

Social Media Marketing Dimensions, Brand Trust, and Smartphone Purchase Decisions: Evidence from an Emerging Digital Market in Malawi

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Abstract

This research examines how key social media marketing dimensions — information quality, content credibility, social proof, content relevance, and user engagement — influence brand trust and smartphone purchase decisions. While social media's marketing role is well recognised, companies lack solid evidence on which content features drive consumer trust and choices, particularly in developing markets, where prior studies remain scarce. Using a quantitative approach, data were collected via structured questionnaire from 403 smartphone users in Malawi and analysed through PLS-SEM. Results show that Social Proof significantly enhances Brand Trust ($\beta = 0.367$, $p < 0.001$), and Brand Trust strongly predicts Purchase Decision ($\beta = 0.420$, $p < 0.001$). Content Credibility, however, does not significantly affect Brand Trust ($\beta = 0.021$, $p = 0.690$), though it directly influences Purchase Decision. Brand Trust mediates the relationship between most social media marketing dimensions and Purchase Decision, except for Content Credibility. The study contributes to the limited literature on emerging African markets and clarifies the distinct roles of social media marketing dimensions, positioning Brand Trust as a central mediating mechanism. Findings highlight that trust alone is insufficient without relevant, engaging, customer-centric content. Firms in similar contexts should prioritise interactive and educational social media strategies to build consumer trust and drive purchase decisions.

KEYWORDS

Social media marketing, smartphone sector, purchasing behaviour, Brand trust, information quality, user engagement

Introduction

Rapid advances in information and communication technologies have transformed marketing from a predominantly one-way communication process into an interactive and digitally mediated exchange between firms and consumers (Lima et al., 2024). Social media platforms have become important spaces through which brands share information, interact with consumers, and influence purchasing behaviour, while user-generated content and peer interactions increasingly shape how marketing messages are interpreted (Balakrishnan et al., 2014; Mandagi & Aseng, 2021; Sijabat et al., 2023). The widespread use of smartphones has further strengthened the importance of social media as a source of product information, brand comparison, and risk assessment, particularly for high-involvement products such as smartphones (Chatterjee et al., 2021; McClure & Seock, 2020).

The Malawian context makes this relationship particularly relevant. Digital adoption is expanding, yet access and usage remain uneven. In 2024, Malawi

had approximately 5.86 million internet users, 1.30 million social media user identities, and 11.77 million mobile connections. More recent evidence indicates that, despite expanding mobile broadband coverage, smartphone adoption remains relatively low and a substantial usage gap persists, partly because of affordability and digital skills barriers. Consequently, Malawian consumers increasingly encounter smartphone-related information and social influence through digital platforms, while simultaneously operating in a market characterised by affordability constraints, uneven digital access, and potentially heightened perceptions of risk and uncertainty. These contextual conditions make it important to understand which social media marketing characteristics foster trust and translate into smartphone purchasing decisions.

This research is based on three complementary theoretical perspectives: the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), the Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM) (Chaiken, 1980; Chaiken et al., 1989), and Trust Theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). S-O-R provides the overarching behavioural mechanism by explaining how external marketing stimuli influence consumers' internal psychological states, which subsequently shape behavioural responses. In this study, content credibility, social proof, content relevance, information quality, and user engagement constitute the stimuli; brand trust represents the organism; and smartphone purchasing behaviour represents the response.

While S-O-R explains the general sequence through which social media stimuli affect behaviour, it does not fully explain how consumers cognitively evaluate different forms of social media content. HSM therefore complements S-O-R by explaining how consumers process persuasive information through heuristic and systematic routes. Information quality may encourage systematic processing, whereas cues such as social proof, content relevance, credibility, and engagement may facilitate heuristic judgements, particularly in information-rich social media environments.

Trust Theory further strengthens the framework by explaining how trust reduces perceived uncertainty and risk during purchase decision-making. Although the relationships among social media marketing, trust, and consumer behaviour have received considerable scholarly attention, limited research has simultaneously examined multiple dimensions of social media marketing within emerging Sub-Saharan African markets. In addition, little attention has been given to understanding whether all social media marketing dimensions influence purchasing behaviour through brand trust in the same way. This study therefore extends existing literature by investigating the differential effects of content credibility, social proof, content relevance, information quality, and user engagement on brand trust and smartphone purchasing behaviour, while assessing the mediating role of brand trust in a developing-market context.

While considerable research has examined social media marketing, brand trust, and consumer behaviour, these relationships have often been investigated separately or primarily in developed economies. Research has also rarely examined whether different social media marketing dimensions influence purchasing behaviour directly or whether their effects operate primarily through brand trust

(Arjun et al., 2021; Buzgău & Cosma, 2024; M. L. Cheung et al., 2021).

Accordingly, the research gap is threefold: empirically, there is limited evidence comparing the effects of specific social media marketing dimensions and examining their direct and mediated relationships with purchasing behaviour; contextually, limited evidence explains these relationships in Malawi's developing digital environment, characterised by growing social media use but uneven smartphone and mobile internet adoption; and theoretically, existing studies rarely integrate S-O-R, HSM, and Trust Theory to explain both the processing of social media cues and the trust-based mechanisms through which they influence consumer purchasing behaviour.

The research therefore investigates how social media marketing influences brand trust and consumer purchasing behaviour in the smartphone industry. The research aims to achieve three research objectives: RO1. To analyse the effects of content credibility, social proof, content relevance, information quality, and user engagement on brand trust and purchase decisions. RO2. To assess the influence of brand trust on consumers' smartphone purchase decisions; and RO3. To evaluate whether brand trust mediates the relationship between social media marketing dimensions and purchasing behaviour. By integrating the three theoretical perspectives, the study explains not only how social media marketing characteristics function as external stimuli, but also how consumers process these cues and how trust translates these evaluations into purchasing behaviour.

Related works

Social Media Marketing and Smartphone Purchase Decisions

Social media marketing (SMM) has emerged as a vital element affecting consumer buying choices by moulding brand images, enabling information sharing, and enhancing brand-consumer connections (Warbung et al., 2023; Waworuntu et al., 2022). In contrast to conventional shopping settings, consumers are progressively depending on social media content, reviews, and online interactions as informational cues when assessing products, especially high-involvement items like smartphones because of their expense, complexity, and swift technological advancements (Lourenço et al., 2022). Essential SMM characteristics, such as the quality of information, relevance of content, user engagement, interactivity, and social proof, improve consumers' skills in evaluating options and minimizing uncertainty in purchasing decisions (Heim et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2019).

Brand trust serves a crucial mediating function in this process by enhancing confidence, lowering perceived risk, and affecting consumers' readiness to buy in digital settings where direct assessment of products is restricted (Trivedi & Malik, 2022). SMM initiatives foster trust through reliable content, significant interactions, and social endorsement, which in turn influences smartphone buying choices (Gkikas et al., 2022; Y. Liu et al., 2022). While earlier studies acknowledge the significance of SMM in consumer behaviour, there is insufficient research investigating how particular social media marketing components affect smartphone purchasing choices via brand trust, especially in emerging markets. This research explores this gap by examining the impact of social proof, quality of information, user engagement, and relevance of content on brand trust and smartphone purchasing choices.

Hypotheses development and conceptual model

Content credibility

Content credibility refers to the extent to which

consumers perceive social media marketing messages as reliable, accurate, and believable. In social media environments, consumers often assess information quality and source trustworthiness before forming attitudes toward brands (Oliveira et al., 2020). Credible content helps reduce uncertainty and supports informed decision-making. Prior studies suggest that trustworthy and authentic social media communications enhance perceptions of brand reliability and integrity, particularly when messages originate from influencers or peers (Mohd Thas Thaker et al., 2020). Credible online information has also been linked to greater consumer confidence in brands (H. Liu et al., 2021). Furthermore, for high-involvement products such as smartphones, consumers rely on credible information to reduce perceived financial and performance risks, thereby increasing decision confidence and purchase likelihood (Lourenço et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2019). Based on the foregoing literature, credible social media content is expected to enhance brand trust. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1a: Content credibility dimension of social media marketing has a positive impact on brand trust.

H1b: Content credibility dimension of social media marketing has a positive impact on smartphone purchase decision.

Social proof

Social proof refers to social media cues such as likes, reviews, comments, shares, and endorsements that consumers use to evaluate brands and products (Bilgin & Kethüda, 2022). In information-rich social media environments, consumers often rely on the opinions and experiences of others to guide decision-making (Oliveira et al., 2020).

