

Acta
Universitatis
Danubius



ÆCONOMICA

Impact of Social Media Marketing on Consumer Purchasing Decisions for Clothing Products in Mthatha

Phumla Nkominopondo¹, Ifeanyi Mbukanma², Olaitan Shemfe³

Abstract: This study investigates the influence of social media marketing on consumer clothing purchase decisions in Mthatha, a low-income, semi-urban area in South Africa. Despite the widespread adoption of social media marketing across the country, its effectiveness in regions with limited internet access and high price sensitivity remains underexplored. Grounded in the Theory of Planned Behavior and the Commitment Trust Theory, the study builds on existing literature to understand how digital strategies perform in under-resourced settings. A quantitative, cross-sectional research design was employed using a structured questionnaire administered to 290 university students. Structural equation modelling revealed that all three marketing strategies, content strategy ($\beta = 0.488$), target audience ($\beta = 0.249$), and platform selection ($\beta = 0.213$), significantly and positively influenced purchase decisions. Among these, content strategy had the strongest impact, highlighting the importance of engaging and relevant messaging. The findings offer practical implications for marketers, researchers, and academic institutions by demonstrating that well-tailored social media campaigns can be effective even in digitally constrained environments. This research adds unique value by providing empirical evidence from a previously under-researched context, broadening the applicability of digital marketing theory to diverse socio-economic settings and affirming the potential of social platforms to influence consumer behavior in emerging markets.

¹ Honours Student, Department of Business Management and Economics, Faculty of Economic and Financial Sciences, Walter Sisulu University, Mthatha, South Africa, Address: ZMK Site, Mthatha Campus, South Africa, E-mail: pnkominopondo@gmail.com.

² Senior Lecturer, Department of Business Management and Economics, Faculty of Economic and Financial Sciences, Walter Sisulu University, Mthatha, South Africa, Address: ZMK Site, Mthatha Campus, South Africa, E-mail: imbukanma@wsu.ac.za.

³ Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Department of Business Management and Economics, Faculty of Economic and Financial Sciences, Walter Sisulu University, Mthatha, South Africa, Address: ZMK Site, Mthatha Campus, South Africa, Correspondence author: oshemfe@wsu.ac.za.



Copyright: © 2025 by the authors.

Open access publication under the terms and conditions of the
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial (CC BY NC) license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>)

Keywords: consumer behavior; social marketing; digital strategy; rural retail; purchase intent

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

Social media has become a transformative marketing channel globally, but its impact in poorer, small-town contexts like Mthatha remains unclear. Mthatha's consumers are predominantly low-income and highly price-sensitive, often willing to travel long distances for lower prices (Coetzee, 2013). This suggests that typical social media appeals (e.g. convenience, trendiness) may be less effective in this context (Ntobela & Mbukanma, 2023). Internet access in the Eastern Cape remains limited, only about 70% of households have any internet access, and just 7.7% have fixed broadband (Statistics South Africa, 2024). While mobile internet use is increasing, with over two-thirds of households accessing the internet via mobile devices, many Mthatha consumers still rely on basic phones, limiting their ability to engage with rich media content. Use of public Wi-Fi remains minimal, with only 1.6% of households reporting access (Odendaal, 2024). These limitations restrict local consumers' exposure to data-intensive social media content, such as video ads or influencer campaigns.

At the national level, around 83% of South African consumers report using social media platforms to discover new brands and inform purchase decisions (Malinga, 2024). Yet, in Mthatha, traditional in-store factors such as store environment and sensory cues have a stronger influence on purchase decisions than digital marketing (Ntobela & Mbukanma, 2023). This contrast presents a dilemma for local retailers: despite widespread national engagement with social media, it is uncertain whether online clothing promotions can significantly shape consumer behavior in Mthatha's under-resourced market.

Existing studies on social media marketing and fashion consumption largely focus on urban or global settings (Johnstone & Lindh 2022; Zhao et al., 2019), offering limited relevance to towns like Mthatha. The unique socio-economic conditions pervasive poverty, low connectivity, and strong price-consciousness warrant a focused investigation into whether, and how, social media marketing influences clothing purchase decisions in this local context. This study aims to fill that gap by exploring the relationships between social media marketing strategies and consumer purchasing behaviour among Mthatha residents.

