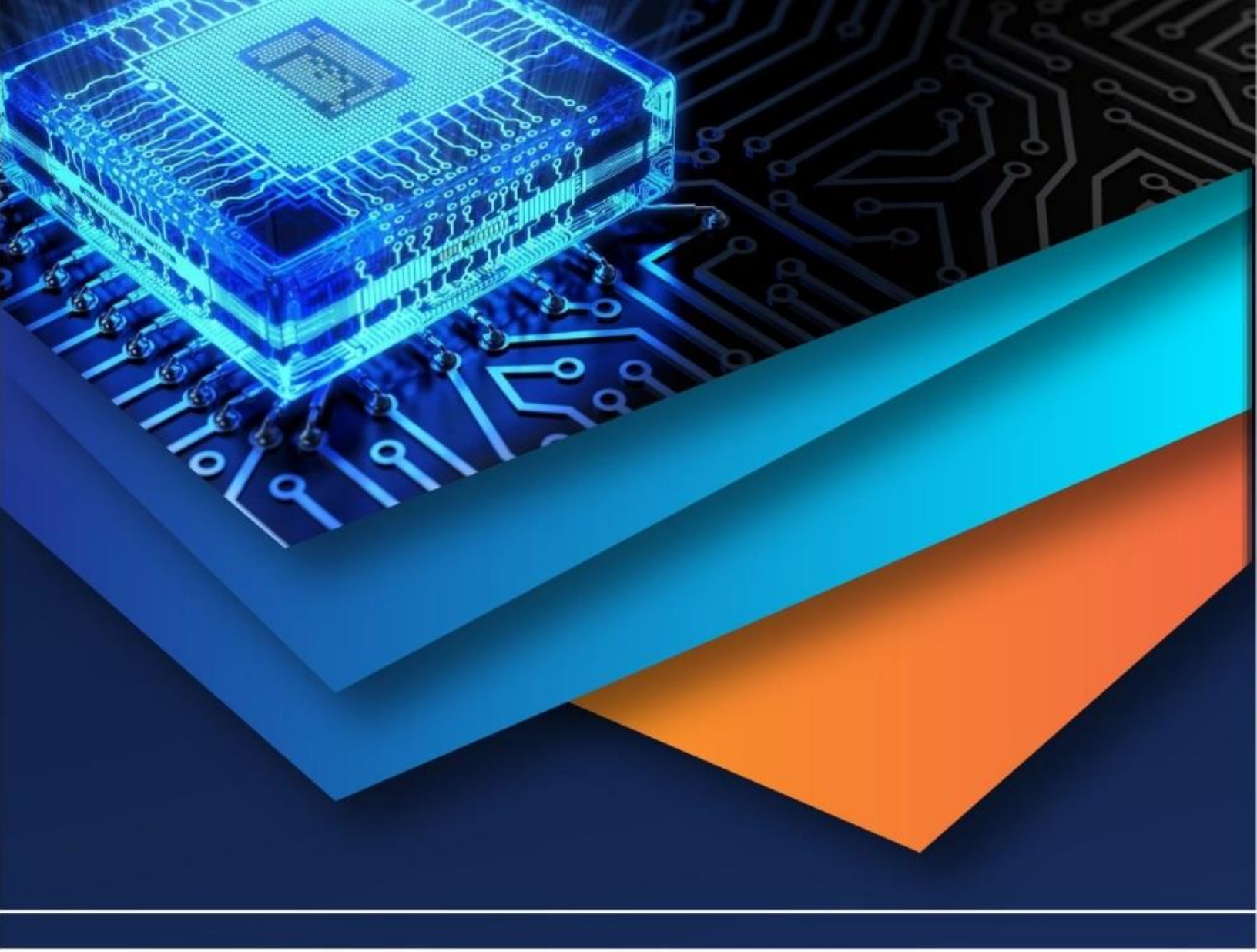
As India's social media landscape continues to evolve — with the rapid growth of short-form video content, live commerce, social shopping features, and AI-powered personalization — the brands that will establish enduring competitive advantage will be those that recognize social media marketing not as a set of tactical tools but as a strategic capability for building genuine consumer relationships at scale. The findings and framework presented in this paper provide both the conceptual foundation and practical guidance for that strategic orientation.

Future research should examine the longitudinal impact of social media marketing on consumer brand loyalty over time, the differential effectiveness of social media marketing strategies across India's diverse regional markets, and the emerging impact of generative AI-powered content and virtual influencers on consumer trust and buying behaviour.

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