SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCES CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES, INCLUDING ACCESS TO INFORMATION, PURCHASING HABITS, AND BRAND AWARENESS

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ABSTRACT

Consumers' use of social networking sites has skyrocketed in the contemporary period, and their activities on these sites have far-reaching consequences. Several social networking websites have an impact on buying decisions. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, etc., all have many features that influence and entice large audiences. Today's consumers increasingly rely on social media to inform their purchasing choices. Marketing via social media platforms is crucial, and it is one of the most effective strategies now available in advertising. Every company owner wants to maximize profits, and they know this is possible through numerous marketing tools and tactics. The study's primary objective is to investigate the predicted links between different social media marketing operations, customer actions, and consumer behavior, focusing on the latter among heavy social media users.

Keywords: social media, consumer behavior, business strategy

I.   INTRODUCTION

The modern marketing literature has a plethora of studies on the topic of consumer purchasing behavior. Salem [1] defined it as the steps a customer takes after realizing they have a need: researching available solutions, considering the pros and disadvantages of each, and ultimately settling on one. "Thus, the buying process is a sequence of actions taken by customers. It includes questions like what to purchase, when, where to buy it, what brand or model to buy, how to pay for it, and how much money to spend. Consumers' impressions of a company's products and reputation as a whole are significant factors in the latter's success." A customer's propensity to buy a product is mainly determined by their prior exposure to the brand and the level of satisfaction achieved by the item's use in meeting its intended purpose. In addition, advertisers may encourage purchases by creating campaigns that resonate with target audiences. "In recent years, several internet media outlets have evolved to convey a business' product and influence customers' purchasing choices. The development of various ICTs has led to the emergence of such avenues."
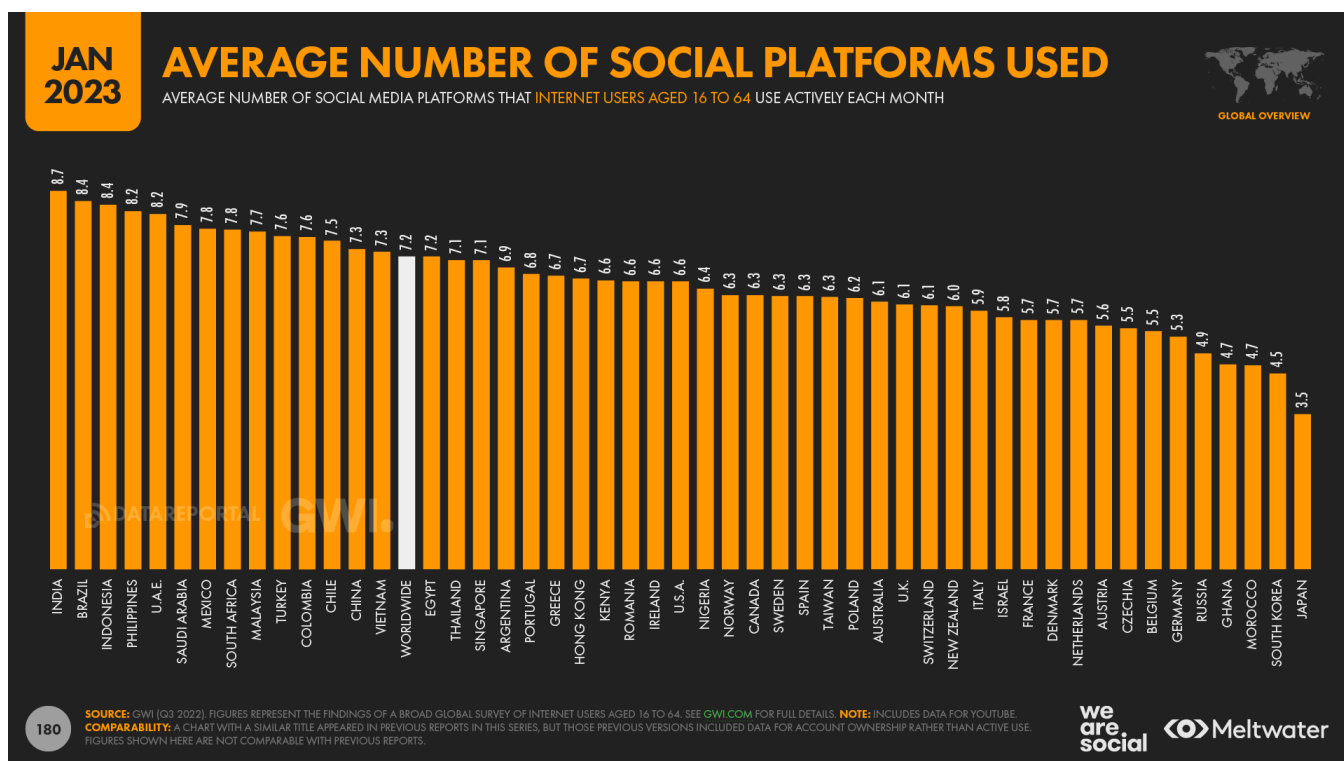
Previous research on social media marketing activities demonstrated that creating meaningful relationships with clients via online platforms is a cutting-edge method of promoting and reaching large audiences [2]. With the rapid development of communication technology, several social media sites have developed in recent years, prompting marketers to make use of them for easily connecting, talking, and working with their clients [3]. Due to the fast development of the Internet and other information technologies, business professionals were given many new options for communicating with their target markets and bolstering their brands [4]. Various web-based technologies make it possible for internet users to digitally exchange and broadcast a big pool of knowledge via social media platforms. Social media have been referred to by many other names in the past, including "Web 2.0," "social networking communications," "social networking tools," "social networking sites," and "blogs," among others.