1.2. Problem Statement and Objective of the Study

Retailers in Mthatha face a strategic dilemma regarding whether to invest in social media marketing, given the region's distinctive digital landscape and consumer

behaviour. The Eastern Cape lags behind other provinces in digital connectivity: while mobile device access is widespread, data costs and limited infrastructure still hinder consistent online engagement (Statistics South Africa, 2024). Public Wi-Fi access remains extremely low in the province, only 1.6% of households report usage (Odendaal, 2024), making access to social media campaigns highly variable across the region.

Meanwhile, social media has become a pervasive marketing tool nationally, with 83% of South African consumers using these platforms to discover brands (Malinga, 2024). However, there is limited empirical evidence to show whether Mthatha's predominantly low-income, price-sensitive consumers engage with online clothing promotions at the same level as urban shoppers. Existing local research suggests that Mthatha consumers are more influenced by physical store features than by promotional content (Ntobela & Mbukanma, 2023).

This discrepancy between high national social media usage and limited digital access in Mthatha underscores the need for a localized investigation. Objective: This study seeks to determine the extent to which social media marketing strategies, particularly target audience engagement, platform selection, and content strategy influence consumer purchase decisions for clothing products in Mthatha.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Framework

Businesses increasingly leverage social media marketing (SMM) to engage customers (Alalwan et al., 2017). SMM offers advantages such as improved two-way interaction and easier information access, but many firms struggle to translate online engagement into actual sales or loyalty (Appel et al., 2020). Key elements of an SMM strategy include identifying a target audience, selecting appropriate platforms, and crafting a compelling content strategy (Chyrak et al., 2024). Accurately defining the target audience is challenging but critical (Ntobela & Mbukanma, 2023). Platform selection involves choosing social media channels that best reach the intended audience and align with campaign goals (Malinga, 2024). A well-planned content strategy with consistent, engaging content helps build brand identity and trust among consumers (Zhao et al., 2019). These marketing factors are expected to positively influence consumers' attitudes and purchase decisions online (Wagner, 2020).

This study is underpinned by two theoretical frameworks. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) posits that purchase intention is determined by the consumer's attitude toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). TPB has been applied successfully to predict purchase intentions in

South Africa (Fatoki, 2021). In Mthatha's context, factors like skepticism or enthusiasm toward social media ads, peer influence, and having the means to purchase online can shape whether consumers intend to buy clothing seen on social media (Ntobela & Mbukanma, 2023).

The Commitment–Trust Theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) emphasizes that trust and commitment are key to ongoing customer–brand relationships. On social media, trust must be built quickly through authentic content and engagement, since consumers may fear online fraud in low-trust environments (Bowen & Bowen, 2015). High levels of trust and a sense of commitment can significantly increase consumers' purchase intentions (Alalwan et al., 2017). Thus, an effective social media marketing approach in Mthatha likely needs to cultivate consumer trust in the brand in order to convert online interest into actual purchases.

