

The Impact of Social Media Content Marketing on Consumer Purchase Behavior: A Comprehensive Literature Review

Yixin Weng*

Kaplan Higher Education Academy Singapore, Singapore

**Corresponding author: Yixin Weng.*

Abstract

This study presents a comprehensive literature review investigating how social media content marketing influences consumer purchase behavior through a complex sequence of psychological and social mechanisms. These mechanisms operate within contemporary digital ecosystems that are increasingly characterized by algorithmic content distribution, influencer-driven communication, and the seamless integration of social commerce features. Unlike traditional advertising models that rely heavily on persuasive interruption, modern social media content marketing emphasizes value-based communication strategies. These strategies are designed to deliver informational, experiential, and relational benefits, thereby encouraging voluntary consumer engagement and fostering long-term brand relationships. By synthesizing fragmented findings from interdisciplinary research across marketing, consumer behavior, and information systems domains, this review develops a conceptual mechanism framework in which content quality stimulates consumer engagement, engagement facilitates electronic word-of-mouth diffusion, electronic word-of-mouth strengthens consumer trust, and trust ultimately drives purchase intention and purchasing behavior. Employing literature review involves structured database search, screening procedures, and thematic synthesis. This study integrates empirical evidence across multiple platforms, industries, and cultural contexts to identify consistent patterns and theoretical inconsistencies. Findings reveal that content credibility, authenticity, and informativeness function as primary antecedents of engagement and trust formation, while peer validation, influencer credibility, and community interaction operate as amplification mechanisms that reduce perceived risk and enhance consumer confidence in brand claims. The review further identifies research gaps related to platform-specific dynamics, cross-cultural variations, and methodological limitations, providing theoretical contributions and managerial implications that support the design of trust-oriented, engagement-driven content marketing strategies in increasingly competitive and socially mediated digital marketplaces.

Keywords

social media content marketing, consumer engagement, electronic word-of-mouth, consumer trust, digital marketing strategy

1. Introduction

In the era of rapid digital transformation, social media platforms have been widely adopted by the public. The interaction, between consumers and brands, has undergone a fundamental transformation that challenges traditional marketing paradigms. Because of this shift, it is now an urgent necessity for companies to understand exactly how content-driven communication influences consumer decision-making processes across a wide variety of diverse digital environments. Previously, traditional advertising approaches relied heavily on persuasive promotional messages, designed to interrupt consumers' attention and influence purchase decisions. Nowadays, social media content marketing operates through the strategic provision of valuable, informative, and engaging content that attracts consumers voluntarily. Such content encourages continuous interaction between customers and brands, particularly on platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, TikTok, and Xiaohongshu [1, 2].

This transformation reflects a shift, from transaction-oriented marketing toward relationship-oriented communication. Brands prioritize storytelling, tutorials, reviews, influencer collaborations, and User-Generated Content (UGC) as tools, for establishing credibility and long-term trust relationships with consumers [3, 4]. As consumers increasingly rely on social media content, in the purchase journey stage of Information Search and Evaluation. It is essential to examine psychological and behavioral mechanisms, through which content could funnel customers into the stage of purchase intention and eventual purchasing behavior.

Although extensive research has explored digital marketing and social media marketing in broad strokes, there is currently a limited amount of comprehensive synthesis explaining exactly how content marketing within social media environments influences consumer purchase behavior through the interconnected, step-by-step mechanisms of engagement, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), and trust formation. Therefore, this article applies a comprehensive literature review to critically evaluate and synthesize existing academic research, and also constructs a comprehensive conceptual framework explaining this phenomenon.

This study specifically addresses the following research questions:

- **Research Question 1:** How does social media content marketing stimulate consumer engagement in digital platforms?
- **Research Question 2:** How does engagement influence the spread of electronic word-of-mouth?
- **Research Question 3:** How does eWOM contribute to trust formation and purchase intention?

2. Motivation

In recent years, global social media usage has grown rapidly. According to Statista, more than 4.9 billion people worldwide actively use social media platforms on a regular basis in 2023. This rapid, widespread growth has transformed social media from a mere networking tool into one of the most influential and lucrative marketing channels in the global economy. As multinational corporations and small businesses alike increasingly invest massive portions of their budgets into digital content strategies, understanding how social media content actively influences consumer behavior becomes critically important for both academic researchers and industry practitioners.

