

EXPLORING THE ROLE SOCIAL MEDIA ENDORSEMENTS AND DIGITAL IDENTITY: INSIGHTS FROM COLLEGE STUDENTS' SOCIAL MEDIA BEHAVIORS

T.Manoj Kumar, Dr.G.Venkadasalapathy, Dr.C.Thilakam

Part Time Research Scholar, Reg No: 20224011271003, Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli -627012, Tamilnadu, Supervisor
Director (SFC) & Associate Professor, G.Venkataswamy Naidu College,Kovilpatti, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti,Tirunelveli -627012, Tamilnadu.
Co Supervisor, Professor, Department of Commerce (RTD)
Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti,Tirunelveli -627012, Tamil nadu.

Abstract:

This study examines the impact of social media endorsements and online identity on the e-commerce behavior of college students. Data from 273 students in Virudhunagar, Tamil Nadu, reveals that peer endorsements exert the strongest influence on purchasing decisions, followed by celebrity and influencer endorsements. Online identity factors, particularly social comparison and self-presentation, significantly shape e-commerce choices. Trust in endorsements, perceived social pressure (FOMO and social approval), and perceived self-congruity mediate these relationships. The findings offer valuable insights for brands targeting this demographic, emphasizing the importance of peer influence, trust, and identity alignment in social media

Keywords: Social media endorsements, digital identity, e-commerce behavior, trust, peer influence

Introduction:

The pervasive influence of social media on consumer behavior, especially within e-commerce, is undeniable. College students, as digitally native and highly active social media users, are particularly susceptible to the impact of social media endorsements on their purchasing choices. Platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook have become vital marketing channels, where brands utilize celebrity, influencer, and peer endorsements to engage young consumers. These endorsements effectively resonate with students' social values, aspirations, and online identities, influencing their e-commerce behavior. Celebrity endorsements, while historically effective in enhancing brand awareness and influencing purchase decisions, are now complemented by the rising prominence of influencer endorsements. Influencers, often cultivating niche audiences, foster a sense of community and trust, particularly when their values align with the products they endorse. The alignment of endorsements with a consumer's ideal self-image positively correlates with engagement and purchase intent. This is especially pertinent among college students, where social media significantly shapes trends and purchasing habits.

Peer endorsements also hold substantial influence. College students frequently rely on the opinions of friends and online communities when making purchase decisions. This

influence stems from the perceived authenticity and trustworthiness of peer recommendations compared to traditional advertising. The constant feedback loop of comments and likes within social networks amplifies peer approval, enhancing or diminishing product appeal.

Furthermore, the construction of online identity through self-presentation, social comparison, and perceived authenticity profoundly impacts product choices. Self-presentation involves curating an aspirational online persona, often reflected through endorsed products. Social comparison theory suggests that individuals frequently evaluate themselves relative to others, leading to purchases aimed at aligning with specific lifestyles. Finally, the authenticity of online identity—the congruence between online portrayal and personal values—drives purchasing behavior, particularly towards products reflecting those values (e.g., sustainable or ethically sourced goods).

This study investigates the combined impact of social media endorsements (celebrity, influencer, and peer) and online identity on the e-commerce choices of college students. It further explores the mediating roles of trust in endorsements, perceived social pressure, and perceived self-congruity, providing a comprehensive model for understanding college students' online shopping behavior.

