



Social Media and Fashion Buying Behaviour of Young Adults A Systematic Literature Review Based on PRISMA

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Abstract: Today's fashion purchase is impossible to imagine without the ongoing presence of social media. A fast look through Instagram or YouTube Reels reveals a constant flow of wardrobe ideas, influencer reviews and business advertising that heavily push viewers to buy. This systematic literature review intends to provide insight into what the academic literature says about this relationship through investigating the impact of social media usage on fashion buying behaviour of young adults (18–29 years) as identified in peer-reviewed studies indexed in Scopus, Web of Science and Research gate. A systematic search was adopted following PRISMA 2020 principles in three databases (Scopus, Web of Science and ResearchGate). Of the original search of 554 records, the final synthesis included 43 peer-reviewed papers that met the whole set of qualifying requirements. The synthesis resulted five themes: (1) influencer marketing and credibility; (2) platform-specific dynamics on Instagram, YouTube and Facebook; (3) content created by users (UGC) and electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM); (4) sustainable and ethical fashion consumption; and (5) social comparison and identity formation. The most common drivers of fashion purchase intention across these themes were influencer credibility, content authenticity and Para social links between followers and producers. It is evident that social media has evolved from being a marketing medium to being a participatory fashion ecology in which aspiration, identity and consumption are connected. The analysis also highlighted numerous important gaps including a lack of longitudinal studies in the Global South, especially in India, and the absence of cross-platform comparative studies.

Keywords: social media, fashion buying behaviour, young adults, PRISMA, influencer marketing, user-generated content, e-WOM, purchase intention, systematic literature review.

Introduction

When thinking about how young people nowadays decide what to wear, what to buy and which companies to trust, social media is almost always part of the picture. Once a place for socializing and self-expression, it has quietly become one of the most influential factors shaping fashion consumption. This change has been especially pronounced among Millennials (born 1981-1996) and Generation Z (born 1997-2012), two generations that grew up using social media as a regular part of their everyday lives.

Instagram, YouTube, Pinterest, Facebook, and now Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts are all full-blown fashion discovery environments. Here, trends are born, caught, and consumed, often within days. Celebrities with hundreds of millions of followers, everyday creators with only a few thousand, and influencers at all levels in between have largely taken over the function that used to be played by fashion publications and celebrity endorsements. Young adults are bombarded with peer reviews, aspirational imagery and algorithmically curated content that prompts them to make purchasing decisions that feel organic, not commercial. This is exactly why these platforms are so strong.

This study attempts this by conducting a systematic literature review based on PRISMA 2020 guidelines using peer-reviewed publications indexed in Scopus, Web of Science (WoS) and ResearchGate. The four research questions that formed the basis of the investigation were:



RQ1: How is social media usage related to the fashion purchase behaviour of young adults (18-29 years)? to what extent?

RQ2: Which social media platforms and what types of material have the biggest influence on young adults' fashion buying intentions?

RQ3: What theoretical frameworks have been used to explain the impact of social media on fashion consumption among young adults?

RQ4: What are the primary methodological approaches in the existing literature and what are the gaps?

Theoretical Background

There is no hypothesis that explains why a young adult scrolling through Instagram ends up buying a kurta she didn't even expect to buy an hour ago. It's a multi-layered phenomenon: information, emotion, identity and social pressure all at the same time. This section outlines the main theoretical frameworks that have been utilized by researchers to make sense of it.

TPB — Theory of Planned Behaviours:

Probably the most used framework in the literature is Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). Thus, our intentions to act in this case to purchase a fashion item depend on three things: how positively we feel about the activity, what we think people around us expect and how much power we feel we have. All three are affected by social media. Applying the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) to social media and fashion, the largest single predictor of purchase intention among young people constantly emerges as the social normative limitations that are imposed through platform interactions (Vladimirova et al., 2023; Valaei & Nikhashemi, 2022).

Technology Acceptance Model (TAM):

Initially, the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1989) was developed to explain the adoption of new technologies but has successfully been extended to digital buying behavior. Two key levers; perceived utility: Does this platform actually help me identify things I want to buy? and ease of use: is the experience smooth and easy enough to handle?. The integrated versions of TAM with social influence factors have been found to be particularly explanatory for the fashion behavior of Gen Z (Du Thi Chung et al., 2024; Frontiers, 2024).