The importance of social media in influencing consumer purchasing behavior has led to a rapid expansion of its use in the last few years. An increasing number of people are forgoing conventional media in favor of mobile-friendly internet alternatives. Kar and Kushwaha [5] state that social media is common for customers to look for credible information about a company. As smartphones and other mobile devices have increased, so has the consensus that looking for information about a company on social media sites is the best choice. "They may also help businesses learn more about their customers and make informed marketing choices. Because of these advantages, businesses are investing time, energy, and marketing savvy into spreading the word online about their services to sway consumers to make a purchase." Despite social media marketing's popularity, only a few studies have looked at its potential impact on consumers' final buying decisions. Previous empirical research on social media

marketing initiatives has studied the influence on buy intention but not actual purchase behavior.

There are risks associated with online buying during the epidemic, such as making impulsive purchases. During the 2009 COVID-19 epidemic, Naeem [6] presented intriguing research on the impact of social media on fear and consumer reactions, with a particular emphasis on the function of social media in inciting panic and, in turn, a flurry of frantic spending. His research confirms that social media shape people's collective response to the coronavirus, which affects people's panic purchasing reaction [6]. One of his primary conclusions is that "social proof and influence from close connections might improve consumer panic buying behavior" (p. The author notes that misinformation and falsehoods spread through social media have contributed to consumers' heightened sense of insecurity, prompting them to make hasty purchases so they may remain at home for longer. He says that people's increased isolation and staying inside, as well as their use of social media and connect with government officials, all contributed to a climate of heightened anxiety and impulse purchases [7]. "panic purchasing has become a worldwide phenomenon reflecting that lack of control among consumers in the age of Coronavirus lockdown," Islam et al. [8] explain. Stores ran out of necessities like toilet paper and food because customers bought them on the spot or repeatedly. Social media has been inundated with posts about people's panic buying as well as images of empty shelves and long lines outside of stores, all of which have contributed to the already tense situation by reinforcing people's propensity to make purchases on the spur of the moment and with an unhealthy level of obsession [**8**].

II.   OBJECTIVES

- Examining the direct and indirect effect of social media marketing features on buying decisions.
- To examine how social media marketing will affect the final consumer behavior
- To find out the forecasted relationships among various social media marketing activities, customer activities, and consumer behavior.

III.   LITERATURE REVIEW

The social media landscape has shifted significantly in the last year [9]. The term refers to "internet-based channels that let users easily and selectively communicate with one other and get value from user-generated content" (Carr and Hayes, 2015, in [10]). According to tefko and Steffek [11], the last few years have been a time of fast expansion in the digital sphere, whereby the cutting edge of today's technology is tomorrow's relic. The increasing prevalence of innovations like the Internet of Things, virtual reality, artificial intelligence, and free-standing businesses will test many shops. There is no denying the effectiveness of social media. Thus it makes up a sizable chunk of most businesses' marketing plans [12].