Previous studies suggest that positive reviews, peer recommendations, and influencer endorsements can enhance perceptions of brand legitimacy and reliability while reducing uncertainty and perceived risk (Sijabat et al., 2022). Social proof has also been found to influence purchase decisions, particularly for high-involvement products such as smartphones, where consumers seek validation before committing to a purchase.

Despite its importance, limited research has examined the influence of social proof on brand trust and consumer behaviour in developing-market contexts. Based on the foregoing literature, social proof is expected to enhance brand trust. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed.

H2a: Social proof dimension of social media marketing has a positive impact on brand trust.

H2b: Social proof dimension of social media marketing has a positive impact on smartphone purchase decision.

Content relevance

Content relevance pertains to how well social media marketing messages match consumers' individual needs, interests, and decision-making contexts (Devereux et al., 2020). In algorithm-driven social media settings, relevance significantly impacts content visibility and user interaction, establishing it as an essential measure for assessing brand value and purpose. Relevance content indicates customer focus and informational worth, thus enhancing brand trust, especially when consumers find the message timely, personalized, and in harmony with their buying objectives (Liu et al., 2022). This position is

particularly crucial in developing markets, where consumers depend on social media as their main information source and are more responsive to irrelevance or intrusive messaging (Walean et al., 2024). Although it is significant, content relevance is frequently overlooked as a separate concept in social media marketing studies, hindering insight into its specific role in trust and purchase results in developing social media markets (Sijabat et al., 2022). Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3a: Content relevance dimension of social media marketing has a positive impact on brand trust.

H3b: Content relevance dimension of social media marketing has a positive impact on smartphone purchase decision.

Information quality

Information quality refers to the extent to which social media content is perceived as accurate, reliable, relevant, and useful for decision-making (Walean, Pongoh, & Mandagi, 2024). In social media environments characterized by information overload and limited verification, consumers often rely on the quality of available information to evaluate products and reduce uncertainty, particularly for high-involvement products such as smartphones (Liu et al., 2022). Studies indicate that clear, reliable, and useful content can enhance consumers' confidence in their judgments and contribute to more favourable evaluations of brands (Liu et al., 2022). Moreover, comprehensive and trustworthy product information has been shown to reduce perceived risk and support purchase decision-making, especially in developing markets where social media frequently serves as a key source of product information (Kitsios et al., 2022).

Despite its importance, information quality is often examined as part of broader social media marketing constructs, leaving its specific role in trust formation less clearly understood. Given its ability to reduce uncertainty and strengthen positive brand evaluations, consumers who perceive social media content as high in quality are likely to develop greater trust in the brand. Based on the above discussion, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H4a: Information quality dimension of social media marketing has a positive impact on brand trust.

H4b: Information quality dimension of social media marketing has a positive impact on smartphone purchase decision.

User engagement

User engagement denotes the degree to which consumers actively participate with brand-related material on social media by performing activities like liking, commenting, sharing, and direct interaction (Hafez, 2021). In social media platforms powered by algorithms, engagement indicates consumer interest while also increasing content visibility, thus broadening the reach and impact of marketing messages (Cheung, Pires & Rosenberger, 2020). Consequently, user engagement serves as an essential behavioural mechanism by which social media marketing converts exposure into relational and decision-making results (Sijabat et al., 2022). Zafar et al., (2021) indicate that user involvement significantly influences smartphone buying choices. Smartphones, being high involvement products, need assurance in brand reliability and after-sale assistance, which involved consumers often build through more thorough information analysis and interactive communication (Bilgin & Kethüda, 2022).

Nonetheless, current studies frequently consider engagement as a result instead of a strategic influencer (Cheung, Pires & Rosenberger, 2020). To fill this gap, the

current research identifies user engagement as a fundamental aspect of social media marketing that directly and indirectly affects Brand Trust and smartphone purchasing choices in developing social media markets. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H5a: User engagement dimension of social media marketing has a positive impact on brand trust.

H5b: User engagement dimension of social media marketing has a positive impact on smartphone purchase decision.

Brand trust

Brand trust refers to consumers' confidence in a brand's reliability, honesty, and ability to deliver its promised value (Bilgin & Kethüda, 2022). In digital and social media environments, consumers often face information asymmetry and limited opportunities to physically evaluate products before purchase. Consequently, trust becomes an important mechanism for reducing perceived risk and uncertainty, particularly for high-involvement products such as smartphones (Devereux, Grimmer, & Grimmer, 2020). Existing research suggests that social media marketing characteristics, including content relevance, information quality, social proof, and interactivity, influence consumers' perceptions of a brand's competence, authenticity, and responsiveness (Hafez, 2021).

Through these signals, consumers form judgments about whether a brand can be relied upon to meet their expectations. As trust develops, consumers become more confident in their purchase decisions and are more likely to engage in favourable behavioural outcomes. Previous studies therefore identify brand trust as an important mechanism linking social media marketing activities to consumer behaviour (Bilgin & Kethüda, 2022). Accordingly, this study conceptualises brand trust as a mediating construct through which social media marketing factors influence smartphone purchase decisions in developing social media markets. Based on the above discussion, the following hypothesis are proposed:

H6: Brand trust has positive impact on smartphone purchase decision

H7 Brand Trust mediates the relationship between Content Credibility and Purchase Decision.

H8 Brand Trust mediates the relationship between Content Relevance and Purchase Decision.

H9 Brand Trust mediates the relationship between Information Quality and Purchase Decision.

H10 Brand Trust mediates the relationship between Social Proof and Purchase Decision.

H11 Brand Trust mediates the relationship between User Engagement and Purchase Decision.

Figure 1 depicts the conceptual framework of the research, created after formulating hypotheses and designed for empirical evaluation.

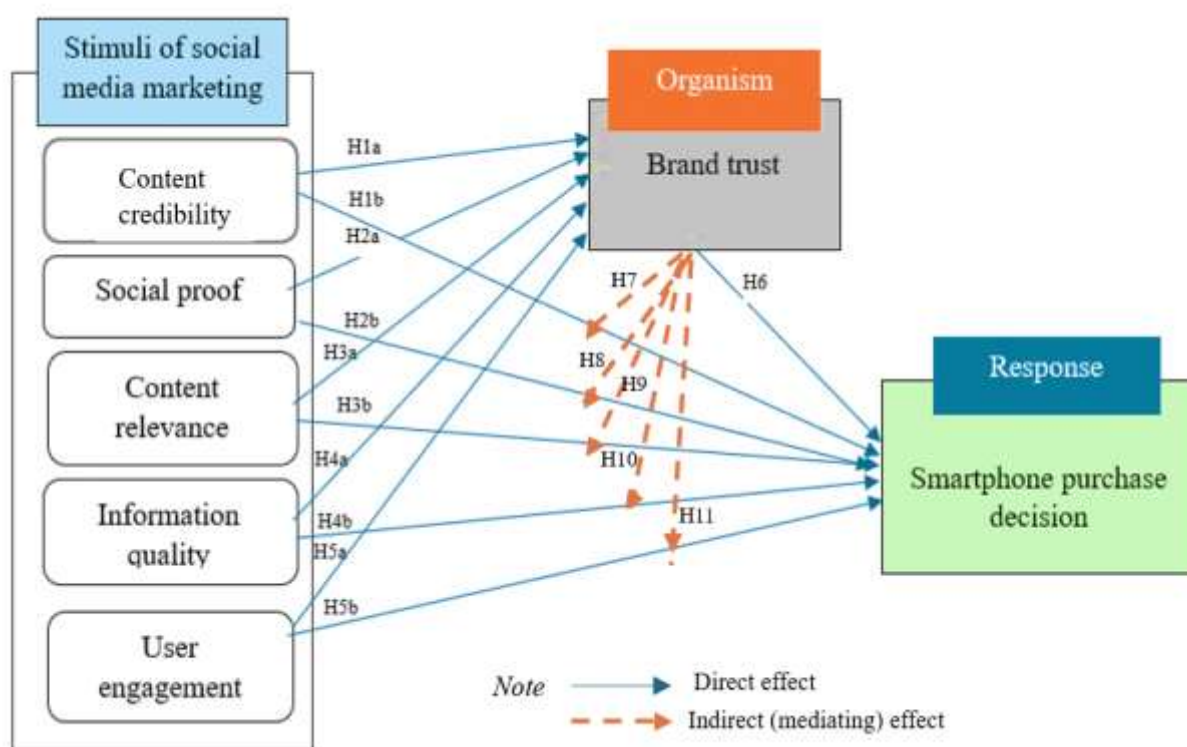


Figure 1. Conceptual model

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to examine the relationships between social media marketing dimensions, brand trust, and smartphone purchasing behaviour in Malawi. A quantitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to measure predefined constructs and empirically test hypothesised relationships among them using statistical techniques, particularly Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) (J. Hair & Alamer, 2022). PLS-SEM was selected over CB-SEM because the study's primary objective is prediction and explaining variance in smartphone purchase decisions rather than strict theory confirmation. The model includes multiple constructs and mediation effects, making PLS-SEM suitable for analysing complex relationships while maximizing the predictive power of endogenous variables. Additionally, PLS-SEM is less restrictive regarding data distribution assumptions and is widely recommended for exploratory and predictive research contexts (J. F. Hair et al., 2022).