Information Adoption Model (IAM) versus Information Acceptance Model (IACM):

Sussman and Siegal (2003) offered an alternative view, the Information Adoption Model (IAM), which focused on how individuals decided which information online they would believe and act on. Erkan and Evans (2016) extended this to the Information Acceptance Model (IACM) incorporating consumer-side variables such as the level of need for the information and positive feelings toward the information. Psychologically, information that is low-quality and clearly sponsored is ignored (Erkan & Evans, 2016; Du Thi Chung et al., 2023; Maru, 2024).

The Social Comparison Theory:

Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) is perhaps the most unsettling way of looking at this. The key idea is that we compare ourselves to others so that we can assess ourselves. Social media is, in effect, a factory for this, selected, filtered, aspirational images at scale. That upward comparison is what creates desire when a young lady scrolling through Instagram sees someone her age or an influencer in an outfit she wishes she could pull off. The comparison dynamics are a major predictor of impulsive fashion purchase and brand selections among young adults (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Van den Bergh et al., 2024).



Para social Interaction Theory:

Horton and Wohl (1956) originally presented an idea of Para social interaction, a one-way yet real emotional relationship audiences have with media personalities. We've all been there: you follow someone's daily life through their posts, you feel like you know them and when they recommend something it's like a friend's opinion even if they don't know you exist. This relationship is at the heart of the commercial power of influencer marketing. Research indicates that the stronger the Para social relationship, the more likely a follower is to purchase fashion goods promoted by an influencer, especially if the influencer is seen as credible (Bratina & Faganel, 2024; Nguyen et al., 2024; George et al.

Research Methodology

Study Design and PRISMA Protocol:

This investigation was conducted based on the PRISMA 2020 declaration (Page et al., 2021) that gives a standardized guideline on how to design, conduct and report systematic reviews. The rationale for using this framework was simple, when you are compiling dozens of publications from different disciplines and databases you need some form of systematic approach so that the selection of studies is transparent and justifiable rather than selective. To prevent the danger of just including those studies that confirmed what we expected to discover, the protocol was finalized before the search was started.

Search strategy and data bases:

The searches were performed in three databases: Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), and ResearchGate. They were selected because together they offer a solid coverage of peer-reviewed work in the social sciences, marketing, communication and consumer behaviour — the primary disciplinary homes of this literature. The three searched for with the same Boolean search string:

("social media" OR "Instagram" OR "YouTube" OR "Facebook") AND ("fashion" OR "apparel" OR "clothing") AND ("buying behaviour" OR "purchase intention" OR "consumer behaviour") AND ("young adults" OR "millennials" OR "Generation Z")

The search was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles published in English from January 2019 to September 2024. The selected time period is purposeful, since it refers to the period in which short-form video material became popular and the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a boom in social media use and online fashion retail, making it the period most relevant for recent research.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria:

Inclusion criteria: (a) peer-reviewed empirical or review articles; (b) published in English between 2019–2024; (c) focusing on the relationship between social media and fashion buying behaviour, purchase intention or consumption patterns; (d) involving participants aged 18–27 years (young adults); (e) indexed in Scopus, WoS or ResearchGate.

