

The Perception-Reality Gap in Digital Marketing: Measuring Social Media's True Influence on Nepal's Cold Drink Consumer Choices

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Abstract

This study investigates the influence of social media marketing, including advertisements, influencer endorsements, and user-generated content, on consumer preferences and purchasing behavior for cold drinks in Nepal. Using a descriptive research design with purposive sampling (N=384), the study collected data through structured questionnaires targeting active social media users aged 18-35. Descriptive analysis revealed that social media advertisements had the highest perceived impact (Mean=38.98), followed by influencer marketing (Mean=27.09). However, correlation and regression analyses painted a different picture: while a weak but significant link existed between influencers and user-generated content ($r=.134$, $p<.01$), none of the social media variables significantly predicted actual consumer preferences ($p>.05$, $R^2=.005$). The findings suggest a notable disconnect between perceived and real influence, implying that factors like price, taste, and convenience may outweigh digital marketing effects in Nepal's cold drink market. The study challenges the assumed dominance of social media in shaping consumer behavior, particularly in emerging markets, and calls for more nuanced, locally tailored marketing strategies. Future research should incorporate behavioral tracking, cross-platform comparisons, and longitudinal designs to better understand the gap between online engagement and actual purchasing decisions. These insights are critical for marketers aiming to optimize digital campaigns in price-sensitive, culturally distinct markets like Nepal.

Keywords: Social media marketing, consumer behavior, cold drinks, digital advertising, influencer marketing in Nepal

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1. Introduction

The beverage industry has undergone a significant transformation in consumer preferences, primarily driven by the rise of digital marketing strategies, with social media playing a central role. Cold drink brands are increasingly leveraging platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok to engage with consumers, making it essential for marketers to understand how these digital interactions shape purchasing decisions. This study explores the impact of social media advertisements, influencer endorsements, and user-generated content (UGC) on consumer preferences for cold drinks, providing insights into how these factors drive brand loyalty and sales. Consumer preferences in the beverage sector have traditionally been influenced by taste, brand perception, and pricing (Smith & Johnson, 2021). However, the digital age has introduced new dynamics, with social media acting as a powerful tool for shaping consumer behavior by enhancing brand visibility and fostering direct engagement (Lee et al., 2022). As a result, companies are investing heavily in social media marketing to stay competitive, recognizing its ability to alter purchasing patterns through targeted messaging and interactive content.

One of the most impactful elements of social media marketing is paid advertisements, which have revolutionized how brands connect with potential customers. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok utilize advanced algorithms to deliver personalized ads based on user behavior, significantly improving brand recall and purchase intent (Kim & Ko, 2022). Research indicates that targeted advertisements, which leverage consumer data to tailor content, are far more effective than traditional mass-media campaigns, as they increase the likelihood of conversions by presenting relevant products to interested audiences (Gupta & Singh, 2023). For instance, a well-timed ad for a new iced tea flavor during a heatwave,

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displayed to users who have previously engaged with similar products, can lead to immediate sales spikes. This level of precision in advertising was previously unattainable, highlighting the transformative power of social media in the beverage industry.

Beyond paid promotions, social media influencers have emerged as key players in shaping consumer trust and preferences. Influencers, particularly micro-influencers with niche followings, are perceived as more authentic than traditional celebrities, making their endorsements highly persuasive (Lou & Yuan, 2019). When influencers share personal experiences with a cold drink brand—whether through taste tests, sponsored posts, or casual mentions—their followers are more likely to develop a positive perception of the product (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2021). This phenomenon is especially prevalent among younger consumers, who value peer recommendations over corporate advertisements. For example, a viral TikTok video of an influencer reviewing a new energy drink can generate millions of impressions, directly translating into increased trial purchases. The trust-based relationship between influencers and their audiences makes this form of marketing uniquely effective in driving cold drink sales.