The cross-sectional design enabled data to be collected from eligible respondents at a single point in time, providing a snapshot of consumers' perceptions and purchasing behaviour. The study adopted a descriptive and explanatory orientation, as it described respondents' perceptions of social media marketing while also examining the relationships among social media marketing dimensions, brand trust, and smartphone purchasing behaviour.

Population and Sample/Informants

The target population comprised social media users in Malawi who had purchased a smartphone or were considering purchasing one. In 2024, Malawi had approximately 5.86 million internet users, 1.30 million social media user identities, and 11.77 million mobile connections, indicating a substantial and digitally connected population from which the study respondents could be drawn. However, because a complete and reliable sampling frame specifically identifying smartphone users in Malawi was unavailable, the target population was treated as large and indeterminate. Data were collected through an online self-administered survey, and participants were selected using convenience sampling based on their accessibility and willingness to participate. A total of 403 valid responses were obtained.

The sample size was calculated using Cochran's (1977) formula designed for estimating sample size for large or unspecified populations:

$$n_0 = \frac{Z^2 pq}{e^2}$$

where n_0 is the required sample size, Z is the standard normal variate at a 95% confidence level (1.96), p is the estimated proportion of the population (0.5), q is $1-p$ (0.5), and e is the margin of error (0.05).

Substituting these values into the formula:

$$n_0 = \frac{(1.96)^2 (0.5)(0.5)}{(0.05)^2}$$

$$n_0 = 384.16 = 385$$

Thus, the minimum required sample size was approximately 385 participants. The study obtained 403 valid responses, exceeding the minimum requirement. The final sample also exceeded the recommended minimum sample sizes commonly used in Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), supporting adequate statistical power and reliable parameter estimation (Hair et al., 2022).

Measurement Instruments

Data were collected using a structured, self-administered online questionnaire. The instrument measured the social media marketing dimensions of content credibility, social proof, content relevance, information quality, and user engagement, together with brand trust and smartphone purchasing behaviour. Measurement items were assessed using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Likert-type scales are widely used in quantitative research to measure respondents' perceptions, attitudes, and behavioural intentions in a structured and comparable manner (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

The questionnaire was pilot tested before the main data collection to assess the clarity, relevance, and comprehensibility of the measurement items. Feedback from the pilot test was used to refine ambiguous or unclear items and improve the overall quality of the instrument. Minor adjustments were therefore made before the final questionnaire was administered, supporting the reliability and validity of the measurement instrument (Hair et al., 2022).

Common Method Bias

Given that the study employed a single-source, self-administered questionnaire to collect data, the potential for common method bias (CMB) was carefully assessed (Hair et al., 2022). To mitigate the risk of method-related bias, several procedural remedies were implemented during the questionnaire design and data collection stages. These included assuring respondents of anonymity and confidentiality, using clear and concise questionnaire items, avoiding ambiguous or leading questions, and organizing the questionnaire in a logical and systematic manner to reduce evaluation apprehension and response pattern tendencies (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

Data Collection

Data were collected using a structured online self-administered questionnaire developed in Google Forms. The target population comprised social media users in Malawi who had either previously purchased a smartphone or were actively considering purchasing one. The online survey approach was deemed appropriate because it enabled efficient access to geographically dispersed respondents and facilitated the collection of data from individuals who actively engage with digital platforms.

Prior to data collection, potential respondents were provided with an information and consent letter explaining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the estimated completion time, and assurances regarding confidentiality and anonymity. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and respondents were informed that they could withdraw from the survey at any stage without penalty. Consent was obtained electronically before respondents could proceed to complete the questionnaire.

The survey link was distributed through email and various online channels, including social media platforms and professional networks, to reach eligible participants. Respondents were encouraged to share the survey within their networks to increase participation among smartphone users and prospective smartphone buyers. No personally identifiable information was collected, and all responses were treated with strict confidentiality and used solely for academic research purposes.

Data collection was conducted for four(4) months (January-April 2026) period, during which completed responses were monitored and screened for completeness.

and eligibility. After data cleaning and the removal of incomplete or invalid submissions, a total of 403 valid responses were retained for subsequent statistical analyses, including descriptive analysis, measurement model evaluation, and hypothesis testing. The final sample exceeded the minimum sample size requirements for Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM), thereby providing adequate statistical power for the study. (Hair et al., 2022).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the appropriate Research Ethics Committee (Reference [Table 1. Measurement instrument tool](#))

Number: 2025/019/032) prior to data collection. Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained electronically from all respondents before they completed the questionnaire. Participants were provided with information regarding the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidential handling of their responses. To protect participants' privacy, anonymity and confidentiality were assured throughout the research process. No personally identifiable information was collected, and all data were used solely for academic purposes. The results are reported in aggregate form to prevent the identification of individual respondents.

Construct	Item	Measurement Statement	Cronbach's alpha	Adapted Author(s)
Brand Trust	BT1	I trust smartphone brands that consistently deliver quality products.	0.871	Delgado-Ballester, (2004)
	BT2	I believe reputable smartphone brands are more likely to meet my expectations.		
	BT3	I feel confident purchasing smartphones from brands with a positive reputation.		
	BT4	I consider brand trust an important factor when choosing a smartphone.		
	BT5	I prefer smartphone brands that I perceive as reliable and dependable.		
Content Credibility	CC1	I trust smartphone-related content that appears accurate and factual.	0.813	Ohanian, (1990)
	CC2	Smartphone reviews from credible sources influence my purchasing decisions.		
	CC3	I am more likely to consider smartphones recommended by trusted content creators.		
	CC4	The credibility of online information affects my evaluation of smartphone brands.		
	CC5	I verify smartphone information before making a purchase decision.		
Content Relevance	CR1	Smartphone content shown on my social media feeds is relevant to my interests.	0.696	Xu et al., (2009)
	CR2	I pay more attention to smartphone advertisements that match my needs.		
	CR3	Relevant smartphone information helps me compare available options.		
	CR4	Personalized smartphone recommendations are useful in my decision-making process.		
	CR5	I am more likely to consider smartphones displayed in content related to my preferences.		
Information Quality	IQ1	Detailed smartphone information helps me make better purchase decisions.	0.847	McKinney et al., (2002)
	IQ2	I prefer smartphone content that provides complete product specifications.		
	IQ3	Accurate information about smartphone features increases my confidence in a purchase.		
	IQ4	Up-to-date smartphone information is important when evaluating alternatives.		
	IQ5	High-quality information makes smartphone advertisements more persuasive.		
Social Proof	SP1	Positive customer reviews influence my smartphone purchase decisions.	0.803	C. M. K. Cheung & Thadani, (2012)
	SP2	I am more likely to purchase a smartphone that has received high ratings from users.		
	SP3	Recommendations from friends and family affect my smartphone choices.		
	SP4	User testimonials increase my confidence in a smartphone brand.		
	SP5	Seeing many people endorse a smartphone makes me more willing to consider it.		
User Engagement	UE1	I frequently interact with smartphone-related content on social media platforms.	0.841	Hollebeek et al., (2014)
	UE2	I like, comment on, or share smartphone posts that interest me.		
	UE3	I follow smartphone brands or technology influencers online.		
	UE4	I actively seek information about smartphones through digital platforms.		

Construct	Item	Measurement Statement	Cronbach's alpha	Adapted Author(s)
Purchase Decisions (Dependent Variable)	UE5	My engagement with smartphone content influences my smartphone preferences.	0.888	Dodds et al., (1991)
	PD1	I intend to purchase a smartphone that best meets my needs and preferences.		
	PD2	Information obtained online significantly influences my smartphone purchase decisions.		
	PD3	I carefully evaluate different smartphone options before making a purchase.		
	PD4	I am likely to purchase a smartphone that receives positive online feedback.		
	PD5	The content I encounter online affects which smartphone brand I choose.		
	PD6	I feel confident in my final smartphone purchase decision after reviewing online information.		

