

How Social Media Marketing Drives Purchase Intention in Fast Fashion: The Distinct Mediating Roles of Brand Trust and Consumer Engagement

Zongyi Zhou^{1, a}, Xuegang Zhan^{1, b, *}

¹Rattanakosin International College of Creative Entrepreneurship, Rajamangala University of Technology Rattanakosin, Nakhon Pathom 73170, Thailand

^azhou.zongyi@rmutr.ac.th, ^bxuegang.zhan@rmutr.ac.th

* Corresponding author

Abstract: While social media marketing (SMM) is widely used by fast fashion brands, the psychological and behavioral mechanisms through which it influences consumers' purchase intention remain underexplored. Based on the stimulus–organism–response (S-O-R) theory, this study constructs a dual-mediation model to examine how three SMM dimensions—content quality, interactivity, and promotional activities—affect purchase intention via brand trust (a cognitive pathway) and consumer engagement (a behavioral pathway). A quantitative survey of 200 fast fashion consumers was analyzed using regression and Sobel tests. Results show that all three SMM dimensions positively affect purchase intention, with interactivity exerting the strongest direct effect. Brand trust partially mediates the effect of interactivity, whereas consumer engagement mediates both interactivity and promotional activities. Notably, content quality does not significantly influence consumer engagement, suggesting it may serve as a baseline expectation rather than an engagement trigger in fast fashion. These findings extend S-O-R theory by differentiating two parallel mediating pathways and offer actionable guidance for fast fashion brands seeking to optimize SMM resource allocation.

Keywords: Social media marketing; purchase intention; brand trust; consumer engagement; fast fashion; S-O-R theory.

1. Introduction

The digital transformation has fundamentally reshaped how fast fashion brands interact with consumers. Social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Xiaohongshu, and Weibo have evolved from mere communication channels into integrated ecosystems where branding, customer interaction, and sales conversion occur simultaneously. For fast fashion giants like Uniqlo, ZARA, H&M, and SHEIN, social media has become a critical battlefield for attracting young consumers, launching products rapidly, and building brand image.

Despite heavy investments, many fast fashion brands struggle with content homogenization, low interaction quality, and unsatisfactory returns. A 2023 industry report noted that while 76% of consumers believe social media interaction affects their purchase decisions, only 34% perceive current brand interactions as “warm and trustworthy.” This gap highlights a pressing need: to understand not merely whether SMM works, but *how* it works—specifically, through which psychological and behavioral pathways SMM shapes purchase intention.

Existing research has largely focused on direct effects or single-mediator models, leaving the relative importance of different mediators unclear. Moreover, the fast fashion context—characterized by rapid trends, visual dominance, and a young user base—has received insufficient theoretical attention. To address these gaps, this study poses the following research question: *How do content quality, interactivity, and promotional activities in SMM influence consumers' purchase intention in fast fashion, and what roles do brand trust and consumer engagement play as mediators?*

Drawing on the S-O-R (Stimulus–Organism–Response)

framework, this study proposes a dual-mediation model in which SMM dimensions serve as external stimuli, brand trust and consumer engagement represent internal organismic states, and purchase intention is the behavioral response. The study has four objectives: (1) to test the direct effects of the three SMM dimensions on purchase intention; (2) to compare their relative influence; (3) to examine the mediating role of brand trust; and (4) to examine the mediating role of consumer engagement.

2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

2.1. The S-O-R Framework in Social Media Marketing

The S-O-R model, originating from environmental psychology, posits that external stimuli (S) trigger internal organismic states (O), which in turn lead to behavioral responses (R). In the context of digital marketing, SMM activities are conceptualized as stimuli that affect consumers' cognitive and affective states (e.g., trust, engagement), ultimately shaping their purchase intentions. This framework has been widely applied in online consumer behavior research, yet few studies have simultaneously compared cognitive versus behavioral pathways within a single model.