Throughout this coronavirus outbreak, social media has played an important role. Its effects and impacts may be seen in many facets of daily life, from the workplace to classrooms, theatres, and even retail. People's reliance on social media for solace, entertainment, and human connection increased as the COVID-19 epidemic caused social isolation and lockdown. How and what people reveal about themselves on social media has evolved due to people's increasing tendency to withdraw from others and shut down [10]. People have

connected with one another and learned more about the epidemic thanks to social media, which has also helped them keep in touch with loved ones when they are far from their communities [8]. Nabity-Grover et al. [10] hypothesize that people were more careful about their online personas and the information they shared about their health, their interactions with others, and their perspectives on health during the epidemic.

According to Criteo [13], an advertising platform, 61% of Italian consumers downloaded the online store application during the lockdown (38% of them used it daily), 59% of consumers downloaded the online food delivery application (26% of them used it daily and 26% several times a week), and 46% of consumers downloaded the online food delivery application during the lockdown (24% of them used it daily and 26% several times a week).

Gender is crucial in consumer behavior (even outside of pandemic situations). Several researchers have found that males and females use social media for quite different reasons, and these differences are significant. Women, unlike males, are more likely to use social media to maintain connections with friends and family, get access to social knowledge, and share what they know, according to research by Krasnova et al. [14]. However, men's social media usage is driven by their desire to learn about broad topics since they do not value commitments as highly as women. In contrast to males, who use social media to broaden their thin social networks, women use it to deepen the bonds between themselves and those with whom they interact [15]. Compared to males, women had more positive perceptions of social media's usability, relative advantage, and compatibility [16]. When we highlight the privacy risk associated with social media identity information sharing (e.g., full name, date of birth, home address, bank account number, phone number, etc.), women exhibit significantly higher fears of their misuse, which may fail to complete an online purchase. Compared to males, women saw a greater threat to their privacy when publishing photographs on Snapchat and Reddit, while they saw less of a threat on Facebook and Twitter [17]. One possible explanation for this trend is that men and women use social media for different reasons when building and maintaining relationships. Insight into gender disparities among Italian users regarding individual social media choice reveals that women constitute the vast majority of Snapchat (72%) and Pinterest (76% of all users) users. Snapchat's primary function is visual communication and connection development, whereas Pinterest caters to those looking for ideas about their inclination for online purchasing. Another research has shown [18] that social media visual information, especially photos, and videos, had a greater impact on women than on males. Girls in Generation Z spend more time than males on social networking and texting through cell phones, but both sexes are glued to video games and other electronic entertainment [19]. They strongly identify with published information and have high standards for honesty, especially regarding their use of social media (which is mirrored in their increasing confidence in the medium). According to research conducted by Hou et al. [20], during the COVID-19 epidemic, sadness and anxiety have become more commonplace in China, with women reporting more severe anxiety symptoms than men. The authors also investigated the use of social media as a source of knowledge about COVID-19 and found that it was the primary location for the dissemination of news and updates on the

outbreak. Nonetheless, there were disparities in the proportion of people who relied on conventional media as their primary source of knowledge regarding COVID-19, despite the fact that there was no difference in the amount of time spent searching for such information. Those who spent more time looking for information (more than 60 min) on COVID-19 reported more severe anxiety symptoms than those who spent less time searching (less than 30 min).

IV.   CONSUMER PURCHASE INTENTION

Consumers' purchase propensity is measured by their "purchase intention" [22]. The purchasing cycle may be accurately anticipated with the help of purchase intent. Consumers' propensity to purchase reveals the probable outcome of a specific action. According to Alnsour et al. [23], consumer purchase intention is the degree to which they plan to purchase a product or service based on their current level of satisfaction with the product or service and their own preferences. According to the logic presented by Alnsour et al. [23], this high level of customer purchase intention indicates that the product will likely be purchased and that the buyer is inclined to purchase the goods again when needed. An individual's purpose predicts behavior to do the behavior, as stated in the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) by Fishbein and Ajzen [24] and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) by Ajzen [25]. That behavioral intention predicts actual use behavior is supported by research. Oleynikovaa's [26] systematic assessment of 450 studies found a linear correlation between behavioral intention and actual use. Some researchers employed the desire to buy as a determinant variable. One explanation is the predictive power of purchase intent on consumers' actions. The intensity of antecedents might have a favorable or unfavorable impact on purchase intent. As stated by Al-Qaeda, Isa, and Othman [27], positive purchasing intentions lead to a more significant market share, customer loyalty, and a propensity to buy from the service provider. Unfavorable purchase intentions, conversely, result in customers becoming less loyal to a particular company or service and even spreading bad reviews online. Parasuraman et al. [28] concluded that a company's success hinges on its capacity to encourage consumers to make excellent and favorable purchases.