Result and Discussion

Prior to analysis, the data were screened for missing values, outliers, and response inconsistencies. No significant data quality issues were identified. Data analysis was conducted using SmartPLS-SEM version 4.1.1.8. While Cochran's formula was used to determine the minimum survey sample size, sample adequacy was further supported by established PLS-SEM sample size guidelines. The analysis followed a two-step PLS-SEM approach involving assessment of the measurement model and structural model. The significance of direct and indirect relationships was evaluated using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals. Path coefficients, t-values, p-values, and mediation effects were then examined to test the study hypotheses (Hair et al.2022).

Demographic characteristics of respondents

The demographic characteristics of respondents offer significant context for grasping the sample makeup and analysing the study results. Factors like gender, age, education, work experience, and socio-economic traits assist in recognizing patterns and possible impacts on the primary constructs. Analysing demographic factors further boosts the credibility and generalizability of the study by showing the diversity and representativeness of the sample (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

The demographic characteristics of the respondents are presented in [Table 2](#). Female respondents constituted 55.83% of the sample, while males accounted for 44.17%.

The largest age group was 18-30 years (30.52%), followed by 31-40 years (26.05%), 41-50 years (19.60%), 51-60 years (17.37%), and 61-65 years (6.45%). Regarding education, 40.94% of respondents had postgraduate qualifications, while 26.80% held a university degree and 26.80% a college/university diploma. Respondents with a high school education accounted for 5.46% of the sample. In terms of occupation, students represented the largest group (43.18%), followed by unemployed respondents (22.08%), other occupations (18.61%), and employed respondents (16.13%). With respect to social media experience, 65.01% of respondents had used social media platforms for more than five years, 27.05% had used them for between one and five years, and 7.94% had used them for less than one year. These demographic characteristics provide contextual information about the study sample.

Evaluation of Measurement Model

Factor loadings, a Cronbach Alpha, Composite reliability, and average variance

[Table 1](#) displays the outcomes of the measurement model evaluation, featuring indicator loadings along with essential reliability and validity metrics for all latent constructs. [Table 1](#) presents factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (ρ_a and ρ_c), and average variance extracted (AVE), which were utilized to assess indicator reliability, internal consistency, and convergent validity.

Factor loadings indicate the degree of association between an observable indicator and its underlying latent variable, calculated as the standardized correlation between the indicator and the variable.

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of respondents

Demographic	Sample Characteristics	Frequency	(%)
Gender	Male	178	44.17
	Female	225	55.83
Age group	18-30	123	30.52
	31-40	105	26.05
	41-50	79	19.60
	51-60	70	17.37
	61-65	26	6.45
Level of Education	High school	22	5.46
	College/University Diploma	108	26.80
	University Degree	108	26.80
	Postgraduate	165	40.94
Occupation	Student	174	43.18
	Un employed	89	22.08
	Employed	65	16.13
	Other	75	18.61
	Less than 1 year	32	7.94

Use of social media platforms	1 year to 5years	109	27,05
	5 years and above	262	65,01

Table 3. Factor loadings, a Cronbach Alpha, Composite reliability, and average variance

Variable	Item	Outer loadings	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Brand trust			0.871	0.874	0.907	0.661
	BT1	0.767				
	BT2	0.811				
	BT3	0.841				
	BT4	0.779				
	BT5	0.863				
Content credibility			0.813	0.824	0.868	0.568
	CC1	0.732				
	CC2	0.740				
	CC3	0.724				
	CC4	0.801				
	CC5	0.770				
Content relevance			0.696	0.700	0.814	0.524
	CR1	0.705				
	CR2	0.775				
	CR4	0.708				
	CR5	0.703				
Information quality			0.847	0.847	0.907	0.765
	IQ1	0.885				
	IQ2	0.882				
	IQ3	0.857				
Purchase decision			0.788	0.789	0.855	0.541
	PD1	0.755				
	PD2	0.800				
	PD3	0.722				
	PD5	0.701				
	PD6	0.696				
Social proof			0.803	0.807	0.871	0.629
	SP1	0.764				
	SP2	0.835				
	SP3	0.761				
	SP4	0.809				
User engagement			0.841	0.850	0.887	0.613
	UE1	0.836				
	UE2	0.795				
	UE3	0.698				
	UE4	0.810				
	UE5	0.769				

Loadings of 0.70 or greater suggest that the indicator sufficiently clarifies the construct (Hair et al., 2022). Cronbach's alpha (α) was utilized to evaluate the reliability of internal consistency and is computed as:

$$\alpha = \frac{k}{k-1} \left(1 - \frac{\sum \sigma_i^2}{\sigma_t^2} \right)$$

where k is the number of items, σ_i^2 is the variance of each item, and σ_t^2 is the variance of the total scale score. Values above 0.70 indicate acceptable reliability. Composite Reliability (CR) was employed because it accounts for the different loadings of indicators and is calculated as:

$$CR = \frac{(\sum \lambda_i)^2}{(\sum \lambda_i)^2 + \sum (1 - \lambda_i^2)}$$

where λ_i represents the standardized factor loading of each indicator. Composite reliability values above 0.70 demonstrate satisfactory internal consistency (Hair et al., 2022).

Average Variance Extracted (AVE) was used to assess

convergent validity and is calculated as:

$$AVE = \frac{\sum \lambda_i^2}{n}$$

where λ_i^2 represents the squared standardized loading for each indicator and n denotes the total number of indicators. An AVE value of 0.50 or greater signifies that the construct accounts for over 50% of the variance in its indicators, thus affirming sufficient convergent validity. Collectively, these actions offer the empirical foundation for assessing the sufficiency of the measurement model prior to moving on to the evaluation of the structural model. In accordance with the guidelines of Hair et al. (2022), suitable factor loadings, reliability coefficients, and AVE values demonstrate that the constructs are assessed in a reliable and valid manner.

The measurement model presented in [Table 3](#) demonstrates satisfactory indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, and convergent validity across all latent constructs. Standardized outer loadings range from

0.696 to 0.885, with the majority exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. These results indicate that the observed indicators adequately represent their respective constructs. A few indicators, namely PD6 = 0.696 and UE3 = 0.698, fall marginally below the recommended level; however, they remain acceptable because the overall construct reliability and validity statistics are satisfactory and exceed recommended thresholds.

Internal consistency reliability is supported across all constructs. Cronbach's alpha values range from 0.696 for Content Relevance to 0.871 for Brand Trust. While the alpha coefficient for Content Relevance is marginally below the conventional benchmark of 0.70, it remains acceptable for exploratory studies and is supported by adequate composite reliability values. The composite reliability estimates further confirm the robustness of the measurement model, with rho_A values ranging from 0.700 to 0.874 and rho_C values ranging from 0.814 to 0.907. The constructs Brand Trust ($\rho_c = 0.907$), Information Quality ($\rho_c = 0.907$), and User Engagement ($\rho_c = 0.887$) exhibit particularly strong internal consistency, indicating high reliability among their respective indicators.

Convergent validity is also established for all constructs, as evidenced by Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.50. The AVE values range from 0.524 for Content Relevance to 0.765 for Information Quality, indicating that each construct explains more than half of the variance in its indicators. Information Quality demonstrates the strongest convergent validity (AVE = 0.765), supported by high item loadings ranging from 0.857 to 0.885. Similarly, Brand Trust (AVE = 0.661), Social Proof (AVE = 0.629), User Engagement (AVE = 0.613), Content Credibility (AVE = 0.568), and Purchase Decision (AVE = 0.541) all exceed the recommended criterion, confirming adequate convergent validity.

Hetero-Monotrait- Ratio (HTMT)

The HTMT criterion assessed discriminant validity by checking if each construct is adequately distinct from the others (Hair et al. 2022). Table 3 indicates that discriminant validity is evaluated by checking if the correlations among constructs remain within the suggested threshold limits prior to conducting the structural model analysis.

Table 4 displays the results of the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT) utilized to evaluate discriminant validity. All HTMT values fall between 0.618 and 0.843 and stay beneath the conservative limit of 0.85, demonstrating adequate discriminant validity among the constructs. Formulate pairs like Purchase Decision and Content Relevance (0.830) and User Engagement and Information Quality (0.843) demonstrate robust connections, these figures are acceptable. The results indicate that the latent variables are empirically unique and appropriate for incorporation into the structural model.