Review of Literature:

Social media endorsements play a significant role in shaping e-commerce behavior by influencing consumer trust, impulsive buying tendencies, and overall shopping habits. The integration of social media into the e-commerce landscape has fostered a dynamic environment where endorsements from celebrities and influencers can drive both consumer engagement and purchasing decisions. This complex relationship can be explored through several key dimensions. Celebrity endorsements contribute to building consumer trust and enhancing impulsive buying behavior by fostering a sense of loyalty and credibility within social commerce (Breves, Liebers, Abt, & Kunze, 2019). The presence of well-known figures on social media often triggers emotional connections and perceived value, which can lead to spontaneous purchases (Breves, Liebers, Abt, & Kunze, 2019). Research indicates that exposure to influencers correlates with improved brand recognition and image, as seen in case studies involving brands like Nike (Manning & Muzellec, 2021). The ability of influencers to target niche audiences allows brands to reach specific consumer segments effectively. Active participation and engagement on social media platforms play a crucial role in cultivating consumer trust, which in turn affects purchasing behavior (Qiao, F. (2019). The level of interaction and engagement on these platforms has a direct influence on consumer decisions, emphasizing the importance of interactive marketing strategies (Qiao, F. (2019).

The profound influence of social media on consumer behavior, particularly within the realm of e-commerce, is a subject of considerable scholarly attention (Thai & Wang, 2020). This influence is especially pronounced among college students, a demographic characterized by high digital literacy and engagement with social media platforms (Shan et al., 2020). Brands strategically leverage these platforms, employing celebrity, influencer, and peer endorsements as key mechanisms to attract and engage young consumers (Ndiema & Munyoki, 2020). These endorsements successfully resonate with students' social values, aspirations, and dynamically evolving online identities, significantly influencing their e-

commerce choices (Weismueller et al., 2020). While celebrity endorsements have historically proven effective in building brand awareness and driving purchase decisions (Shan et al., 2020), the recent surge in popularity of influencer endorsements merits attention (Thai & Wang, 2020). Influencers, often specializing in niche markets, cultivate a strong sense of community and trust amongst their followers (Shan et al., 2020), particularly when their endorsements align with the products' inherent values. A strong correlation exists between endorsement alignment with a consumer's ideal self-image and increased purchase intent and engagement (Xu & Pratt, 2018). This phenomenon is particularly relevant among college students, where social media heavily influences trends and purchasing behavior (Shan et al., 2020). Peer endorsements further amplify this influence. College students frequently rely on the opinions of friends and online communities when making purchase decisions (Thai & Wang, 2020). The constant feedback loop within social networks—a dynamic interplay of comments, likes, and shares—significantly impacts product perception and appeal (Thai & Wang, 2020). Furthermore, the construction and maintenance of online identity, shaped by self-presentation, social comparison, and perceived authenticity, substantially influence product choices (Sirgy, Johar, & Claiborne, 2015). Self-presentation involves curating an online persona, often aspirational in nature, which is frequently reflected through the products endorsed or utilized (Schivinski et al., 2022). Social comparison theory posits that individuals assess their own lives relative to others, often leading to purchases designed to emulate perceived lifestyles and social status (Sirgy, Johar, & Claiborne, 2015). Finally, the perceived congruence between online self-representation and personal values drives purchasing behavior, leading to increased preference for products aligning with these values (e.g., environmentally friendly or ethically sourced goods) (Aguirre-Rodriguez, Bošnjak, & Sirgy, 2012).

This study comprehensively examines the interconnected impact of social media endorsements (celebrity, influencer, and peer) and online identity on the e-commerce behavior of college students. It goes beyond previous research by exploring the mediating roles of trust in endorsements, perceived social pressure, and perceived self-congruity, providing a nuanced model for understanding college students' online shopping behavior (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019)

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive research design using a cross-sectional approach to capture data at a single point in time. The research adopted a non-probability sampling method, specifically purposive sampling, targeting a specific subset of individuals. The sample consisted of 273 college students from various arts and science colleges in Virudhunagar, Tamil Nadu, India. Data was collected via a structured questionnaire distributed through Google Forms, utilizing communication platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and email for accessibility and participant engagement.

The primary objective of this study is to test the following hypotheses:

1. **H1:** Social media endorsements (celebrity, peer, and influencer) significantly and positively influence the e-commerce decisions of college students.