V.   SOCIAL MEDIA AND CONSUMER PURCHASE INTENTION

The proliferation of social media has opened up a wide variety of new opportunities for businesses and marketers to influence customers' buying decisions. Social media has altered the dynamics of customer behavior by accelerating the purchase process, claim Permatasari and Kuswadi [29]. In order to complete a purchase, customers often go through many phases. The processes involved need identification, resource gathering, alternative assessment, and final purchase. In light of this, Permatasari and Kuswadi [29]. Conclude that social media marketing shortens the consumer's sequential process by allowing them to skip over specific steps before reaching the point where they have a strong enough intention to buy that they really go through with it. Social media has increased the quality of the information available to customers. Informational seeking, the second step in the typical customer purchase process, benefit from this enhancement. Many product-related data, including plain text, hyper-markup text, and downloadable periodicals and brochures, are readily available

through social media. In this social media age, knowledge is at everyone's fingertips. Advertising on social media may reach people all over the world. Kulimula [30] demonstrates that the company's advertising messaging on social media may reach individuals from various walks of life. Customers will spend less time researching products, increasing the likelihood that they will make a purchase. Information accessibility is a powerful predictor of future purchase intent, and Never [31] believes that consumers' search costs are lowered across the board when information is readily available.

Others have stated that the greatest differentiating aspect of social media that affects consumer purchasing behaviour is the potential of social network platforms to stimulate dual sorts of contact between the user and the company. Web 2.0 characteristics like user-generated content and user ratings and endorsements form the backbone of social media, a kind of online communication. Although this information is mostly utilised to provide feedback to the corporation, its impact on other social network members is far greater. Moreover, Young and Lian [22] argue that user-generated content is more interesting than brand messages. Hence, consumers are influenced to buy thanks to the praise they see other people giving on social media. In addition, Nikita [32] brought forward the concept that user-generated content is highly correlated with positive consumer behaviour.

Online communities have a significant impact on customers because of the persuasive power of peer pressure. This implies that, much as when friends go shopping together in real life, social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter enable peer and group buying. Hence, social media affects consumers' inclination to purchase through opinion leadership and reference group effects. People have a natural tendency to buy what everyone else is buying because they want to be accepted by their peers. A statistically significant correlation between consumers' behavioural intent to purchase and social media group purchases was found by Young and Lian [22].

VI.   SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING FEATURES

Many aspects of social media marketing have been used in previous studies to testify to their influence on consumers' purchasing decisions. However, this article zeroes in on four specific aspects of social media advertising to trace their causes and consequences on consumers' confidence in brands and, ultimately, their purchasing decisions. Perceived relevance, interaction, entertainment, and information are some of the elements/features. Consequently, the fundamental contribution of this study is the unified evaluation of the impact of these factors on the purchasing choice mediated by brand trust. One can see a lack of empirical research on these issues in the Arab area by looking at previous studies. Thus, this research aims to fill some of the blanks in understanding how social media influences consumers' purchasing decisions by gaining new perspectives in the UAE.

Impact of Social Media Impact on Consumer Purchases

The empirical literature on the diffusion and use of IT has developed. The increasing focus on this topic may be traced back to the realization that the success of IT applications is highly reliant on user adoption. As a result, several ideas that sought to quantify people's and businesses' embrace of technological advancements have been put out and confirmed. Researchers have used a variety of frameworks, such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Unified Theory of Adoption and Use of Technology, to examine the factors that influence people's openness to adopt new technologies (UTAUT). Nevertheless, the

UTAUT, introduced earlier by Venkatesh et al. [33], is the most prominent current popular theory that has been actively utilized and used to identify the factors of consumers' adoption and usage of technology in many contexts. Alawadhi and Morris [34] state that UTAUT is the best model for studying new technology adoption. In a similar vein, Arfi et al. [34] found that the UTAUT model efficiently unified the many studies done on the topic of technology adoption. Academic literature writers often see social media as a fundamental component of IT. Numerous studies have used UTAUT to analyze the impact of social media advertising on consumers' final purchases. Consequently, the UTAUT model serves as the theoretical basis for this investigation into the relationship between social media marketing elements and consumer behavior to determine whether or not brand trust mediates these links.

