

THE DIGITAL SHOPPING REVOLUTION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF SOCIAL MEDIA'S IMPACT ON SHOPPING BEHAVIOR AMONG YOUNG ADULTS IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

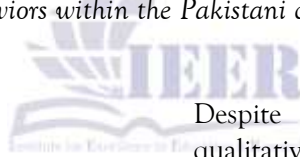
Social media has evolved from a communication tool to a dominant force in influencing consumer habits, mobility, and economic decisions. This qualitative study looks at the lived experiences of young adult consumers (ages 18-30) in Pakistan and their social media-driven shopping habits. The study uses semi-structured interviews with 20 people (10 men and 10 women) to evaluate psychological triggers, digital coping methods, and socio-cultural impacts. Thematic analysis identifies important factors such as Influencer Credibility, Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), Digital Trust Deficits, and Algorithmic Impulsivity. The findings emphasize the need of consumer protection policies and digital literacy programs in promoting healthy purchasing behaviors within the Pakistani cultural setting.

INTRODUCTION

Background

Social media is typically associated with worldwide connectivity and lifestyle inspiration, but for many young adults, it is a primary source of shopping behavior that disrupts financial planning and self-perception. In Pakistan, social media involvement has become an integral part of daily life, influencing not only communication but also buying choices and shopping patterns (Agustiniingsih et al., 2017). The emergence of platforms such as Instagram and TikTok led to an increase in digital conspicuous spending, in which young adults, encouraged by filtered feeds, display costly products as indicators of social status. While digital marketing provides ease and time savings, it also exposes consumers to high levels of marketing persuasion, which can lead to impulsive behaviors such as hedonic shopping (Nining et al., 2022).

Problem Statement



Despite the rapid rise of e-commerce, little qualitative research has been conducted to examine the psychological implications of social media on shopping behavior, particularly in Pakistan. Most existing consumer studies are based on Western nations, where economic stability and digital legal frameworks differ dramatically from those in South Asia. This study intends to address this gap by investigating how young adults in Pakistan deal with the pressures of digital consumption, as well as the cultural elements that influence their trust in online markets.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), which links attitudes and social norms to purchasing intentions (Sara, 2025). Furthermore, Social Learning Theory outlines how young adults model their behavior after social media influencers (SMIs) whom they regard as authentic or relatable (Ravikumar, 2019). In Pakistan, the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) model proposes that social

media marketing functions as a stimulus, influencing purchase intentions indirectly through brand image and community identification (Hochreiter et al., 2023).

Research Questions

1. How do Pakistani young adults perceive and experience the influence of social media on their shopping habits?
2. What are the primary psychological and social factors that trigger social-media-driven purchases?
3. How is digital trust in shopping shaped by cultural and environmental factors in Pakistan?
4. How do gender differences affect the shopping experiences and motivations of young adults on social media?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The rise of social media platforms has had significant effects on young adult shopping behavior (Anute, 2024). Instead of actively seeking for products, many young consumers are discovering them through posts, reels, and algorithm-based recommendations (Adamu et al., 2019). This type of exposure frequently generates powerful emotional and psychological responses, such as excitement while watching unboxing videos or transient emotional comfort from purchasing things online or from shops (Otamendi & Sutil Martín, 2020). In Pakistan, social media buying has grown in popularity among young adults, although trust in online purchases remains low (Ali et al., 2022). Moreover, many consumers express concern about online fraud, poor product quality, deceptive ads, and the exploitation of personal or financial information, which influences their purchasing decisions (Jin, 2023). Several psychological factors influence Pakistani young adults' buying behavior. Influencers have a significant impact on purchase choices since they are frequently seen as trustworthy, relatable, and similar to ordinary consumers. Influencer endorsements are considered more trustworthy and convincing than standard ads (Nuradina, 2022). Furthermore, fear of missing out (FOMO) drives young adults to purchase trendy things in order to feel socially included or up to date.