2.2. Social Media Marketing Dimensions

Following prior research, this study conceptualizes SMM as a multidimensional construct comprising three key dimensions:

Content quality: the perceived value, reliability, timeliness, and entertainment of brand-generated content.

Interactivity: the timeliness and depth of two-way communication between brand and consumer.

Promotional activities: economic incentives such as discount codes, coupons, and limited-time offers.

These dimensions are not mutually exclusive but represent distinct strategic levers that brands can pull. However, their relative effectiveness in the fast fashion context remains empirically unclear.

2.3. Direct Effects on Purchase Intention

Purchase intention refers to a consumer's subjective likelihood of purchasing a product in the near future. High-quality content can inform and entertain, thereby reducing uncertainty and increasing preference. Interactivity fosters a sense of connection and personalization, which are highly valued by young fast-fashion consumers. Promotional activities provide immediate economic utility, which can trigger impulse purchases. Thus:

H1a: Content quality has a significant positive effect on purchase intention.

H1b: Interactivity has a significant positive effect on purchase intention.

H1c: Promotional activities have a significant positive effect on purchase intention.

2.4. The Mediating Role of Brand Trust (Cognitive Pathway)

Brand trust reflects consumers' confidence in a brand's reliability, integrity, and goodwill. In the fast fashion industry—where product quality consistency is often questioned—trust is a crucial risk-reduction mechanism. When brands provide valuable content and engage in genuine interactions, consumers are more likely to perceive the brand as trustworthy. This trust, in turn, increases purchase intention by lowering perceived risk. Therefore:

H2a, H2b, H2c: Content quality, interactivity, and promotional activities each positively affect brand trust.

H3: Brand trust positively affects purchase intention.

H4: Brand trust mediates the relationship between SMM

dimensions and purchase intention.

2.5. The Mediating Role of Consumer Engagement (Behavioral Pathway)

Consumer engagement goes beyond passive exposure to include active behaviors such as liking, commenting, sharing, and participating in brand-hosted activities. Engaged consumers develop stronger brand relationships and are more likely to convert. Interactivity directly invites participation, while promotional activities (e.g., share-to-win campaigns) can also stimulate engagement. However, content quality alone may not suffice if it lacks interactive or incentive elements. Thus:

H5a, H5b, H5c: Content quality, interactivity, and promotional activities each positively affect consumer engagement.

H6: Consumer engagement positively affects purchase intention.

H7: Consumer engagement mediates the relationship between SMM dimensions and purchase intention.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Sample

A cross-sectional quantitative design was adopted. The target population comprised active social media users who had followed at least one major fast fashion brand (Uniqlo, ZARA, H&M, or SHEIN) in the past six months. Using convenience and snowball sampling, an online questionnaire was distributed via Wenjuanxing. Of 235 responses received, 200 were valid (effective rate: 85.1%), after excluding incomplete or patterned responses.

3.2. Sample Characteristics

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the sample. The sample closely matches the typical fast fashion consumer profile (predominantly young, female, and well-educated), supporting external validity.

Table 1. Sample Demographic Characteristics (N = 200)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	63	31.6
	Female	137	68.4
Age	Under 18	8	5.1
	18–25	108	53.8
	26–30	56	28.2
	31 and above	28	12.9
Education	High school or below	15	7.7
	Associate degree	15	7.7
Variable	Bachelor's degree	123	61.5
	Master's or above	47	23.1

3.3. Measurements

All constructs were measured using established scales adapted to the fast fashion context, rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Content quality (4 items): e.g., "The brand's content provides valuable fashion information."

Interactivity (4 items): e.g., "The brand actively replies to my comments or private messages."

Promotional activities (4 items): e.g., "The brand often provides exclusive discount codes on social media."

Brand trust (4 items): adapted from Hanaysha (2022).

Consumer engagement (4 items): adapted from Chu & Kim (2011).

Purchase intention (3 items): e.g., "I am likely to purchase from this brand in the near future."

Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's α . All α values exceeded 0.85 (content quality: 0.89; interactivity: 0.91; promotional activities: 0.85; brand trust: 0.88; consumer engagement: 0.87; purchase intention: 0.90), indicating excellent internal consistency. The KMO value was 0.87, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2 = 1246.32$, $p <$

0.001). Factor loadings all exceeded 0.60, confirming structural validity.

3.4. Data Analysis

SPSS 26.0 was used for analysis. The analytical procedure involved: (1) Pearson correlation analysis; (2) multiple regression for direct effects; and (3) Baron and Kenny's stepwise mediation analysis with Sobel tests for indirect effects.

4. Results

4.1. Correlation Analysis

Table 2 presents the Pearson correlation matrix. All SMM dimensions correlate significantly with brand trust, consumer engagement, and purchase intention ($p < 0.01$). Interactivity shows the strongest correlation with purchase intention ($r = 0.782$), followed by content quality ($r = 0.645$) and promotional activities ($r = 0.623$).

Table 2. Pearson Correlation Matrix (N = 200)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Content quality	1					
2. Interactivity	0.612**	1				
3. Promotional activ	0.534**	0.581**	1			
4. Brand trust	0.663**	0.721**	0.598**	1		
5. Consumer engagement	0.587**	0.749**	0.645**	0.672**	1	
6. Purchase intention	0.645**	0.782**	0.623**	0.701**	0.735**	1

Note: $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed)

4.2. Direct Effects

Table 3 shows the multiple regression results for direct effects of SMM dimensions on purchase intention. The model

is significant ($F = 93.20$, $p < 0.001$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.57$). All three dimensions positively affect purchase intention, with interactivity having the strongest effect ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, H1a, H1b, and H1c are supported.

Table 3. Direct Effects of SMM Dimensions on Purchase Intention

Variable	β	t-value	p-value
Content quality	0.28	4.77	<0.001
Interactivity	0.48	8.19	<0.001
Promotional activities	0.19	3.57	0.001

Model: $F = 93.20$, $p < 0.001$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.57$

4.3. Mediation Effects

Following Baron and Kenny's stepwise approach, we first tested the effects of SMM dimensions on the mediators (Table 4). All three dimensions significantly affect brand trust (H2a–

H2c supported). For consumer engagement, interactivity ($\beta = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$) and promotional activities ($\beta = 0.31$, $p = 0.002$) have significant effects, but content quality does not ($\beta = 0.15$, $p = 0.076$). Thus H5b and H5c are supported, while H5a is rejected.

Table 4. Effects of SMM Dimensions on Mediators

Independent variable	Dependent: Brand trust		Dependent: Consumer engagement	
	β	p-value	β	p-value
Content quality	0.35	<0.001	0.15	0.076
Interactivity	0.42	<0.000	0.52	<0.001
Promotional activities	0.21	0.008	0.31	0.002

Next, we regressed purchase intention on the mediators while controlling for SMM dimensions (Table 5). Both brand trust ($\beta = 0.26$, $p < 0.001$) and consumer engagement ($\beta =$

0.39, $p < 0.001$) positively affect purchase intention, supporting H3 and H6.

Table 5. Effects of Mediators on Purchase Intention (controlling for SMM)

Variable	β	t-value	p-value
Content quality	0.12	2.16	0.032
Interactivity	0.25	4.45	<0.001
Promotional activities	0.08	1.15	0.133
Brand trust	0.26	4.66	<0.001
Consumer engagement	0.39	6.19	<0.001

Model: $F = 72.15$, $p < 0.001$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.64$.

Finally, Sobel tests (Table 6) confirmed that brand trust partially mediates the “interactivity → purchase intention” path ($Z = 4.62$, $p < 0.001$). Consumer engagement mediates both the “interactivity → purchase intention” ($Z = 5.52$, $p < 0.001$) and “promotional activities → purchase intention” (Z

$= 4.27$, $p < 0.001$) paths. Thus H4 and H7 are partially supported. Notably, the direct effect of promotional activities becomes non-significant after including mediators, indicating full mediation through consumer engagement.