2.2. Conceptual Framework and Hypothesis Development

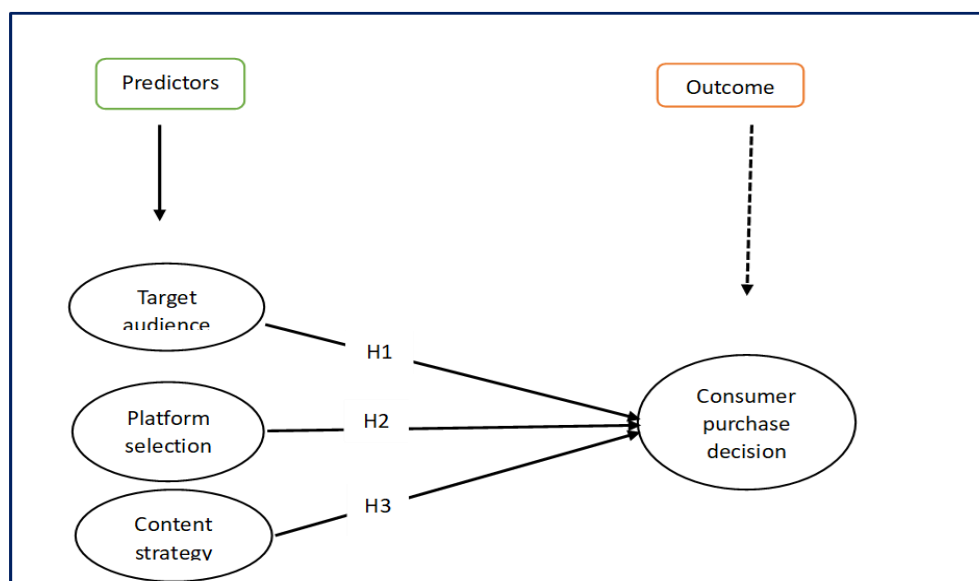


Figure 1. Presents the conceptual framework illustrating the hypothesized positive effects of Target Audience (TA), Platform Selection (PS), and Content Strategy (CS) on Consumer Purchase Decision (CPD). This model forms the basis for the study and informs the development of the following hypotheses.

H₁: Target audience has a positive effect on consumer purchase decisions regarding clothing products in Mthatha.

H₂: Platform selection has a positive effect on consumer purchase decisions regarding clothing products in Mthatha.

H₃: Content strategy has a positive effect on consumer purchase decisions regarding clothing products in Mthatha.

3. Methodology

This section outlines research design, sampling, data collection, analysis, and ethical procedures.

3.1. Research Design

This research employed a quantitative, cross-sectional design within a positivist paradigm. The target population was students at Walter Sisulu University's Mthatha campus who purchase clothing via social media. Using purposive sampling, a total of 290 valid responses were obtained. Data were gathered through a structured questionnaire. Descriptive statistics were generated using SPSS, and hypothesis testing was conducted through SEM path analysis using SmartPLS. Ethical approval was obtained from the Walter Sisulu University Faculty Research Committee (protocol number 041/2024/HBM/BME-1902) and participation was voluntary and anonymous.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the results of the data analysis, including reliability, validity, and structural model assessments, aligned with the study's hypotheses and objectives.

4.1. Reliability

Research reliability is the extent to which a methodology produces consistent and repeatable results (Bartlett & Frost, 2008). Reliability analysis confirmed that all constructs were internally consistent. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.892 to 0.944, and composite reliability from 0.920 to 0.954, all exceeding the acceptable 0.70 threshold. Thus, the measurement scales can be considered reliable (see Table 1).

Table 1. Reliability Test Results for Constructs

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Consumer Purchase Decision	0,944	0,945	0,954	0,750
Content Strategy	0,922	0,925	0,941	0,763
Platform Selection	0,920	0,922	0,940	0,757
Target Audience	0,892	0,895	0,920	0,698

4.1.1. Validity

In this study, discriminant validity was assessed. When a test has discriminating validity, it can be utilized to ascertain whether a particular construct is also measured by another test Gaffney (2024). Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell–Larcker criterion. Each construct's square root of AVE (diagonal values in Table 2) exceeded its correlations with other constructs, confirming adequate discriminant validity.

Table 2. Fornell–Larcker criterion results (diagonal entries are $\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$; off-diagonals are inter-construct correlations)

Fornell-Larcker Criterion				
	Consumer Purchase Decision	Content Strategy	Platform Selection	Target Audience
Consumer Purchase Decision	0,866			
Content Strategy	0,892	0,873		
Platform Selection	0,868	0,903	0,870	
Target Audience	0,847	0,849	0,862	0,836

4.2. Correlation Analysis

Table 3 presents the correlation matrix of the study constructs. All bivariate correlations between the independent variables (TA, PS, CS) and the dependent

variable (CPD) are strong and positive. Content strategy has the highest correlation with purchase decision ($r = 0.892$), followed by platform selection ($r = 0.868$) and target audience ($r = 0.847$). These correlations align with the relative strengths observed in the SEM path analysis.