Fornell-Larcker Criterion

The research evaluated discriminant validity by applying the Fornell-Larcker Criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Discriminant validity is confirmed when the square root of each construct's AVE is greater than its correlations with other constructs, signifying that each construct is empirically unique and accounts for more variance in its indicators than in the other variables.

As shown in Table 5, the Fornell-Larcker criterion outcomes for evaluating discriminant validity among the constructs of the study. Discriminant validity is confirmed

when the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) displayed on the diagonal is greater than the related inter-construct correlations. The diagonal values for all constructs, as noted, are Brand Trust (0.813), Content Credibility (0.754), Content Relevance (0.724), Information Quality (0.875), Purchase Decision (0.736), Social Proof (0.793), and User Engagement (0.783), which exceed their correlations with other constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Structural model

The structural model was employed to analyse the connections between the latent constructs and evaluate the model's explanatory and predictive capabilities. Utilizing the confirmed measurement model, it assessed the direct and indirect impacts of social media marketing elements on Purchase Decision, with Brand Trust acting as a crucial mediator. The examination concentrated on path coefficients, coefficients of determination (R^2), effect sizes (f^2), mediation effects, and model fit to assess the hypotheses and illustrate how social media prompts affect consumer buying behavior within the suggested framework.

The structural model (Figure 2) evaluates the proposed relationships among social media marketing factors, Brand Trust, and Purchase Decision.

Regarding the antecedents of Brand Trust, Social Proof demonstrates the strongest positive effect ($\beta = 0.367$, $p < 0.001$), followed by Content Relevance ($\beta = 0.243$, $p < 0.001$), Information Quality ($\beta = 0.157$, $p = 0.011$), and User Engagement ($\beta = 0.132$, $p = 0.033$). These findings suggest that consumers are more likely to trust brands when social media content is relevant, information is of high quality, engagement opportunities are provided, and positive social cues from other users are visible. In contrast, Content Credibility does not significantly influence Brand Trust ($\beta = 0.021$, $p = 0.690$), indicating that credibility alone may not be sufficient to foster trust in this context.

With respect to Purchase Decision, Brand Trust exerts the strongest positive influence ($\beta = 0.420$, $p < 0.001$), underscoring its critical role in shaping consumers' purchasing behaviour. Among the direct effects, Information Quality significantly influences Purchase Decision ($\beta = 0.134$, $p < 0.001$), followed by Content Credibility ($\beta = 0.108$, $p = 0.016$), Content Relevance ($\beta = 0.103$, $p = 0.034$), and Social Proof ($\beta = 0.086$, $p = 0.001$). These findings indicate that consumers are more inclined to make purchase decisions when social media content is informative, credible, relevant, and supported by the opinions and experiences of others. Conversely, User Engagement does not have a significant direct effect on Purchase Decision ($\beta = 0.011$, $p = 0.830$), suggesting that engagement primarily contributes to purchase behaviour indirectly through the development of Brand Trust rather than exerting an immediate influence on buying decisions.

Coefficient of determination (R^2)

The coefficient of determination (R^2) was utilized to assess the explanatory capability of the structural model by showing the share of variance in an endogenous construct accounted for by its exogenous predictors. In PLS-SEM, R^2 values indicate the model's predictive effectiveness, where larger values signify greater explanatory power (Hair et al., 2022). The R^2 findings demonstrate considerable explanatory strength of the structural model for the endogenous constructs. Brand Trust shows an R^2 value of 0.591 (adjusted $R^2 = 0.585$), indicating that nearly 59.1% of the variance in Brand Trust is accounted for by its predictive factors. Likewise, Purchase Decision presents an R^2 of 0.654 (adjusted $R^2 = 0.649$), signifying that the model explains 65.4% of the variation in consumers' purchase choices.

Based on widely recognized standards for PLS-SEM, these R^2 values may be regarded as moderate to significant, indicating robust predictive precision of the model. The small disparity between the R^2 and adjusted R^2 values further indicates that the model is appropriately specified and not unduly affected by model complexity (Hair et al., 2022).

Effect size assessment (f^2)

In addition to evaluating the significance of the structural relationships, effect size (f^2) was assessed to determine the relative contribution of each exogenous construct to the explained variance of the endogenous constructs. The f^2 statistic indicates the extent to which an exogenous variable contributes to an endogenous variable when included in the model. Following Cohen's (1988) guidelines, f^2 values of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 represent small, medium, and large effects, respectively. Thus, the effect size assessment provides a deeper understanding of the practical importance of each predictor beyond statistical significance alone.

The f^2 results reveal varying levels of explanatory power of the exogenous constructs on Brand Trust and Purchase Decision. Based on Cohen's benchmarks (0.02 = small, 0.15 = medium, and 0.35 = large), Brand Trust exerts a medium effect on Purchase Decision ($f^2 = 0.208$), underscoring its central role in the model. Regarding the predictors of Brand Trust, Social Proof demonstrates a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.186$) and emerges as the most influential contributor. Content Relevance ($f^2 = 0.067$) exhibits a small effect, while Information Quality ($f^2 = 0.028$) has a weak but meaningful influence. User Engagement ($f^2 = 0.014$) and Content Credibility ($f^2 = 0.001$) show negligible effects on Brand Trust. For Purchase Decision, Social Proof ($f^2 = 0.049$) and Information Quality ($f^2 = 0.023$) exhibit small effects, whereas Content Credibility ($f^2 = 0.018$) and Content Relevance ($f^2 = 0.013$) contribute negligibly. User Engagement shows virtually no effect on Purchase Decision ($f^2 = 0.000$). Overall, the findings indicate that Brand Trust is the most important predictor of Purchase Decision, while Social Proof is the strongest determinant of Brand Trust.

Model Fit Assessment

Model fit evaluation was used to determine how effectively the suggested structural model reflects the observed data and offers a general measure of model suitability. In PLS-SEM, global fit indices like the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), discrepancy measures (d_{ULS} and d_{G}), and comparative fit indices (for instance, NFI) are typically presented to enhance the assessment of the measurement and structural models. Table 6 presents a summary of the model fit statistics for the saturated and estimated models (Hair et al., 2022).

As shown in Table 6, the saturated and estimated models yielded identical fit indices, indicating consistency between the specified and estimated model structures. The standardized root mean square residual (SRMR = 0.070) is below the recommended threshold of 0.08, suggesting an acceptable overall model fit. The discrepancy measures ($d_{\text{ULS}} = 2.400$; $d_{\text{G}} = 0.739$) are reported as additional model fit indicators, while the chi-square statistic (1662.433) is included for completeness, acknowledging its sensitivity to sample size in SEM applications. The Normed Fit Index (NFI = 0.755) indicates a moderate level of model fit and should be interpreted alongside other fit measures. Overall, the model fit assessment, particularly the SRMR value, provides

support for the adequacy of the proposed model for evaluating the hypothesized relationships (Hair et al., 2022). Furthermore, the Q^2 values exceeded zero, indicating that the model possesses predictive relevance for the endogenous constructs.

Bootstrapping analysis- Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis testing was performed to investigate the suggested connections among the study constructs and to assess both direct and indirect influences within the structural model. The importance of the proposed routes was evaluated using path coefficients (β), t-values, and p-values obtained from bootstrapping methods. This method enables a thorough assessment of the empirical backing for each hypothesis, encompassing the mediating effect of Brand Trust, and offers proof for either endorsing or dismissing the suggested hypotheses according to defined statistical standards.

The structural model (Table 7) evaluates the proposed relationships among the social media marketing constructs. Regarding the antecedents of Brand Trust, Social Proof exhibits the strongest positive and significant effect ($\beta = 0.367$, $t = 7.771$, $p < 0.001$), followed by Content Relevance ($\beta = 0.243$, $t = 4.687$, $p < 0.001$), Information Quality ($\beta = 0.157$, $t = 2.552$, $p = 0.011$), and User Engagement ($\beta = 0.132$, $t = 2.135$, $p = 0.033$). These findings emphasize the importance of social validation, relevant content, high-quality information, and active engagement in building consumer trust. Conversely, Content Credibility does not have a significant effect on Brand Trust ($\beta = 0.021$, $t = 0.399$, $p = 0.690$), indicating that credibility may be perceived as a basic expectation rather than a trust-enhancing factor in social media environments.