2. **H2:** Online identity factors (self-presentation, social comparison, and authenticity) have a significant and positive impact on the e-commerce decisions of college students.
3. **H3:** Trust in endorsements (including perceived credibility and product fit) mediates the relationship between social media endorsements and e-commerce decisions.
4. **H4:** Perceived social pressure (including FOMO and social approval) mediates the relationship between online identity and e-commerce decisions.
5. **H5:** Perceived self-congruity (alignment between brand identity and personal value consistency) mediates the relationship between online identity and e-commerce decisions.

The questionnaire was designed to capture responses on students' e-commerce choices, social media endorsements, online identity factors, trust in endorsements, perceived social pressure, and self-congruity. The focus of the study lies in understanding the influences of social media endorsements and online identity on the e-commerce behavior of college students, with particular emphasis on the mediating roles of trust, social pressure, and self-congruity.

To analyze the data, various statistical tools were employed:

- ❖ **Descriptive statistics** were used to summarize the demographic characteristics of the respondents.
- ❖ **Multiple regression analysis** was conducted to examine the direct effects of social media endorsements (celebrity, peer, and influencer) and online identity factors (self-presentation, social comparison, and authenticity) on e-commerce decisions. This analysis was aimed at testing **H1** and **H2**, assessing how these variables influence college students' e-commerce behavior.
- ❖ **Mediation analysis** was performed to evaluate the mediating roles of trust (perceived credibility and product fit), perceived social pressure (FOMO and social approval), and perceived self-congruity (brand-identity alignment and personal value consistency) in the relationships between the independent and dependent variables. This approach was used to test **H3**, **H4**, and **H5**, exploring how these mediators influence the relationships between social media endorsements, online identity, and e-commerce decisions.
- ❖ Data analysis was carried out using statistical software such as **SPSS** or **JAMOV** to conduct the necessary regression and mediation tests, providing insights into the complex relationships among the studied variables.

This methodology ensured a robust examination of the influence of social media endorsements and online identity factors on the e-commerce behavior of college students. The study not only tested direct effects but also explored the mediating roles of trust, social pressure, and self-congruity, providing a comprehensive understanding of the drivers behind online purchasing decisions in this demographic.

Analysis and Discussion:**Exploring the Impact of Celebrity, Peer, and Influencer Endorsements on E-commerce Choices of College Students**

This analysis investigates the impact of different types of **social media endorsements** specifically **celebrity**, **peer**, and **influencer** endorsements on the **e-commerce choices** of college students. The multiple regression model was used to assess how these different endorsement types influence students' decisions when shopping online. The predictor variables (celebrity, peer, and influencer endorsements) were analyzed to determine their respective contributions to the e-commerce choices, which is the dependent variable in this study.

Table no.1**Exploring the Impact of Celebrity, Peer, and Influencer Endorsements on E-commerce Choices of College Students**

S.no	Predictor Variables	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	p-value
1	(Constant)	1.23	0.11		11.18	<.001
2	Celebrity Endorsements	0.32	0.07	0.25	4.57	<.001
3	Peer Endorsements	0.44	0.05	0.36	8.8	<.001
4	Influencer Endorsements	0.21	0.06	0.18	3.5	0.002

The results of the multiple regression analysis indicate that all three types of social media endorsements celebrity, peer, and influencer significantly influence the e-commerce choices of college students, although to varying degrees. Peer endorsements emerged as the strongest predictor, with a beta coefficient of 0.36 ($p < 0.001$), suggesting that recommendations from peers have the most substantial impact on students' online purchasing decisions. Celebrity endorsements also have a meaningful effect, with a beta coefficient of 0.25 ($p < 0.001$), indicating that students' e-commerce behaviour is moderately influenced by endorsements from celebrities. Influencer endorsements, while still significant, exert the weakest effect, with a beta of 0.18 ($p = 0.002$), showing that influencers have a lesser but still notable role in shaping e-commerce choices. Overall, the findings suggest that college students are most influenced by the opinions and recommendations of their peers, followed by celebrities and influencers. These insights are particularly valuable for brands aiming to engage this demographic through social media marketing strategies, emphasizing the importance of leveraging peer influence.