Social media also encourages conspicuous consumption, in which people show off their purchases online to represent their identity or social position. Furthermore, faulty thinking habits contribute to impulsive buying, such as believing a product is urgently needed since it appears frequently online or fear of missing out on a limited-time offer. These psychological processes influence how young adults in Pakistan use social media to shop and make purchases (Kaur & Sandhu, 2024).

In addition, conventional media such as television commercials, billboards, printed pictures, dramas, and films have a substantial impact on shopping behavior among young adults in Pakistan. Television commercials frequently combine eye-catching imagery, emotive storytelling, and celebrity endorsements to promote good connections with items (Srinopnikom, 2016). Similarly, billboards in urban areas constantly expose young adults to branded images, thereby increasing familiarity and memory (Wasserbauer, 2023). Product placements, stylish clothes, and affluent lifestyles are commonly featured in Pakistani plays and films, influencing viewers' choices and consumption objectives in subtle ways. These visual representations promote idealized standards of living and beauty, leading young individuals to identify specific objects with success, happiness, or social acceptance (Siddiqi, 2021).

In conclusion, available research indicates that both digital and traditional media have a significant impact on the shopping habits of young adults in Pakistan. Social media platforms, influencers, and algorithm-driven content all promote impulsive and emotionally motivated purchases, whereas television, billboards, and entertainment media reinforce consumption through frequent visual exposure and aspirational messaging (Raza et al., 2025). These media forms alter attitudes, desires, and purchasing habits by influencing emotions, beliefs, and identity creation. Understanding the cumulative impact of media is critical for explaining changes in consumer behavior among Pakistani young adults, and it emphasizes the need for increased awareness of how media exposure influences purchasing decisions (Naeem et al., 2023).

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

This research utilizes a qualitative approach to capture the depth of consumer experiences. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow participants to express their subjective perceptions of digital marketing and its impact on their lives.

Participants

A purposive sample of 20 young adults (10 males, 10 females) aged 18–30 was selected from major urban centers like Lahore and Islamabad, where social media usage is most concentrated.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted online using Zoom and Google Meet after taking their consent. The interviews lasted 45 to 60 minutes and were audio-recorded. The data was analyzed using Thematic Analysis to identify recurrent patterns and themes regarding motivations, barriers, and gender-specific behaviors in the digital marketplace.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted out utilizing Braun and Clarke's (2013) method, which ensured rigor in recognizing and categorizing emerging themes.

Results

Table 1.

Themes Identified Through Interviews

Themes	Sub-themes	Description
Influencer Credibility vs. Parasocial Relationships	Perceived authenticity; Emotional connection; Trust in personal content	Participants responded that social media influencers have a considerable influence on their purchasing decisions. Influencers who post personal vlogs, everyday routines, and honest product reviews are seen as trustworthy and relatable.
Algorithmic Impulsivity and Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)	Targeted advertisements; Limited-time offers; Impulse buying	Young adults reported making impulsive purchases as a result of continuous exposure to targeted advertisements and quick discounts on social media sites.
Trust Deficit in the Pakistani Digital Market	Fear of scams; Product quality concerns; Cash-on-Delivery preference	Despite their regular online activity, participants indicated concerns about online fraud, financial loss, and receiving low-quality products.
Gendered Consumption Patterns	Fashion and beauty engagement; Technology and status consumption	This theme discovered gender differences in shopping behavior. Female participants were more engaged with fashion, beauty, and lifestyle-related information, whereas male participants were more drawn to technology-related products.

Theme 1: Influencer Credibility vs. Parasocial Relationships

Participants reported that social media influencers had a significant impact on their purchasing decisions. Many young adults reported they trust influencers who share personal vlogs or provide honest product

reviews because they appear authentic and relatable. Instead of considering influencers as paid advertising, participants frequently saw them as digital acquaintances, making them more likely to trust their recommendations and buy the advertised products.