Table 3. Correlation Matrix of Constructs

	Consumer Purchase Decision	Content Strategy	Platform Selection	Target Audience
Consumer Purchase Decision	1,000			
Content Strategy	0,892	1,000		
Platform Selection	0,868	0,903	1,000	
Target Audience	0,847	0,849	0,862	1,000

4.3. Structural Model Results

The structural equation model results are summarized in Figure 2. All three hypothesized paths are positive and statistically significant. Content strategy has the strongest effect on purchase decisions ($\beta = 0.488$, $p < 0.001$), compared to target audience ($\beta = 0.249$, $p < 0.001$) and platform selection ($\beta = 0.213$, $p = 0.008$). Table 4 details the path coefficients, t-statistics, and p-values, confirming that H1, H2, and H3 were all supported (each $t > 1.96$ and $p < 0.01$).

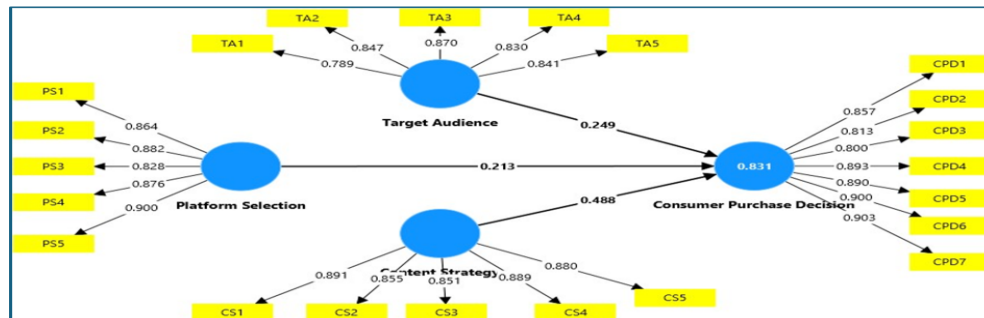


Figure 2. Structural Equation Model results (SEM Path Diagram with Standardized Path Coefficients)

According to Beaujean and Parker (2020), Path analysis is a type of statistical multiple-regression analysis used to assess causal hypotheses by analyzing the correlations between a dependent variable and two or more independent variables. In the context of this study, it is utilized to test the relationship between Target

audience and Consumer purchase decision (H1), Platform selection and Consumer purchase decision (H2), and Content strategy and Consumer purchase decision (H3).

Table 4. SEM Path Analysis Results. All Hypothesized Effects are Positive and Significant ($p < 0.01$; $p < 0.001$)

Hypothesized Relationship	Hypotheses	Beta/Path coefficient	T-Statistics	P-value	Decision Outcome
CS → CPD	H1	0.488	5.130	0.000	Significant & supported
PS → CPD	H2	0.213	2.634	0.008	Significant supported
TA → CPD	H3	0.249	3.908	0.000	Significant and supported

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This section synthesizes the study's insights into their practical significance. The focus is on how the findings inform business practice in semi-urban, resource-constrained contexts such as Mthatha, and on presenting evidence-based recommendations to guide more effective social media marketing strategies.

5.1. Conclusions

The findings confirm that social media marketing plays a significant role in influencing consumer purchase decisions for clothing in Mthatha. First, content strategy had a strong positive impact on purchase decisions ($\beta = 0.488$). This suggests that delivering engaging, relevant content is highly effective in motivating consumers to buy. This result is consistent with the observations of Gomes et al. (2022), who found that compelling content strategies drive consumer purchases. Local retailers should therefore invest in creative content creation (e.g. fashion videos, influencer partnerships) to stimulate consumer interest and trust. Second, platform selection showed a positive but more modest effect on purchase decisions ($\beta = 0.213$). While weaker than the content effect, it indicates that choosing the right social media platforms does facilitate consumer engagement and sales. This finding aligns with Barari et al. (2025), who observed that utilizing popular platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok can encourage purchases. Marketers in Mthatha should maintain a strategic presence on the social media platforms most frequented by their target audience to maximize reach. Third, effectively targeting the audience

($\beta = 0.249$) was also found to significantly influence purchase decisions. This supports the idea that tailoring marketing efforts to the needs and interests of a specific consumer segment increases conversion rates, in line with Kuncoro and Windyasari (2021). It highlights the importance for businesses to clearly define their target market such as youth fashion consumers in Mthatha and to customize social media campaigns to that demographic for maximum effect.