In the context of Purchase Decision, Brand Trust exerts the strongest effect ($\beta = 0.420$, $t = 7.484$, $p < 0.001$), reinforcing its central role in influencing consumer purchasing behaviour. Social Proof ($\beta = 0.186$, $t = 3.431$, $p = 0.001$), Information Quality ($\beta = 0.134$, $t = 3.211$, $p = 0.001$), Content Credibility ($\beta = 0.108$, $t = 2.405$, $p = 0.016$), and Content Relevance ($\beta = 0.103$, $t = 2.405$, $p = 0.034$) all exert significant positive direct effects on Purchase Decision. Among these antecedents, Social Proof demonstrates the strongest direct influence on Purchase Decision, highlighting the importance of peer recommendations, reviews, and online endorsements in shaping consumer choices. In contrast, User Engagement does not have a significant direct effect on Purchase Decision ($\beta = 0.011$, $t = 0.214$, $p = 0.830$), suggesting that its influence operates primarily through Brand Trust rather than directly affecting purchasing decisions.

Specific Indirect Effects (Mediation Analysis)

The results of the bootstrapping analysis conducted to assess the mediating role of brand trust in the relationships between social media content characteristics and purchase decision. Mediation is supported when the indirect effect is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

The results reveal that brand trust significantly mediates the effects of content relevance, information quality, social proof, and user engagement on purchase decision. Specifically, the indirect effect of social proof $\rightarrow$ brand trust $\rightarrow$ purchase decision was the strongest ($\beta = 0.154$, $t = 4.878$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that social proof exerts a substantial influence on purchase decisions through enhanced brand trust. Similarly, content relevance $\rightarrow$ brand trust $\rightarrow$ purchase decision showed a significant positive indirect effect ($\beta = 0.102$, $t = 4.210$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that relevant content strengthens consumers' trust in the brand, which subsequently increases their likelihood of making a purchase.

Table 4. Hetero-Monotrait- ratio (HTMT)

	Brand trust	Content credibility	Content relevance	Information quality	Purchase decision	Social proof	User engagement
Brand trust							
Content credibility	0.618						
Content relevance	0.812	0.783					
Information quality	0.686	0.646	0.714				
Purchase decision	0.803	0.697	0.830	0.731			
Social proof	0.804	0.671	0.734	0.640	0.819		
User engagement	0.741	0.741	0.800	0.843	0.755	0.718	

Table 5. Fornell-Larcker Criterion

	Brand trust	Content credibility	Content relevance	Information quality	Purchase decision	Social proof	User engagement
Brand trust	0.813						
Content credibility	0.534	0.754					
Content relevance	0.635	0.595	0.724				
Information quality	0.591	0.553	0.550	0.875			
Purchase decision	0.755	0.577	0.618	0.605	0.736		
Social proof	0.673	0.546	0.549	0.529	0.662	0.793	
User engagement	0.643	0.616	0.692	0.715	0.625	0.594	0.783

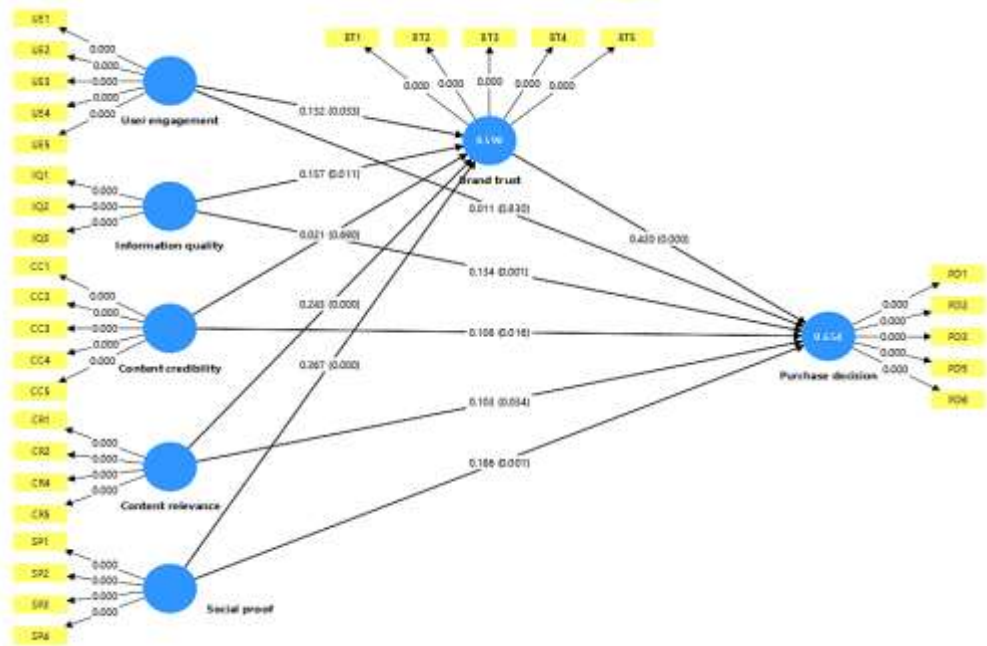


Figure 2. Structural model

Furthermore, information quality demonstrated a significant indirect effect through brand trust ($\beta = 0.066$, $t = 2.472$, $p = 0.013$), while user engagement also exhibited a significant, albeit comparatively weaker, indirect effect ($\beta = 0.055$, $t = 2.042$, $p = 0.041$). These findings indicate that high-quality information and interactive consumer engagement contribute to purchase decisions primarily by fostering trust in the brand.

In contrast, the indirect effect of content credibility $\rightarrow$ brand trust $\rightarrow$ purchase decision was not statistically significant ($\beta = 0.009$, $t = 0.397$, $p = 0.690$). This result suggests that brand trust does not mediate the relationship between content credibility and purchase decision in the present study. Although content credibility may influence consumer behaviour through other mechanisms, its indirect effect through brand trust is negligible and unsupported.

As shown in Table 8, Brand trust significantly mediates

four of the five proposed relationships, with the strongest mediating effect occurring between social proof and purchase decision. This finding highlights the strategic importance of building consumer trust as a pathway through which social media marketing efforts translate into actual purchasing behaviour.

Bootstrapping Analysis: Specific Indirect Effects Confidence intervals

To further examine the mediating role of Brand Trust, a bootstrapping procedure was conducted to assess the significance of the indirect effects between the social media marketing dimensions and Purchase Decision. Bootstrapping is a non-parametric resampling technique that provides robust estimates of indirect effects and their associated confidence intervals. Following recommended PLS-SEM practices, mediation is considered significant when the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval (CI) does

not include zero. Therefore, the lower (2.5%) and upper (97.5%) confidence interval bounds were examined to determine whether Brand Trust significantly mediates the relationships between the independent variables and Purchase Decision.

The results shown (Table 9) indicate that Brand Trust does not mediate the relationship between Content Credibility and Purchase Decision ($\beta = 0.009$, 95% CI [-0.035, 0.052]), as the confidence interval includes zero. This finding suggests that the indirect effect is not statistically significant, providing no evidence of mediation. In contrast, Brand Trust significantly mediates the relationship between Content Relevance and Purchase Decision ($\beta = 0.102$, 95% CI [0.057, 0.152]), since the confidence interval excludes zero. This finding indicates that relevant content enhances consumers' purchase decisions through its positive influence on trust. Similarly, Brand Trust significantly mediates the effect of Information Quality on Purchase Decision ($\beta = 0.066$, 95% CI [0.013, 0.117]). The exclusion of zero from the confidence interval confirms that high-quality information contributes to purchasing behaviour by strengthening trust in the brand. The strongest indirect effect is observed for Social Proof $\rightarrow$ Brand Trust $\rightarrow$ Purchase Decision ($\beta = 0.154$, 95% CI [0.099, 0.220]). Because the confidence interval does not include zero, the mediation effect is significant, indicating that social proof enhances purchase decisions largely through its ability to build consumer trust. Accordingly, Brand Trust significantly mediates the relationship between User Engagement and Purchase Decision ($\beta = 0.055$, 95% CI [0.005, 0.111]). Although the effect size is relatively small, the confidence interval excludes zero, confirming a significant indirect effect.

Predictive assessment

Following the assessment of the measurement and structural models, the predictive capability of the model was examined using PLSpredict and the Cross-Validated Predictive Ability Test (CVPAT). These procedures are recommended for evaluating the extent to which a PLS-SEM model can predict outcomes in new samples. The results provide evidence of the model's predictive relevance by comparing the prediction errors of the PLS-SEM model with those obtained from benchmark prediction models.