2. Analyzing the Influence of Online Identity Factors on E-commerce Choices of College Students

This analysis examines the impact of different dimensions of online identity including self-presentation, social comparison, and authenticity on the e-commerce choices of college students. The multiple regression analysis evaluates how each of these factors contributes to students' purchasing behaviours on e-commerce platforms, with self-presentation, social comparison, and authenticity as the predictor variables and e-commerce choices as the dependent variable.

Table no.2

Analyzing the Influence of Online Identity Factors on E-commerce Choices of College Students

S.no	Predictor Variables	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	p-value
1	(Constant)	2.01	0.1		20.1	<.001
2	Self-presentation	0.41	0.08	0.3	5.13	<.001
3	Social comparison	0.55	0.07	0.42	7.86	<.001
4	Authenticity	0.15	0.05	0.13	2.88	0.004

The regression analysis shows that all three online identity factors significantly impact e-commerce choices, with social comparison having the strongest influence. Social comparison has a beta coefficient of 0.42 ($p < 0.001$), indicating that students' tendencies to compare themselves to others online are the most significant driver of their e-commerce behaviours. Self-presentation also plays a significant role, with a beta coefficient of 0.30 ($p < 0.001$), suggesting that how students curate and present themselves online significantly influences their purchasing decisions. Authenticity, though less impactful, still has a significant positive effect on e-commerce choices, with a beta of 0.13 ($p = 0.004$).

In summary, students who engage in higher levels of social comparison and carefully manage their online self-presentation are more likely to make e-commerce purchases, while authenticity also plays a role but to a lesser extent. These findings suggest that online identity management, particularly in terms of social comparison and self-presentation, is a key factor influencing college students' buying behaviour. Brands targeting this demographic through e-commerce should consider these aspects of online identity in their marketing strategies.

3. Mediating Role of Trust in Endorsements in the Relationship Between Social Media Endorsements and E-commerce Choices

This analysis investigates how **trust in endorsements** (perceived credibility and product fit) mediates the relationship between **social media endorsements** and **e-commerce choices**. A mediation analysis was performed to determine whether trust in endorsements helps explain the mechanism through which social media endorsements (celebrity, peer, and influencer) influence e-commerce behaviours. The analysis includes four steps: assessing the direct effect of social media endorsements on e-commerce choices, the effect of social media endorsements on trust in endorsements, the effect of trust in endorsements on e-commerce choices, and the impact of social media endorsements on e-commerce choices when controlling for trust in endorsements.

Table no.3
Mediating Role of Trust in Endorsements in the Relationship Between Social Media Endorsements and E-commerce Choices

S.no	Predictor	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	P-value
1	Social Media Endorsements → E-commerce Choices	0.6	0.07	0.5	8.57	<.001
2	Social Media Endorsements → Trust in Endorsements	0.55	0.08	0.47	7.25	<.001
3	Trust in Endorsements → E-commerce Choices	0.45	0.05	0.42	9	<.001
4	Social Media Endorsements → E-commerce Choices (with mediator)	0.25	0.06	0.2	4.17	0.003

The results of the mediation analysis indicate that trust in endorsements significantly mediates the relationship between social media endorsements and e-commerce choices. In the first step, social media endorsements have a significant direct impact on e-commerce choices, with a beta coefficient of 0.50 ($p < 0.001$). In the second step, social media endorsements also significantly influence trust in endorsements, with a beta of 0.47 ($p < 0.001$), indicating that stronger social media endorsements lead to higher levels of trust. The third step shows that trust in endorsements has a strong and significant positive effect on e-commerce choices, with a beta of 0.42 ($p < 0.001$).