The motivation for this study comes from the observation that many previous studies treat content marketing simply as a part of social media marketing. As a result, the specific process through which content exposure influences consumer purchase intention is not clearly explained. Existing research has examined several important factors, such as consumer engagement, trust, and eWOM. For example, some studies focus on how engagement increases interaction between consumers and brands, while others emphasize the role of trust in online purchasing. However, these factors are often studied separately. Few studies integrate them into a unified framework that explains how social media content marketing influences consumer behavior [5, 6].

The digital world is changing fast, and this has made content marketing more important than ever. Social media platforms are now using algorithms to decide what content to show us, and they are also using influencer marketing and social commerce to reach us. As a result, people are relying more and more on what their friends

and influencers think when they are deciding what to buy. For example, when we are looking at products on websites like Xiaohongshu or Amazon, we often look at the reviews to see what other people think of the product. Similarly, influencers on TikTok or Instagram frequently demonstrate products and share their experiences, which can affect consumers' purchase intentions. These examples show that engagement and eWOM play an important role in building consumer trust and influencing purchase decisions [7, 8].

Based on the existing literature, this study integrates findings from different research streams and proposes a conceptual pathway explaining the mechanism of social media content marketing. Specifically, high-quality content first encourages consumer engagement. Engagement then stimulates electronic word-of-mouth communication among consumers. Positive eWOM helps build consumer trust in brands, which eventually leads to stronger purchase intention. This framework provides a clearer explanation of how content marketing strategies influence consumer decision-making in digital environments.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Content Marketing Theory

Content marketing theory fundamentally focuses on the strategic creation and distribution of valuable, highly relevant content designed to attract and retain a clearly defined target audience. The main, overarching objective is to build sustainable, long-term relationships with consumers and, ultimately, encourage profitable customer actions. Unlike traditional advertising—which often relies on aggressive, persuasive promotional messages that disrupt the consumer's experience—content marketing emphasizes providing genuinely useful information and highly engaging experiences. This subtle approach encourages consumers to interact voluntarily and enthusiastically with brand communication, rather than feeling annoyed by being interrupted by direct advertisements. As a result, consumers are increasingly willing to spend time engaging with brand-related content on digital platforms [9, 10].

In the social media environment, content marketing takes many forms. Brands typically share influencer posts, product tutorials, story videos, live content, and user-generated content. These forms promote interaction and communication between brands and consumers. Previous research has shown that the effectiveness of content marketing is influenced by various factors, including information value, entertainment value, credibility, and relevance. Content with informational value helps consumers understand the features and advantages of products. Entertaining content attracts attention and increases engagement. Credible and authentic content helps consumers overcome their skepticism about marketing information. For example, a cosmetics brand might use a short makeup tutorial video to promote a new lipstick. The video might demonstrate how the color looks on different skin tones and explains the product's staying power. When consumers find content useful or entertaining, they are more likely to watch videos, leave comments, and share them with others.

3.2 Consumer Decision-Making Theory

Consumer decision-making theory explains how consumers process information and make purchasing decisions. Traditional decision-making models suggest that consumers usually go through several stages before purchasing a product. These stages include problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase evaluation. During these stages, consumers actively collect and evaluate information to reduce uncertainty and select the product that best meets their needs [11].

In the modern digital market, social media platforms have become an important source of information, particularly during the information search stages and the evaluation of alternatives stages of the consumer decision-making process. At the information search stage, consumers actively seek product-related information from different sources. Social media platforms provide convenient access to product reviews, recommendations, and demonstrations. At the evaluation of alternatives stage, consumers compare different brands or products in order to choose the most suitable option. For example, when consumers consider buying a lipstick product, they may watch several short videos comparing different brands. Influencers may demonstrate how the lipstick looks after application and explain whether the product is long-lasting or moisturizing. Consumers may also read comments from other users who have already tried the product. These

interactions provide valuable information that helps consumers evaluate alternatives and reduce perceived risk. As a result, social media content marketing can influence how consumers form purchase intentions.

3.3 Trust Theory

Trust theory provides an important explanation for consumer behavior in online environments. Trust refers to consumers' belief that a brand or product is reliable and capable of delivering the expected value. In traditional retail environments, consumers can directly examine products before purchasing them. However, in online environments, consumers cannot physically interact with products. This lack of direct experience increases uncertainty and perceived risk. Therefore, trust becomes a key factor that influences online purchase decisions. When consumers trust a brand or product, they are more likely to believe the information provided and feel confident about making a purchase [12].