Table 10 presents the PLSpredict results, which provide strong evidence of the model's out-of-sample predictive performance. Notably, all Q^2 predict values are positive, ranging from 0.202 to 0.449, thereby confirming predictive relevance across all indicators. The PLS-SEM model also demonstrates superior predictive accuracy relative to the benchmark linear model, achieving lower RMSE values for nine out of the ten indicators. Although the linear model marginally outperformed PLS-SEM for indicator PD5, the overall pattern of results strongly favours the PLS-SEM model. Furthermore, when compared with the indicator average benchmark, PLS-SEM consistently generated lower RMSE and MAE values across all indicators. Collectively, these findings provide compelling support for the model's predictive capability and suggest that it possesses high predictive power, reinforcing its usefulness for predicting observations beyond the original estimation sample.

The findings demonstrate that Brand Trust is a critical mechanism through which social media marketing influences Purchase Decision. This finding is consistent with prior studies which argue that trust reduces consumers' perceptions of risk and uncertainty in online environments, thereby increasing their willingness to purchase (Hajli et al., 2019). While earlier studies

established the importance of trust in digital commerce, the present study extends this understanding by showing that trust is shaped by multiple social media marketing attributes rather than by social media presence alone.

Among the determinants of Brand Trust, Social Proof emerged as the most influential factor. This finding supports Social Influence Theory and aligns with studies by Hajli et al. (2019), Chung et al. (2020), and Chen, (2024), which found that consumers rely heavily on reviews, ratings, recommendations, and peer-generated content when evaluating brands. The present study extends this literature by demonstrating that social proof not only shapes consumer evaluations but also serves as a critical mechanism for building trust, thereby strengthening subsequent purchase decisions. The finding suggests that social validation is particularly important in social media environments where consumers face information overload and uncertainty.

The findings further indicate that Content Relevance positively influences both Brand Trust and Purchase Decision. This result corroborates previous studies by Lou and Yuan (2019), and Sijabat et al. (2022) who found that consumers respond more favourably to content that closely matches their interests, needs, and consumption goals. The results suggest that relevant content enables consumers to perceive greater value in brand communications, thereby encouraging trust and facilitating purchase behaviour. In contrast to studies that emphasise information quality as the primary driver of trust (Al Adwan & Kokash, 2019), the findings suggest that consumers may attach greater importance to whether content addresses their specific concerns and decision-making needs.

Information Quality was also found to positively influence both Brand Trust and Purchase Decision. This finding is consistent with Li & Wang, (2021), who argued that accurate, comprehensive, and reliable information reduces information asymmetry and promotes informed decision-making. The results reinforce the view that consumers continue to depend on high-quality information when evaluating products in digital environments. However, the findings also suggest that information quality alone may not be sufficient. Rather, its effectiveness appears to be strengthened when accompanied by relevant content and positive social endorsement, highlighting the complementary nature of social media marketing attributes.

User Engagement was found to significantly enhance Brand Trust but did not directly influence Purchase Decision. This finding partially supports Bilgin and Kethuda (2022), who argued that interactions such as commenting, sharing, and reacting help strengthen relationships between consumers and brands. However, unlike some previous studies that reported a direct relationship between engagement and purchasing behaviour, the current study suggests that engagement alone does not necessarily translate into actual purchases. This discrepancy may be explained by the fact that engagement can reflect entertainment, curiosity, or social interaction rather than genuine purchase intentions. Thus, engagement contributes to purchasing behaviour primarily when it strengthens consumers' trust in the brand.

The mediation analysis further reinforces the central role of Brand Trust in the proposed model. Brand Trust significantly mediated the relationships between Social Proof, Content Relevance, Information Quality, and User Engagement and Purchase Decision. These findings support earlier studies that identified trust as a mechanism linking marketing activities to behavioural outcomes (Hajli et al., 2019). Importantly, User Engagement influenced Purchase Decision only through Brand Trust, indicating full mediation. This finding suggests that engagement activities

alone may be insufficient to encourage purchases unless they successfully build trust. In contrast, Social Proof, Content Relevance, and Information Quality exhibited both direct and indirect effects, indicating partial mediation. Therefore, these factors influence purchasing decisions directly while simultaneously enhancing trust, which further strengthens their impact.

A particularly noteworthy finding concerns Content Credibility. Contrary to studies that identify credibility as a key antecedent of trust (Ki et al., 2020; Ki & Kim, 2019; Sussman & Siegal, 2003), Content Credibility did not significantly contribute to the development of Brand Trust. This finding differs from traditional trust literature, which posits that credible information enhances consumer confidence in brands and online platforms. One possible explanation is that credibility has become an expected baseline characteristic rather than a distinguishing attribute in contemporary social media environments. As suggested

Table 6. Model fit assessment

	Saturated model	Estimated model
SRMR	0.070	0.070
d_ULS	2.400	2.400
d_G	0.739	0.739
Chi-square	1662.433	1662.433
NFI	0.755	0.755

by Zafar et al. (2021), consumers increasingly assume that information originating from established brands is credible. Consequently, credibility may no longer be a decisive factor in trust formation. Nevertheless, Content Credibility exerted a direct influence on Purchase Decision, suggesting that consumers may use credibility as a heuristic cue when making purchasing decisions. This interpretation is consistent with the Heuristic-Systematic Model, which proposes that individuals often rely on simple informational cues to make decisions, particularly in environments characterised by abundant information and limited cognitive resources. The finding therefore challenges the conventional assumption that credibility automatically translates into trust and suggests that social proof, content relevance, and information quality may play a more prominent role in trust development within social media contexts.

Table 7. Hypothesis Testing

Variable Relationships	H	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	STDEV	T Statistics	P Values	Results
Content credibility → Brand trust	H1a	0.021	0.022	0.052	0.399	0.690	Not Supported
Content credibility → Purchase decision	H1b	0.108	0.108	0.045	2.405	0.016	Supported
Social proof → Brand trust	H2a	0.367	0.368	0.047	7.771	0.000	Supported
Social proof → Purchase decision	H2b	0.086	0.187	0.054	3.431	0.001	Supported
Content relevance → Brand trust	H3a	0.243	0.244	0.052	4.687	0.000	Supported
Content relevance → Purchase decision	H3b	0.103	0.108	0.045	2.405	0.034	Supported
Information quality → Brand trust	H4a	0.157	0.154	0.062	2.552	0.011	Supported
Information quality → Purchase decision	H4b	0.134	0.134	0.042	3.211	0.001	Supported
User engagement → Brand trust	H5a	0.132	0.133	0.062	2.135	0.033	Supported
User engagement → Purchase decision	H5b	0.011	0.009	0.051	0.214	0.830	Not Supported
Brand trust → Purchase decision	H6	0.420	0.419	0.056	7.484	0.000	Supported

Table 8. Summary of Mediation Results

Indirect Path	H	β	t-value	p-value	Mediation Decision
Content credibility → Brand trust → Purchase decision	H7	0.009	0.397	0.690	Not Supported
Content relevance → Brand trust → Purchase decision	H8	0.102	4.210	<0.001	Supported
Information quality → Brand trust → Purchase decision	H9	0.066	2.472	0.013	Supported
Social proof → Brand trust → Purchase decision	H10	0.154	4.878	<0.001	Supported
User engagement → Brand trust → Purchase decision	H11	0.055	2.042	0.041	Supported

Theoretical Contribution

This study makes an important theoretical contribution by integrating the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), Trust Theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), and the Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM), S. Chen & Chaiken, (1999) explain consumer behaviour in social media environments. Responding to calls for more comprehensive frameworks in digital marketing research (Cardoso et al., 2022) the study conceptualizes content credibility, content relevance, information quality, user engagement, and social proof as stimuli, Brand Trust as the organism, and Purchase Decision as the response. This framework provides a coherent explanation of how social media marketing activities influence consumer purchasing behaviour.

Consistent with Trust Theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), the findings confirm that Brand Trust is a key mechanism

through which social media marketing activities translate into purchase decisions. While previous studies have primarily examined trust as a direct predictor of purchasing behaviour (Hajli et al., 2019), the present study demonstrates that trust is simultaneously shaped by informational cues (content relevance and information quality), relational cues (user engagement), and social cues (social proof). This extends existing trust-based models by clarifying the specific pathways through which social media marketing develops consumer trust and subsequently influences purchasing decisions.