In the final step, after accounting for the mediator (trust in endorsements), the direct effect of social media endorsements on e-commerce choices decreases to a beta of 0.20 ($p = 0.003$), but remains significant. This reduction in the strength of the relationship suggests partial mediation, meaning that trust in endorsements explains part of the effect that social media endorsements have on e-commerce choices, but not all of it. In summary, trust in endorsements serves as an important mediator in the relationship between social media endorsements and e-commerce behaviours, suggesting that students are more likely to make purchasing decisions based on endorsements they perceive as trustworthy. This implies that brands leveraging social media endorsements should prioritize building credibility and ensuring product fit to maximize their influence on e-commerce decisions.

4. The Mediating Role of Perceived Social Pressure (FOMO and Social Approval) in the Relationship Between Online Identity and E-commerce Choices

This analysis explores the role of **perceived social pressure**, specifically **FOMO (Fear of Missing Out)** and **social approval**, as mediators in the relationship between **online identity** (self-presentation, social comparison, and authenticity) and **e-commerce choices** of college students. The mediation model evaluates whether social pressure arising from the need for social approval and fear of missing out helps explain how online identity influences students' e-commerce behaviours. The analysis involves assessing the direct effect of online

identity on e-commerce choices, the influence of online identity on social pressure (FOMO and social approval), the effect of social pressure on e-commerce choices, and the change in the direct effect of online identity on e-commerce choices after including the mediating variables.

Table no.4

The Mediating Role of Perceived Social Pressure (FOMO and Social Approval) in the Relationship between Online Identity and E-commerce Choices

S.no	Predictor	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	p-value
1	Online Identity → E-commerce Choices	0.5	0.06	0.45	8.33	<.001
2	Online Identity → FOMO and Social Approval	0.62	0.07	0.55	9	<.001
3	FOMO and Social Approval → E-commerce Choices	0.35	0.05	0.33	7	<.001
4	Online Identity → E-commerce Choices (with mediator)	0.22	0.06	0.21	4.33	0.002

The results demonstrate that perceived social pressure comprising both FOMO and social approval significantly mediates the relationship between online identity and e-commerce choices. In the first step, online identity has a significant direct effect on e-commerce choices, with a beta coefficient of 0.45 ($p < 0.001$). In the second step, online identity significantly influences perceived social pressure (FOMO and social approval), with a beta of 0.55 ($p < 0.001$), indicating that individuals with a stronger online identity are more likely to experience greater social pressure.

The third step reveals that FOMO and social approval have a strong and significant effect on e-commerce choices, with a beta of 0.33 ($p < 0.001$), showing that students who experience higher social pressure are more likely to engage in e-commerce activities. Finally, in the fourth step, after accounting for the mediating role of social pressure, the direct effect of online identity on e-commerce choices is reduced to a beta of 0.21 ($p = 0.002$), but remains significant. This indicates partial mediation, meaning that while perceived social pressure (FOMO and social approval) explains a portion of the relationship between online identity and e-commerce choices, other factors still contribute.

In conclusion, perceived social pressure, particularly the fear of missing out and the need for social approval, partially mediates the relationship between online identity and e-commerce choices. This suggests that students who actively manage their online identity are more likely to engage in e-commerce activities when they feel social pressure from their peers. Brands targeting this demographic should consider how social pressures such as FOMO and social approval can be leveraged in marketing strategies to influence e-commerce behaviours.

5. The Mediating Role of Perceived Self-congruity in the Relationship Between Online Identity and E-commerce Choices

This analysis evaluates how perceived self-congruity the alignment between a person's self-concept and a brand's identity mediates the relationship between online identity (self-presentation, social comparison, and authenticity) and e-commerce choices of college students. The mediation analysis tests whether the sense of alignment between a brand and an individual's values and identity helps explain the impact of online identity on e-commerce behaviour. The analysis involves assessing the direct effect of online identity on e-commerce choices, the influence of online identity on self-congruity, the effect of self-congruity on e-commerce choices, and the change in the direct effect of online identity on e-commerce choices after including self-congruity as a mediator.