Theme 2: Algorithmic Impulsivity and FOMO

A common theme among participants was their experience with making impulsive purchases while utilizing social media. Young adults said that targeted marketing, personalized product recommendations, and limited-time deals on Instagram stories create a high sense of urgency and pressure to buy. This Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) caused participants to be concerned that they would lose a significant amount of money if they did not act immediately. As a result, several people reported making impulsive purchases that cost more than they expected.

Theme 3: The "Trust Deficit" in the Pakistani Digital Market

Despite their frequent use of social media platforms, participants showed a distinct lack of trust in online purchase in Pakistan's digital marketplace. Many people expressed concern about internet frauds, receiving low-quality or wrong products, and losing money using online payments. Due to these concerns, Cash-On-Delivery (COD) was often accepted because it allowed purchasers to inspect the merchandise before making payment. This payment technique was defined as a culturally appropriate and realistic coping strategy for reducing the anxiety, financial risk, and uncertainty associated with internet purchase.

Theme 4: Gendered Consumption Patterns

The fourth theme of the thematic analysis revolved around clear differences between genders in young people's buying habits. Although both men and women were actively involved in media content and online buying, their interests and motivations differed. Female participants expressed more interest in fashion, beauty, and lifestyle-related content, which was frequently impacted by social media trends, influencers, and aspirational lifestyle imagery. In contrast, male participants expressed a greater interest in technology-related things such as gadgets and electronics. Their purchasing habits were more closely related to excessive spending, in which acquiring specific things was associated with demonstrating status, success, or social prestige. These findings suggest that gender

influences young adults' media-driven purchase preferences.

Discussion

The findings of this research show that social media has grown beyond a simple source of information and entertainment, becoming a significant psychological arena that changes how young adults in Pakistan interpret their wants and desires. The convenience of one-click buying and constant product exposure make purchasing easier than ever (Nazeer et al., 2025). However, due to the lack of strong consumer protection and regulatory institutions in Pakistan, young consumers are extremely cautious and observant (Schrittwieser et al., 2024). This results in a state of perpetual alertness, in which trust cannot be assumed but must be repeatedly established. As a result, brands must demonstrate credibility through customer evaluations, influencer endorsements, and visible community engagement before consumers feel comfortable making a purchase (Costello, 2025).

The findings further highlight the importance of psychological processes including fear of missing out, impulse buying, and parasocial interactions in driving shopping behavior (Kim & Kim, 2025). Influencers, in particular, blur the line between marketing and friendship, making promotional messages appear personalized and trustworthy. Additionally, algorithm-driven marketing and limited-time deals exacerbate emotional pressure, causing young individuals to make impulsive purchases (Wang et al., 2023). These actions indicate that shopping decisions are frequently emotionally motivated rather than rational, influenced by repeated exposure, urgency cues, and a need for social connection. Such patterns have a particularly strong impact on young adults, who are in the process of developing their identities and comparing themselves to others (Sanny & Gerardo, 2020).

In conclusion, the study suggests that both social and conventional media have a substantial impact on the buying behavior of young adults in Pakistan by influencing their emotions, perceptions, and sense of identity. While media platforms provide convenience and diversity, they also promote impulsive

behavior and exacerbate trust-related worries. Understanding these dynamics is critical for psychologists, marketers, and politicians seeking to promote responsible consumer behavior and devise measures to safeguard young customers from financial and psychological harm.

Recommendations

- Policymakers should develop and impose stronger consumer protection laws to reduce online fraud and increase trust in online shopping platforms.
- Social media platforms should introduce clearer labeling of sponsored content to help young consumers differentiate between genuine reviews and paid promotions.
- Brands should focus on building long-term trust by encouraging authentic customer feedback, clear return policies, and active engagement with online communities.
- Influencers should follow ethical marketing practices by clearly revealing paid partnerships and providing honest product reviews.
- Educational institutions should include media literacy programs to help young adults understand persuasive marketing tactics and make informed purchasing decisions.
- Psychologists and mental health professionals should raise awareness about impulse buying and their psychological impact on young consumers.
- Young adults should be encouraged to budget wisely, reflect before making purchases, and critically evaluate online advertisements to avoid unnecessary spending.

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