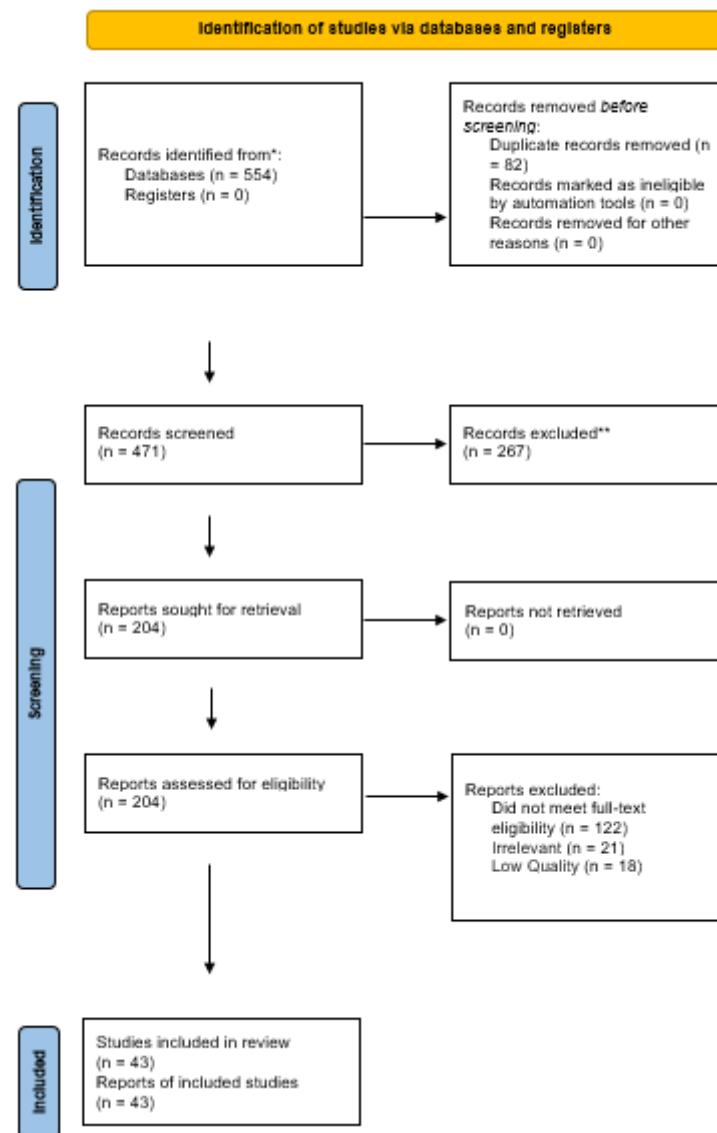
Exclusion Criteria: (a) Grey literature, conference abstracts, dissertations, editorials; (b) Studies involving only children or older individuals; (c) Studies not incorporating fashion or clothing; (d) Studies without a social media component; (e) Articles not available for full-text evaluation.

Screening & selection procedure:

The screening was done in two passes. In the initial pass, researcher independently read titles and abstracts and any discrepancies were resolved through conversation. The second pass involved reading the complete content of the shortlisted articles against the qualifying criteria. The three databases yielded a total of 554 records, 82 of

which were duplicates. Title and abstract screening of the remaining 471 yielded 204 articles for full-text review. After rigorous application of the eligibility criteria, 43 studies were included in the final synthesis.

Table 1: PRISMA Flow diagram- Screening & selection procedure



Database-wise breakdown of records identified: Scopus (n = 248), Web of Science (n = 192), ResearchGate (n = 114).

Quality Evaluation:

The quality of included studies was assessed using a modified Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT). Articles were assessed on the following criteria: clarity of study objectives; suitability of methodology; method of data collection and analysis; relevance of findings to the review questions; possibility for bias. The final synthesis includes only those papers that scored over 60% on the quality criterion. Journal indexing status was also confirmed for studies downloaded from ResearchGate prior to inclusion.

**Data Retrieval and Analysis:**

Data extraction was conducted with the help of a standardized template, which included: author(s) and year, database source, platform focus, theoretical framework, research design, sample characteristics, main variables, and main conclusions. A thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) was undertaken to locate, label and organise prominent topics throughout the study.

4. Results and Discussion**Summary:**

The most investigated platform was Instagram (39.5%), followed by short-form video formats, such as Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts (28.4%), multi-platform studies (20.9%) and Facebook (7.0%). The most researched cohort was Generation Z (48.8%), followed by Millennials (30.2%) and the combined young adult samples (21.0%).

Table 2: Representative Sample of Included Studies

Author(s) & Year	Database	Platform Focus	Method	Key Finding
Vladimirova et al. (2023)	Scopus / WoS	Multi-platform	SLR	SM influences sustainable fashion consumption; influencers play a dominant role.
George et al. (2024)	Scopus	Instagram, Reels	Meta-Analysis	Influencer credibility strongly mediates purchase intention in fashion.
Stoica & Hickman (2024)	Scopus / WoS	Multi-platform	Survey	Gen Z relies more on SM than professional advice for buying decisions.
Valaei & Nikhashemi (2017/rep. 2022)	WoS	Facebook, Instagram	SEM	Moderation analysis shows Gen Y attitudes predict fashion apparel buying.
Chowdhury et al. (2024)	ResearchGate	Instagram, Facebook, YouTube	Review	SM marketing strategies positively correlate with fashion purchase behaviour.
Erkan & Evans (2016/cited 2024)	Scopus	SNS General	Survey	Information quality and credibility (IACM) predict eWOM adoption and PI.