5.2. Practical Implications for Business and Marketing

The findings of this study present several important insights for businesses operating in low-income, semi-urban regions such as Mthatha. One of the most critical takeaways is the necessity for retailers to prioritize and localize their content strategy. It is no longer sufficient to rely on generic product promotions; rather, businesses must develop messaging that is culturally resonant, visually engaging, and reflective of local preferences and values. Strategies such as user-generated content, storytelling tailored to the Mthatha consumer context, and collaborations with micro-influencers from the area can significantly enhance message relatability and consumer trust.

Equally important is the implementation of precise audience segmentation techniques. While national campaigns often focus on broad reach, marketers in resource-constrained settings must emphasize micro-targeting. The student population in Mthatha, for instance, represents a digitally engaged, aspirational consumer base. Customizing social media messages to align with their fashion tastes, budget sensitivities, and platform preferences can yield better engagement and conversion.

Platform selection should also be treated as a strategic decision rather than a default one. Retailers must assess which platforms their specific audience frequents most and tailor content accordingly. In Mthatha, data-light, mobile-first platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp may offer better access and engagement than more data-intensive platforms. Additionally, optimizing content for low-bandwidth consumption is essential to ensure that messaging is both accessible and impactful.

Another major implication concerns the role of trust and perceived brand credibility. In environments where scepticism about online transactions is prevalent, building consumer trust is a prerequisite for successful conversion. Businesses should adopt transparency-enhancing practices such as showcasing customer reviews, actively responding to online queries, and providing multilingual or culturally familiar content. These elements help create a digital atmosphere of authenticity and reliability.

Finally, a hybrid marketing strategy is recommended for retailers in Mthatha. Digital efforts should be complemented by offline tactics such as in-store QR codes, local event sponsorships, or community-based referral campaigns. This dual approach bridges the gap between online engagement and offline transaction, especially for consumers still developing comfort with e-commerce.

5.3. Recommendations

Based on the findings and practical implications of this research, several actionable recommendations are proposed for both practitioners and policymakers seeking to optimize social media marketing in under-resourced settings.

Foremost, marketers are encouraged to transition from passive, one-way communication to active and interactive engagement. Campaigns should include dynamic elements such as live Q&A sessions, social media polls, and community-driven competitions. These features not only increase visibility but also foster a sense of inclusion and dialogue, which is crucial for driving deeper consumer loyalty in digitally emerging markets.

Another key consideration is the use of hyper-local influencers i.e. individuals who possess authentic credibility within the Mthatha community, can be far more effective than partnering with national celebrities. These micro-influencers offer a more relatable and trusted voice, especially for audiences that prioritize social proof and peer validation in their purchase decisions.

In the same vein, both public and private stakeholders should invest in digital literacy training for consumers. Improving understanding of e-commerce platforms, payment options, and digital security can help reduce hesitancy and increase transactional confidence among users who are new to online shopping.

Furthermore, marketers should experiment with a variety of content formats to determine what best resonates with their audience. Comparative analysis of video-based promotions, meme content, and static imagery may offer nuanced insights into which formats drive higher engagement or purchase intent.

Ultimately, to overcome the persistent challenge of limited connectivity, businesses should integrate low-data tools into their marketing strategies. For example, deploying WhatsApp product catalogues, SMS alerts, and USSD follow-ups can offer inclusive alternatives for consumers who lack access to high-speed internet, thereby expanding digital inclusivity without compromising engagement quality.