The findings also refine the application of the Heuristic-Systematic Model in social media marketing research. While previous studies have emphasised content credibility as a central determinant of online trust, the present study found that credibility did not significantly contribute to Brand Trust. Instead, social proof, content relevance, and

information quality emerged as more influential factors in trust formation. This suggests that consumers increasingly evaluate social media content based on its usefulness, contextual relevance, and social validation rather than credibility alone. The findings therefore support more recent evidence (M. L. Cheung et al., 2020; Lou & Yuan, 2019) and indicate an evolution in consumers' information-processing behaviour within digital environments.

The mediation results further contribute to theory by demonstrating that Brand Trust serves as the primary explanatory mechanism linking social media marketing stimuli to purchase decisions. While social proof, content relevance, and information quality exert both direct and indirect effects on purchasing behaviour, user engagement influences purchasing decisions primarily through trust. This finding refines the S-O-R framework by showing that different stimuli do not affect consumer responses through identical mechanisms.

Furthermore, the finding that Content Credibility influences Purchase Decision directly but does not significantly contribute to Brand Trust provides additional theoretical insight. It suggests that some social media marketing attributes may operate through heuristic decision processes rather than trust-building mechanisms. This distinction enhances understanding of how different marketing stimuli affect consumer behaviour and provides a more nuanced application of both Trust Theory and HSM in digital marketing contexts.

From an emerging-market perspective, the study contributes to the limited body of evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly Malawi, where social media marketing research remains underdeveloped. The findings suggest that consumers in emerging markets rely heavily on social validation, relevant information, and trust-building mechanisms when making purchase decisions. This extends the applicability of the S-O-R, Trust Theory, and HSM frameworks beyond the predominantly Western and Asian contexts in which they have traditionally been tested.

Practical Contribution

This study offers several practical contributions for managers, brand owners, and digital marketers operating in Malawi and other emerging markets. First, the findings indicate that building trust should be treated as a strategic objective rather than merely an outcome of social media activity.

Managers should therefore design social media programmes around trust-building metrics, such as customer advocacy, review quality, consumer confidence, and brand credibility, rather than relying solely on reach,

impressions, or engagement statistics. Second, the prominence of social proof highlights the need for firms to adopt customer-driven communication strategies. Rather than focusing exclusively on firm-generated promotional content, organisations should encourage customer reviews, testimonials, referrals, user-generated content, and influencer advocacy.

Such approaches can amplify consumer confidence and reduce uncertainty during the purchase process. Third, the findings suggest that content strategy should shift from a volume-based approach to a value-based approach. Managers should prioritise producing content that addresses consumer needs, solves problems, and supports product evaluation. This implies investing in audience analytics, customer insights, and content personalisation to ensure that marketing communications remain relevant and useful to different consumer segments. Fourth, the significance of information quality underscores the importance of maintaining accurate, complete, and timely product information across social media platforms. Organisations should establish content governance processes that ensure consistency and accuracy of information, particularly for products such as smartphones where consumers depend heavily on technical specifications and product comparisons when making decisions. Fifth, the results suggest that engagement should not be viewed as an end in itself. While likes, shares, comments, and interactions are valuable, their strategic value arises from their ability to strengthen trust. Managers should therefore focus on creating meaningful two-way communication, responding to customer concerns promptly, and fostering online communities that deepen relationships with consumers.

An additional managerial insight concerns content credibility. Although credibility directly influences purchase decisions, it does not appear to be a major trust-building factor. This suggests that credibility should be treated as a basic requirement rather than a source of competitive advantage. Firms must maintain credible communication, but greater resources may yield stronger returns when invested in social proof initiatives, customer engagement programmes, and highly relevant content.

Finally, the mediation findings demonstrate that many social media marketing activities create value indirectly through Brand Trust. Consequently, organisations should evaluate social media effectiveness not only by immediate sales outcomes but also by their ability to enhance trust, which subsequently translates into improved purchasing behaviour. This provides managers with a more strategic framework for allocating resources and measuring the return on social media marketing investments.

Table 9. Bootstrapping Analysis: Specific Indirect Effects Confidents intervals

Relationship	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	2.5%	97.5%
Content credibility -> Brand trust -> Purchase decision	0.009	0.009	-0.035	0.052
Content relevance -> Brand trust -> Purchase decision	0.102	0.102	0.057	0.152
Information quality -> Brand trust -> Purchase decision	0.066	0.064	0.013	0.117
Social proof -> Brand trust -> Purchase decision	0.154	0.155	0.099	0.220
User engagement -> Brand trust -> Purchase decision	0.055	0.056	0.005	0.111

Table 10. *PLSpredict/CVPAT*

	Q ² predi ct	PLS- SEM_RMS E	PLS- SEM_ MAE	LM_RMS E	LM_MAE	IA_RMS E	IA_MA E
BT1	0.348	0.653	0.470	0.674	0.478	0.809	0.625
BT2	0.390	0.595	0.420	0.617	0.440	0.762	0.653
BT3	0.449	0.574	0.423	0.601	0.438	0.773	0.668
BT4	0.319	0.535	0.406	0.545	0.412	0.648	0.590
BT5	0.381	0.572	0.419	0.587	0.433	0.727	0.638
PD1	0.286	0.664	0.487	0.680	0.506	0.786	0.622
PD2	0.299	0.600	0.446	0.610	0.465	0.717	0.560
PD3	0.202	0.673	0.490	0.693	0.510	0.753	0.599
PD5	0.392	0.702	0.558	0.689	0.521	0.900	0.708
PD6	0.306	0.623	0.488	0.635	0.483	0.747	0.625

Limitations, and direction for future studies

Although this study offers important insights into trust-based buying choices in social media contexts, it has a number of limitations.

Initially, the cross-sectional design records consumer perceptions at one specific moment, restricting the capacity to investigate how Brand Trust and purchase choices develop over time. Future research might utilize longitudinal or experimental approaches to more effectively evaluate trust formation and identify causal connections.

Secondly, the model emphasizes content credibility, relevance, information quality, social proof, and user engagement within a unified S-O-R, Trust Theory, and HSM framework. Although theoretically valid, various elements like emotional ties, perceived risk, influencer attributes, algorithm clarity, and brand recognition can also affect consumer choices and warrant investigation in subsequent studies.

Third, the results of the study might be specific to the context. Processes for building trust and buying behaviours can differ between cultures, social media platforms, and types of products. Future studies should hence perform cross-cultural, cross-platform, and industry-specific analyses to evaluate the applicability of the suggested relationships.

Ultimately, Brand Trust was regarded as a one-dimensional concept to preserve the simplicity of the model. Future research might explore its cognitive, emotional, and behavioural aspects independently to establish whether various social media triggers engage unique trust mechanisms that affect buying choices

Conclusion

This study examined how social media marketing attributes influence consumers' purchase decisions in the smartphone market by integrating the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework, Trust Theory, and the Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM). This study examined how social media marketing attributes influence consumers' purchase decisions in the smartphone market by integrating the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework, Trust Theory, and the Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM). The principal empirical finding is that Brand Trust serves as a central mechanism linking social media marketing activities to Purchase Decision. Specifically, Social Proof, Content Relevance, Information Quality, and User Engagement

significantly enhanced Brand Trust, which subsequently exerted a strong positive influence on Purchase Decision

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to the literature by validating the integrated S-O-R, Trust Theory, and HSM framework within a social media marketing context. The findings demonstrate that consumers rely more strongly on relevant information, social validation, and engagement experiences than on credibility alone when developing trust and making purchase decisions. The mediation results further highlight the importance of Brand Trust as the mechanism through which key social media marketing attributes influence consumer behaviour.

Practically, the findings suggest that marketers should prioritize trust-building strategies by providing relevant and informative content, encouraging meaningful consumer engagement, and leveraging social proof through reviews, testimonials, and user-generated content. Such approaches can strengthen Brand Trust and enhance purchasing outcomes.

The study also provides an important contextual contribution by extending evidence from Malawi, where empirical research on social media marketing and consumer behaviour remains limited. The results suggest that, similar to other emerging markets, consumers rely heavily on trust, social validation, and relevant information when making purchase decisions in digital environments. Despite these contributions, the study has limitations. The findings are based on a cross-sectional design and convenience sampling approach, which limits the ability to establish causal relationships and generalize the results to the broader population. Future studies may employ longitudinal designs, probability sampling techniques, and different product categories or geographical settings to further validate and extend the findings.

Author contributions

Dennis Franscico Chandiona independently developed the study, performed the literature review, crafted the research methodology, gathered and examined the data, interpreted the results, wrote and edited the manuscript, and authorized the final version for publication.

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