Van den Bergh et al. (2024)	Scopus / WoS	Multi-platform	Mixed Methods	Gen Z segments respond differently to SM fashion marketing messages.
Nguyen et al. (2024)	Scopus	Instagram Reels	Qualitative	Authenticity is central to Gen Z trust in influencer marketing.
Maru (2024)	Scopus	SNS General	Bibliometric	eWOM-brand relationship shaped by credibility and community engagement.
Du Thi Chung et al. (2023)	WoS	Multi-platform (Vietnam)	SEM-Survey	UGC functional, social & emotional value drive purchase behaviour.
Bratina & Faganel (2024)	Scopus	Instagram	Quantitative	Parasocial relationships with influencers boost fashion purchase intention.
ScienceDirect – Frontiers (2024)	Scopus	Instagram Reels / YT Shorts	Path Analysis	Source credibility and content quality mediate short-form video purchase intention via engagement.
Patwa et al. (2024)	ResearchGate	Instagram Reels, YouTube	Survey	Social proof from content creators enhances Gen Z purchase confidence.
Prakash (2024)	ResearchGate	Multi-platform	Descriptive	SM marketing has a significant positive impact on youth purchase behaviour.

Source: Authors' synthesis from Scopus, Web of Science, and ResearchGate (2019–2024)

Identified themes

The thematic analysis of the 43 papers included generated five main themes which were interdependent and recurrent throughout the corpus.

Table 3: Summary of Thematic Findings

Theme	Key Studies	Core Insight
Influencer Marketing & Credibility	George et al. (2024); Bratina & Faganel (2024); Nguyen et al. (2024)	Trustworthiness, expertise, and authenticity of influencers are primary drivers of purchase intention.
Platform-Specific Dynamics	Stoica & Hickman (2024); Frontiers Study (2024)	Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts amplify impulsive fashion buying through short-form video; Instagram feed drives aspiration.



User-Generated Content (UGC) & eWOM	Du Thi Chung et al. (2023); Erkan & Evans (2016); Maru (2024)	UGC credibility, quality, and emotional value significantly mediate fashion purchase decisions.
Sustainable & Ethical Fashion	Vladimirova et al. (2023); Van den Bergh et al. (2024)	SM raises awareness of sustainability yet simultaneously fuels fast-fashion overconsumption among youth.
Social Comparison & Identity	Valaei & Nikhashemi (2022); Djafarova & Bowes (2021)	Social comparison and self-concept congruence predict fashion brand preference and impulse buying.

Source: Authors' thematic synthesis

Theme 1: Influencer Marketing and Credibility:

Across practically every study reviewed here, one finding is common: influencers matter and what makes them relevant is if people trust them. Influencer content actually leads to buy behaviour via a process of credibility – based on perceived trustworthiness, expertise and authentic connection (George et al., 2024; Bratina & Faganel, 2024).

George et al. (2024) conducted a systematic analysis of Scopus and WoS (2019–2024) research and found that the credibility of the influencer significantly moderates the relationship between fashion brand exposure and purchase intention. Similarly, Nguyen et al. (2024) found that Gen Z consumers clearly preferred influencers who do not veil economic relationships, but make them explicit. Ironically, this transparency did not reduce commercial effectiveness, but intensified it, by stressing authenticity. Ali, M., & Siraj, S. (2024)

Theme 2: Dynamics of Platforms:

One rather evident point from the literature is that social media platforms are not fungible. Treating them as one homogenous environment, as much early research did, overlooks important ways each platform's architecture affects how users engage with fashion information.

Instagram's clean, artistically edited feed remains the number one avenue for aspirational fashion discovery. Djafarova & Bowes (2021) used netnographic methods to show that the aesthetic environment of Instagram is encouraging impulsive fashion purchases among young women – the platform creates a visual standard to strive for, and the direct embedded 'shop now' function means the gap between wanting and buying has never been shorter.