Table 6. Sobel Tests for Indirect Effects

Path	Sobel Z	p
Interactivity → Brand Trust → Purchase Intention	4.62	<0.001
Interactivity → Consumer Engagement → Purchase Intention	5.52	<0.001
Promotional Activities → Consumer Engagement → Purchase Intention	4.27	<0.001

4.4. Summary of Hypothesis Tests

Table 7. Summary of Hypothesis Test Results

Hypothesis	Content	Result
H1a	Content quality → Purchase intention (+)	Supported
H1b	Interactivity → Purchase intention (+)	Supported
H1c	Promotional activities → Purchase intention (+)	Supported
H2a	Content quality → Brand trust (+)	Supported
H2b	Interactivity → Brand trust (+)	Supported
H2c	Promotional activities → Brand trust (+)	Supported
H3	Brand trust → Purchase intention (+)	Supported
H4	Content quality → Consumer engagement (+)	Partially supported
H5a	Interactivity → Consumer engagement (+)	Not supported
H5b	Interactivity → Consumer engagement (+)	Supported
H5c	Promotional activities → Consumer engagement (+)	Supported
H6	Consumer engagement → Purchase intention (+)	Supported
H7	Consumer engagement mediates	Partially supported

5. Discussion

5.1. Key Findings and Interpretation

This study yields three main findings. First, among the three SMM dimensions, interactivity is the strongest direct predictor of purchase intention in fast fashion. This suggests that young consumers value authentic, responsive dialogue over one-way content transactional promotions. Second, brand trust and consumer engagement function as distinct mediating mechanisms: trust is primarily built through interactivity, whereas engagement is activated by both interactivity and promotions. Third, content quality does not significantly drive consumer engagement—a non-finding that is theoretically meaningful. In the fast fashion context, where high-quality visuals and trendy copy are the norm, consumers may have come to expect polished content as a baseline. Only when content is paired with interaction or incentives does it translate into active participation.

5.2. Theoretical Contributions

This study makes three theoretical contributions. First, it extends S-O-R theory by empirically separating cognitive (brand trust) and behavioral (consumer engagement) pathways within a single model, showing that different SMM dimensions activate different organismic responses. Second, it challenges the assumption that content quality uniformly drives all forms of consumer response; in high-stimulation environments like fast fashion, content quality may be necessary but not sufficient for engagement. Third, it clarifies the role of promotional activities beyond economic utility—their main influence on purchase intention operates indirectly through encouraging participation, supporting a relationship-based view of promotions.

5.3. Practical Implications

For fast fashion managers, the results suggest a strategic

reorientation. First, investment priorities should shift from content production to interaction capability: faster reply times, community management, and co-creation activities. Second, a dual-path strategy is recommended: build brand trust through consistent, transparent communication, while simultaneously designing engaging campaigns (e.g., challenges, UGC contests) that reward participation. Third, performance metrics should include not only sales but also trust indicators (e.g., NPS) and engagement metrics (e.g., share rates, comment quality) to capture long-term value.

6. Conclusion, Limitations, and Future Research

This study demonstrates that SMM affects fast-fashion consumers' purchase intention through two distinct pathways: brand trust (cognitive) and consumer engagement (behavioral). Interactivity is the most powerful dimension, whereas content quality alone does not drive engagement.

However, several limitations must be acknowledged. The sample ($N = 200$) was obtained through non-probability sampling, limiting generalizability. The cross-sectional design precludes strong causal inference. The non-significant effect of content quality on engagement, while intriguing, requires replication with refined measures that distinguish between informational, emotional, and social-value dimensions of content.

Future research should employ longitudinal or experimental designs to establish causality, test the model across different cultural contexts, and examine potential

moderators such as brand familiarity or product involvement. Additionally, deeper qualitative inquiry could explore why content quality fails to spur engagement in fast fashion—whether due to consumer fatigue, platform algorithms, or shifting content expectations.

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