Much previous research (e.g., [36]) employed the UTAUT model to describe the impact of social media marketing elements on consumer behavior. People cannot just randomly accept cutting-edge IT systems; they need faith in them. When customers believe in the products promoted on social media, they are more likely to make a purchase decision. Social media has enabled businesses to build relationships with their target audiences and reach them more effectively than ever before, which has helped them increase sales, gain favorable brand recognition, and attract new customers. Rapid dissemination of information on social media reduces client uncertainty while making purchases.

A. Interactivity

One aspect of digital marketing that has garnered much attention is its potential for user interaction. In the literature, "interactivity" refers to a company's prowess in making it possible for its constituents to communicate and share data digitally. According to Kiousis [37], marketers may also be able to communicate with their existing and potential clients over the Internet. Given the importance of social media sites in providing organizations' clients with various options for sharing and getting various information, the interactions utilizing these platforms allow people to receive remarkable advantages when shopping for specific products or services. Moreover, as online media platforms evolve, customers are increasingly inclined to engage with one another in online conversations about a product's merits, history, and characteristics. Positive economic outcomes may occur from strengthened connections between consumers and the businesses that offer them goods and services. Arjun et al. [38] state that businesses may easily communicate with clients via the Internet, email, and mobile apps.

Previous studies have shown that social media interactions may affect consumers' buying decisions and confidence in a business. According to research by Zafar et al. [39], customers' propensity to make impulsive purchases is significantly influenced by the level of involvement provided by a given medium. Social media interaction has been studied by academics and shown to impact consumer choice significantly. Liao et al. [40] found similar results, confirming that a user-friendly website influences customers to make purchases. People generally believe that social media platforms are an essential means of reaching customers and engaging with them to influence their purchasing decisions. Sohail et al. [41] did their research and concluded that participation in social media increases consumers'

confidence in brands. Nevertheless, existing reviews of previous studies suggest that only a small amount of empirical work has yet to be done to evaluate the mediating influence of trust between interaction and the final purchase decision.

B. Entertainment

In today's highly competitive industry, social media marketing relies heavily on the creation of amusing, pleasant, and intriguing content. Entertainment in the form of social media arises when service providers make their customers' experiences memorable by catering to their need for humorous and engaging content, as stated by Cheung et al. [42]. The importance of entertainment to a user's impression of a social media platform was stressed by Pertierra [43]. In a similar vein, Park et al. [44] found that posting content that is interesting and lives up to users' expectations is a key driver of consumer involvement on social networking platforms. This is because people look for brand-related content as a way to unwind and kill time. Courtois et al., De Marez, and Verleye [45] concluded that users' top motivations for loading social media material are amusement and escapism, with satisfaction in both areas serving as the most reliable measures of success. Firms may get more great value from customers by effectively entertaining them and increasing their brand perceptions via good word of mouth and brand trust. Hence, it seems to reason that a wide range of social media entertainment options, such as competitions, online games, and the sharing of prepared movies, should have a beneficial effect on user engagement and brand preference.

Mustafi and Hosain [46] cited previous research that revealed that amusement has a significant influence in influencing customer attitudes and behaviour. According to research by Van Noort and Van Reijmersdal [47], customers are more likely to make an informed purchase when they find a company's marketing activities humorous and engaging. Sohail et al. [48] also discovered that entrainment had a constructive effect on consumers' confidence in a brand. Hafez [49] further demonstrated that the connection between social media marketing characteristics and brand equity is mediated by brand trust. According to Wottrich et al. [50], creating and disseminating engaging social media commercials and content tends to increase customers' confidence in and preference for a company. In spite of this, a study of the literature shows that there has been little actual research done to see whether trust plays a mediating role in the relationship between leisure activities and consumer spending.