Short-form video content on Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts is a rapidly growing type of fashion influence, especially among Gen Z consumers. A PRISMA-informed study published in *Frontiers* (2024) found that this highly interactive, entertaining and peer-participatory video format increases impulsive fashion buying through what the authors call 'compressed social proof' – fast positive social signaling that bypasses deliberative decision-making. Young customers are more prone to look for video advice from their friends than from professional fashion stylists (Stoica and Hickman, 2024).

Theme 3: User Content Creation (UGC) and e-WOM:

What interesting is happening with normal consumer content — postings, reviews, unboxings, outfit shares from folks with no follower count or notice. One of the reasons for the legitimacy of this user-generated material (UGC) and the overall phenomena of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is that it is made by people who have no financial incentive to make the suggestion.



Du Thi Chung et al. (2023) found that for a sample of 445 social media users in Vietnam, UGC boosts purchasing behaviour through three forms of value: functional (i.e., relevant product information), social (i.e., belonging to a peer community) and emotional (i.e., joy from participating in the content). What was intriguing was that the emotional and social components were stronger predictors of actual purchase than the functional knowledge dimension, which means that fashion UGC is less a source of rational information and more of a mood and identity experience. Mehta, A. (2024)

Theme 4: Consumption of Fashion and Ethics & Sustainability:

This is where sustainability theme, social media and fashion writing gets really challenging. Instead of just pushing consumerism further, social media seems to play a contradictory double role and this contradiction is worth focusing on.

This dispute was significantly highlighted in the systematic review carried out by Vladimirova et al. (2023) which synthesized 40 studies. On the other hand, social media is raising awareness around sustainability through hashtag activism, second-hand fashion groups and influencers who speak out about fast fashion. But in contrast, these same platforms are pushing quick fashion consumption with ever-changing trend cycles, influencer hauls normalizing buying and discarding, and algorithm-driven content that emphasizes novelty over longevity. Singh, S., & Agrawal, N. (2024)

Theme 5: Social Comparison and Identity Formation:

The last theme is in many ways the most human: the role of social media in the way young adults are using fashion to find out who they are and how they want to be seen. Social media provides an audience for identity creation, which is already a priority for the 18–35 age range.

Valaei and Nikhashemi (2022) in their moderation study, found self-concept congruence (the amount to which a customer's self-image is aligned with a brand's perceived identity) to be a significant moderator of social media fashion exposure and brand preference. Brands that “feel like me” are considerably more likely to convert exposure into intent than brands that don't. This result is in line with the findings of Djafarova and Bowes (2021) who showed that upward social comparison on Instagram was a significant psychological predictor of impulsive fashion acquisitions, with young women buying products to reduce the gap between their real selves and their ideal social media projected identity.

Discussion and analysis

Synthesizing 43 studies, the strongest message is that social media has a real, meaningful impact on young adults' fashion behaviour, which cannot be explained by any single mechanism. The strongest signal in the research is on influencer mediated purchase intention, credibility and authenticity are typically the characteristics that affect the most. Thus, a correct model of social media fashion consumption must include source attributes (the influencer's credibility) and relationship features (the parasocial closeness of a follower), in addition to information level factors, expanding the IACM.

I would argue that evidence across the five themes suggests three interacting pathways through which social media influences fashion behaviour: cognitive (information acquisition and processing through eWOM and UGC), affective (aspiration, social comparison and emotional resonance with influencer content) and behavioural (impulse purchase, planned purchase and brand loyalty). Most existing frameworks capture one or two of these approaches. All three routes are not present in existing theoretical models (TPB, TAM, IAM). Therefore, there is a need to develop an integrated theoretical model of social media fashion consumption.



Conclusion

The objective of this review was to determine what academics have established on the relationship between social media and fashion purchase behaviour among young adults according to the literature from Scopus, Web of Science and ResearchGate. The synthesis shows that this relationship is really crucial and really complex. Social media influences fashion behaviour through a variety of channels: influencer marketing, user created content, electronic word of mouth, social comparison and platform-specific processes. Each channel has different contribution to fashion behaviour depending on platform, demography and cultural context.

Going forward, the profession needs longitudinal research to observe these affects over time, experimental methods that can show causality not just correlation, and cross-platform comparison studies. Above all, researchers need to take young consumers in the Global South seriously, and in particular India, where both social media adoption and fashion consumerism are exploding among a digitally native youth generation that has been largely ignored in the prior literature.

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