Social media platforms play an important role in the development of consumer trust. Consumers often rely on information shared by other users when evaluating products online. This information may include reviews, product demonstrations, or personal recommendations. Social media content marketing supports trust formation by providing consistent and credible information. For example, beauty influencers frequently review lipstick products on platforms such as TikTok or Xiaohongshu. They may show how the lipstick performs during daily use and explain its advantages and disadvantages. When followers trust the influencer and see similar positive feedback from other users, they are more likely to believe that the product is reliable. Over time, repeated exposure to credible information and positive user experiences can strengthen consumer trust and increase the likelihood of purchase decisions.

4. Literature Review

4.1 Consumer Engagement

Consumer engagement is widely discussed, particularly in social media marketing research. It refers to the level of involvement that consumers show when interacting with brand-related content. Engagement usually includes cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses. Cognitive engagement reflects consumers' interest and attention toward content. Emotional engagement refers to feelings, such as excitement or enjoyment. Behavioral engagement appears through actions such as liking, commenting, sharing, or participating in discussions. These interactions indicate that consumers are not only passive viewers but active participants in brand communication [6, 12].

Existing studies show that engagement plays an important role in digital marketing. When consumers interact with brand content, the visibility of that content often increases on social media platforms. Platform algorithms tend to recommend posts that receive high levels of engagement. As a result, brand messages can reach a wider audience. Engagement can therefore strengthen brand awareness and influence how consumers perceive a product or brand.

For example, in the cosmetics industry, lipstick brands often promote new shades through short videos and tutorials. A beauty influencer may upload a video showing how a lipstick color looks on different skin tones. Viewers may like the video, comment on the color, or ask questions about the product. When engagement increases, the platform algorithm may recommend the video to more users. This allows the brand and the product to reach a larger audience.

Overall, the literature suggests that consumer engagement is not only an outcome of content marketing but also an important mechanism that helps spread information and strengthen interaction between brands and consumers.

4.2 Electronic Word-of-Mouth

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) refers to the online sharing of opinions, experiences, and recommendations among consumers. Unlike traditional advertising, eWOM is created by users rather than brands. Because of this, many consumers perceive it as more authentic and trustworthy. Studies show that eWOM strongly influences consumer decision-making on social media platforms [13].

Previous research indicates that consumer engagement often leads to the spread of eWOM. When consumers interact with online content, they may share their experiences or opinions with other users. These discussions can spread rapidly through digital networks. Positive eWOM can improve brand credibility and reduce perceived risk for potential buyers. In contrast, negative eWOM may discourage consumers from purchasing a product. Therefore, eWOM plays an important role in shaping consumer evaluations of products and brands [9, 13].

In the cosmetics market, eWOM is particularly significant. For example, users on Xiaohongshu frequently post reviews after trying new lipstick products. They may upload photos showing the lipstick color on their lips or describe whether the product is long-lasting and moisturizing. Other users can read these reviews before deciding whether to purchase the product. Similarly, on platforms such as TikTok and YouTube, beauty influencers often test lipstick products and share their experiences with followers. These reviews can quickly influence public opinion and shape consumers' perceptions of the brand.

In addition, the interactive nature of social media platforms further strengthens the impact of eWOM. Consumers can easily respond to reviews by asking questions, sharing additional experiences, or recommending alternative products. This interactive communication allows product information to spread quickly among online communities. As a result, eWOM often functions as an important information source during the consumer decision-making process, especially in product categories where visual demonstration and user experience are important [14].

Overall, the literature suggests that eWOM acts as a form of social proof in digital environments. It transforms individual engagement into shared information that influences how consumers evaluate brands and products. When consumers observe consistent positive feedback from multiple users, they are more likely to develop favorable attitudes toward the product and consider purchasing it [14].

5. Results Synthesis

The reviewed literature reveals a multi-stage mechanism through which social media content marketing influences consumer purchase behavior. Many studies suggest that high-quality content is the starting point of this process. Content that is informative, entertaining, authentic, and relevant can attract consumer attention and encourage voluntary interaction with brand messages [1, 9].

When consumers find content interesting or useful, they are more likely to engage with it. Engagement appears through actions such as liking, commenting, or sharing posts. These interactions increase the visibility of content on social media platforms. As engagement grows, information about the brand spreads across digital networks. This process increases brand exposure and allows more consumers to become aware of the product [6, 12, 15].