6. Future Research Directions

Future studies could broaden the scope by including other demographic groups in Mthatha beyond university students, to improve the generalizability of the findings. A longitudinal approach would be valuable to examine how the influence of social media marketing evolves as internet access and digital literacy improve in the region. Qualitative research such as interviews or focus groups scan also provide deeper insights into consumer attitudes and trust related to online shopping. Additionally, comparative studies between urban and rural areas, as well as analyses of specific social media platforms or content formats (e.g., video vs. static imagery), would further clarify which digital strategies are most effective in different contexts.

References

- Ajzen, I. (1991). *The theory of planned behaviour. Organizational behaviour and human decision processes*, 50(2), 179-211.
- Alalwan, A. A., Rana, N. P., Dwivedi, Y. K., & Algharabat, R. (2017). Social media in marketing: A review and analysis of the existing literature. *Telematics and informatics*, 34(7), 1177-1190.
- Appel, G., Grewal, L., Hadi, R., & Stephen, A. T. (2020). The future of social media in marketing. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 48, 79–95.
- Barari, M. M., Eisend, M., & Jain, S. P. (2025). A meta-analysis of the effectiveness of social media influencers: Mechanisms and moderation. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 1-21.
- Bartlett, J. W., & Frost, C. (2008). Reliability, repeatability and reproducibility: analysis of measurement errors in continuous variables. *Ultrasound in obstetrics & gynecology*, 31(4).
- Beaujean, A. A., & Parker, S. (2020). *Path analysis in personality research*.
- Bowen, G., & Bowen, R. (2019). Brand trust in offline and online environments: Lessons for social media. In *Brand Culture and Identity: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications*. IGI Global Scientific Publishing, 1269-1293.
- Chyrak, I., Koziuk, V., Siskos, E., & Darvidou, K. (2024). Comprehensive framework for social media marketing (smm) strategy for effective business activity. *Socio-economic relations in the digital society*, 4(54), 39-58.
- Coetzee, P. (2013). *Rural retail offers opportunity in Eastern Cape*. Bizcommunity. <https://www.bizcommunity.com/Article/196/460/95352.html>.
- Fatoki, O. (2021). Predicting the Intention to Purchase Electric Vehicles in South Africa. *Journal of Environmental Management and Tourism (JEMT)*, 12(01(49)), 81-96.
- Gaffney, J.A. (2024). Data-driven prediction of scaling and ignition of inertial confinement fusion experiments, discriminant validity. *Physics of Plasmas*, 31(9), 215-220.
- Gomes, M. A., Marques, S., & Dias, Á. (2022). The impact of digital influencers' characteristics on purchase intention of fashion products. *Journal of Global Fashion Marketing*, 13(3), 187-204.

- Johnstone, L., & Lindh, C. (2022). Sustainably sustaining (online) fashion consumption: Using influencers to promote sustainable (un) planned behaviour in Europe's millennials. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 64, 102775.
- Kuncoro, W., & Windyasari, N. A. (2021). Target audience and consumer purchase decisions in online marketing. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 13(2), 55-63.
- Malinga, S. (2024). SA consumers have mixed feelings about social commerce. *ITWeb*. <https://www.itweb.co.za/article/sa-consumers-have-mixed-feelings-about-social-commerce/kYbe9MXby99vAWpG>.
- Morgan, R. M., & Hunt, S. D. (1994). The commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing. *Journal of Marketing*, 58(3), 20-38.
- Ntobela, N., & Mbukanma, I. (2023). Sensory marketing and millennial impulse buying in Mthatha. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 40(5), 521-531.
- Odendaal, N. (2024). South African households have become more connected, yet provincial disparities persist. *Engineering News*. <https://www.engineeringnews.co.za/article/south-african-households-have-become-more-connected-2024-06-14#:~:text=Meanwhile%2C%20of%20the%2078.6,the%20Internet%20at%20a%20library>.
- Statistics South Africa (SSA). (2024). *General Household Survey 2023: Connectivity data*. Pretoria: Stats SA. <https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0318/P03182023.pdf>.
- Zhao, L., Lee, S. H., & Copeland, L. R. (2019). Social media and Chinese consumers' environmentally sustainable apparel purchase intentions. *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics*, 31(4), 855-874.