C. Perceived relevance

According to Zhu and Chang [51], "the degree to which consumers consider tailored advertising to be self-related or in some manner essential in accomplishing their objectives and values" is the conceptualization of perceived relevance. Perceived relevance in digital environments is achieved through crafting communications that resonate with the intended audience. A company's ability to tailor its offerings to each customer, highlight its unique qualities, and build trusting connections with its most important constituents hinge on how well it manages its online presence. Zhu and Chen [51]proposed a system for classifying companies' social media postings according to the degree of personalization they offer: highly personalized messages and broadcasts. A broadcast is mainly concerned with disseminating marketing material to large groups of people, whereas a personalized message

is targeted at a specific individual or group. Brands like Burberry and Gucci stand out as examples of companies that manage their online presence by sending specific brand messages to consumers who may be interested in personalizing their purchases. Perceived relevance in this research may be defined as how well social media ads are tailored to each individual's preferences and requirements.

According to previous research, customers create a favorable attitude towards a company and its products or services when they believe that the company's marketing messages are tailored to their needs. Perceived relevance impacts customers' purchasing decisions through self-awareness, as discovered by Zhu and Chang [51]. If businesses pay attention to how customers respond to their inquiries on social media, they may increase sales and customer confidence in their brand. Hafez's [49] findings that brand trust mediates the associations between SMM and BE provide support. Similarly, earlier research has shown that customers' perceptions of the relevance and suitability of marketing materials to their individual needs and interests positively impact brand trust and purchasing behavior.

D. Informativeness

Rotzoll and Haefner [52] defined "informativeness" as the extent to which commercials teach and educate viewers to improve their perceptions of the advertised brand. In addition, Lee and Hong [53] noted that informativeness is shown by the fact that marketing professionals create convincing advertisements that help draw in a more significant number of clients and influence their behaviors in relation to marketing material. Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter provide a convenient and efficient resource for consumers looking for information on a wide variety of products and services. In addition, the proliferation of the Internet and the advent of new smartphones have made it simpler for businesses to disseminate information online and establish connections with clients. The information offered on social media networks, mainly when online evaluations are supplied, tends to be more trusted by customers than conventional marketing and sales promotion activities. Hence, presenting customers with information about product or service quality and brand values will likely enhance brand trust.

Kitsios et al. [54] stressed the importance of consumers' ability to share their brand experiences on social networking sites as a valuable resource for other consumers. The informativeness of social media was shown to have a favorable effect on customer purchasing behavior, according to research by Blanco et al. [55]. This is consistent with the findings of Lee and Hong [53], who confirmed the beneficial effect of innovative advertising and thorough explanations of customers' opinions. Their research showed that customers' purchasing decisions were affected when relevant brand information was available on the company's website. In addition, Lee and Hong [53] observed that social media had surpassed conventional media as the primary information source for customers before purchasing. To this end, businesses in today's age of social media digitization pay close attention to the production of marketing content and the determination of the frequency of postings on media platforms in an effort to realize their marketing goals. In addition, Lee and Hong [53] discovered that informational content increases consumers' confidence in a company's

products and services. In light of what has been said so far, informativeness is an integral part of marketing that may be used to influence and affect consumer behavior. Social media platforms like Snapchat, YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook may be used to spread brand messaging and increase awareness, which can boost consumer confidence in the company and its products.

VII.   CONCLUSION

Influencers utilize social media platforms to develop and disseminate content for their followers. Instagram and other social media platforms are global in their reach because they eliminate time and space restrictions. Influencers attract a growing following by deviating from the standard and documenting their unconventional lifestyle online. What they wear, where they go, what they eat, and their beauty regimen are all examples of information that might be divulged by fashion and beauty influencers. Fans sign up because they recognize aspects of the influencer's life (or the one they want to have) in the stuff they share. This leads to forming a para-social connection, in which they come to feel a close affinity with the influencers. They see the influencers as trustworthy, respectable, and generally appealing because they can identify with them. Lastly, influencers earn credibility and sway over their communities by keeping in touch with their followers on social media and letting them into their lives.

Companies recognize the importance of influencers in connecting with consumers, particularly the younger generations. They form alliances with influential people to spread the word about their wares. This tactic enables businesses to depart from conventional forms of advertising, which often leave customers unconvinced to make a purchase. Since not all influencers have the same content and audiences, brands may narrow down on certain demographics when selecting those to collaborate with.

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