Engagement can also lead to electronic word-of-mouth. Consumers who interact with content may share their experiences or recommendations with others. These messages often appear as online reviews, comments, or discussion posts. For example, a user who enjoys a lipstick product may post a review on Xiaohongshu or upload a short video on TikTok. Other consumers may read these reviews when searching for product information.

As eWOM spreads, trust becomes an important factor in consumer decision-making. Consumers often rely on peer reviews and influencer recommendations when evaluating products. These signals help reduce uncertainty and increase confidence in the brand. Over time, stronger trust can lead to higher purchase intention and actual buying behavior [11, 15].

Overall, the literature suggests that social media content marketing operates through a sequential mechanism. High-quality content encourages engagement. Engagement generates electronic word-of-mouth. eWOM helps build consumer trust, which ultimately influences purchase decisions.

6. Discussion

6.1 Gap Analysis

Although research on social media content marketing has grown rapidly, several important gaps remain. First, many studies examine engagement, trust, and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) separately. This approach makes it difficult to understand the full process through which content exposure leads to consumer purchase intention [16]. In addition, most studies rely on cross-sectional survey data. Such methods cannot fully capture the dynamic nature of social media environments, where algorithms, repeated exposure, and peer interaction influence consumer behavior over time.

Another limitation concerns the definition of content quality. Many studies focus only on factors such as informativeness or entertainment. However, other important aspects, such as authenticity, storytelling, and influencer credibility, are often ignored [17]. These differences make it difficult to compare findings across studies. Furthermore, a significant geographic and cultural bias exists, most of the existing research mainly focuses heavily on Western platforms (like Facebook and Instagram) and Western consumer samples. This limits the applicability of current theories to emerging social commerce ecosystems, such as those found in Asian markets, where community interaction and integrated shopping functions play a stronger role [18]. Therefore, future research should examine cross-cultural contexts and consider platform characteristics when studying content marketing effectiveness.

6.2 Extended Discussion

The reviewed literature suggests that social media content marketing operates through a multi-stage communication process. High-quality content first attracts attention and encourages consumer engagement. Engagement then stimulates electronic word-of-mouth, which spreads information among users. Over time, repeated exposure to peer opinions and consistent content can strengthen consumer trust. This trust reduces perceived risk and increases the likelihood of purchase decisions.

The author would also highlight that engagement is not a single behavior. It includes emotional reactions, cognitive involvement, and behavioral actions such as commenting or sharing [14]. Different types of engagement may produce different outcomes. For example, entertaining content may generate high interaction but may not lead to purchase intention if it lacks credible information. In contrast, informative reviews or product demonstrations may strengthen both trust and purchase intention, but may be difficult to engage with high interaction and widely spread.

Another important insight relates to the role of culture and platform characteristics. In collectivist cultures, consumers often rely more on community opinions and peer recommendations when evaluating products [19]. In addition, algorithmic recommendation systems increasingly shape how users encounter content on social media platforms. These technological features influence engagement patterns and information diffusion. As a result, future research should pay greater attention to platform design and cultural context when examining the effectiveness of social media content marketing.

7. Conclusion

This comprehensive literature review demonstrates that social media content marketing influences consumer purchase behavior through a sequential mechanism involving content quality, engagement, electronic word-of-mouth, and trust formation, thereby reinforcing the importance of relational and value-driven communication strategies in digital marketing environments [6]. By integrating fragmented research streams into a unified conceptual framework, the study provides theoretical clarity and highlights the role of social influence and credibility signals in shaping consumer decision-making.

The review also identifies critical research gaps related to platform-specific dynamics and cross-cultural generalizability, offering a roadmap for future research employing longitudinal and experimental designs capable of capturing dynamic consumer interaction patterns. Lastly, from a practical management perspective, these comprehensive research results provide clear guidance and sound the alarm for modern enterprises. The study strongly emphasizes that enterprises operating in today's competitive digital environment must prioritize

long-term trust-building strategies over short-term gimmicks. Brands must consistently strive to foster meaningful and in-depth interactions and create authentic, high-quality content. Only by understanding and respecting this complex, multi-stage digital ecosystem can brands enhance the effectiveness of their content marketing and significantly improve their real-world purchasing outcomes in an increasingly competitive, social media-driven digital market.

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Conflicts of Interest

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