Table no.5

The Mediating Role of Perceived Self-congruity in the Relationship Between Online Identity and E-commerce Choices

S.No	Predictor	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	p-value
1	Online Identity → E-commerce Choices	0.55	0.07	0.5	8.85	<.001
2	Online Identity → Self-congruity	0.6	0.06	0.58	10	<.001
3	Self-congruity → E-commerce Choices	0.48	0.05	0.44	9.6	<.001
4	Online Identity → E-commerce Choices (with mediator)	0.22	0.06	0.21	4	0.001

The results indicate that perceived self-congruity significantly mediates the relationship between online identity and e-commerce choices. In the first step, online identity has a significant direct impact on e-commerce choices, with a beta coefficient of 0.50 ($p < 0.001$). In the second step, online identity strongly predicts perceived self-congruity, with a beta of 0.58 ($p < 0.001$), suggesting that individuals with a stronger online identity are more likely to perceive a congruity between their personal values and the brands they interact with.

The third step demonstrates that self-congruity has a strong, significant positive effect on e-commerce choices, with a beta of 0.44 ($p < 0.001$), indicating that students who feel aligned with a brand's identity are more likely to engage in e-commerce activities. In the final step, after accounting for the mediating role of self-congruity, the direct effect of online identity on e-commerce choices is reduced to a beta of 0.21 ($p = 0.001$), but remains significant. This reduction indicates partial mediation, meaning that perceived self-congruity explains a portion of the relationship between online identity and e-commerce choices, but other factors also contribute.

In conclusion, self-congruity partially mediates the relationship between online identity and e-commerce choices, suggesting that students who perceive a strong alignment between their self-concept and the brands they engage with are more likely to make purchasing decisions. This highlights the importance of brand-identity alignment in

influencing consumer behaviour, particularly among college students who actively manage their online identities. Brands aiming to connect with this demographic should focus on building self-congruity in their marketing strategies to enhance e-commerce engagement.

Suggestions:

To effectively engage students and enhance brand loyalty, companies can adopt several strategies. First, leveraging peer endorsements through user-generated content campaigns, referral programs, and incentives for sharing positive experiences can amplify authenticity and trust. Creating online communities for students to share reviews and discussions further strengthens these efforts. Second, credibility in endorsements can be improved by collaborating with influencers who align with the brand's values and resonate with their audiences. Authentic messaging and a clear connection between the product and the endorser's lifestyle enhance trust and purchase intent.

Next, brands should cater to students' aspirations for social status and individuality by delivering visually appealing, aspirational content. Offering personalized or limited-edition products supports self-expression and social comparison needs. Additionally, marketing strategies that leverage FOMO, such as limited-time offers, exclusive launches, and early access deals, create urgency and encourage social validation through interactive campaigns or contests.

Aligning with students' values, such as sustainability and ethical practices, can deepen emotional connections and foster brand loyalty. Highlighting how products fit their lifestyles and aspirations enhances this relationship. Lastly, maintaining long-term engagement through relatable content and parasocial relationships with influencers builds trust and sustained loyalty. Consistent alignment with students' evolving values and identities is critical for enduring success.

Conclusion:

This research provides critical insights into the complex interplay between social media endorsements, online identity, and the mediating factors influencing college students' e-commerce behavior. The findings confirm the potent influence of peer endorsements, underscoring the importance of fostering peer-to-peer engagement strategies. Online identity factors, particularly social comparison and self-presentation, significantly impact purchase decisions. The mediating effects of trust, social pressure, and self-congruity highlight the crucial role these factors play in shaping purchasing behavior. Brands seeking to effectively reach this demographic must integrate these findings into their marketing strategies. By strategically leveraging peer influence, cultivating trust, and crafting messaging that aligns with students' evolving values and identities, brands can develop impactful campaigns that foster both short-term sales and enduring brand loyalty. Future research could explore cultural variations in these influences or focus on specific product categories to further refine understanding.

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