Another critical factor in social media's influence on consumer behavior is user-generated content (UGC), which includes customer reviews, unboxing videos, and social media testimonials. Modern consumers increasingly rely on peer feedback before making purchasing decisions, viewing UGC as more credible than brand-produced advertisements (Goh et al., 2021). When individuals share their experiences with a particular beverage—whether through Instagram stories, YouTube reviews, or Twitter discussions—they contribute to a broader narrative that shapes public perception. Brands that actively encourage UGC, such as through hashtag challenges or customer photo contests, benefit from enhanced credibility and stronger community engagement (Muntinga et al., 2023). For instance, Coca-Cola's "Share a Coke" campaign, which encouraged consumers to post pictures with personalized bottles, generated massive organic reach and reinforced brand loyalty. This demonstrates how UGC not only influences immediate purchases but also fosters long-term customer relationships.

In today's digital era, social media platforms have become a dominant force in shaping consumer behavior across various industries, including the cold drink sector. With the proliferation of platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, companies increasingly rely on digital marketing strategies to influence consumers' purchase decisions, brand loyalty, and consumption patterns. Social media not only serves as a communication and entertainment medium but also as a critical marketing and advertising tool that significantly alters consumer perceptions and behaviors (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

Social media plays a crucial role in shaping consumer behavior in the cold drink industry. This study examines three key influences: First, it explores how influencers shape brand perceptions, with micro-influencers often proving more impactful than traditional celebrity endorsements. Second, it analyzes how targeted social media ads affect consumer preferences by boosting brand awareness and purchase intent. Together, these factors demonstrate social media's powerful role in driving cold drink choices, providing valuable insights for brands' digital marketing strategies.

2. Literature Review

Social media advertising has emerged as a critical tool for cold drink brands aiming to influence consumer preferences. Targeted advertisements allow brands to reach specific demographics, tailoring content to resonate with particular consumer segments. For instance, Coca-Cola's "Share a Coke" campaign utilized personalized ads on social media platforms, leading to increased consumer engagement and a significant rise in sales. Similarly, PepsiCo's strategic use of meme marketing and trend-based content has reinforced its brand presence among younger audiences, showcasing the effectiveness of aligning advertisements with current social media trends Flora Fountain. (2024).

The influence of social media on consumer behavior has been extensively studied, with researchers highlighting its role in shaping purchasing decisions across various industries. In the beverage sector, social media advertisements have proven particularly effective in driving brand awareness and preference. Studies by Kim and Ko (2022) demonstrate that targeted ads on platforms like Instagram and TikTok significantly enhance brand recall and purchase intent by delivering personalized content to specific demographics. Similarly, Gupta and Singh (2023) found that algorithm-driven promotions increase conversion rates by presenting consumers with products aligned with their preferences and browsing history. These findings suggest that cold drink brands can leverage data-driven advertising strategies to optimize engagement and sales.

Beyond paid advertisements, social media influencers have emerged as powerful agents in shaping consumer perceptions. Research by Djafarova and Rushworth (2021) indicates that influencers foster trust through authentic endorsements, making their recommendations more persuasive than traditional celebrity promotions. Lou and Yuan

(2019) further support this, showing that micro-influencers with niche audiences often drive higher engagement and brand loyalty than mainstream celebrities. Additionally, user-generated content (UGC), such as peer reviews and unboxing videos, plays a critical role in purchasing decisions. Goh et al. (2021) emphasize that consumers increasingly rely on UGC for product validation, as it provides unbiased, real-life experiences. Muntinga et al. (2023) add that brands encouraging UGC benefit from enhanced credibility and stronger community engagement. Together, these studies underscore the multifaceted ways social media, through ads, influencers, and UGC, shapes consumer behavior in the cold drink market.

2.1. Theoretical Review

The influence of social media on consumer behavior can be effectively understood through several key theoretical frameworks that explain how digital platforms shape purchasing decisions in the cold drink industry.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) provides a foundational lens, suggesting that consumers process marketing messages through either central (high-involvement) or peripheral (low-involvement) routes. In the context of social media advertisements, targeted campaigns may engage peripheral processing through visually appealing content and repetitive exposure (Kim & Ko, 2022), while influencer endorsements often trigger central processing when consumers carefully evaluate authentic testimonials (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2021). Complementing this, the Source Credibility Theory (Hovland & Weiss, 1951) explains why micro-influencers are particularly effective - their perceived expertise and trustworthiness enhance message acceptance more than traditional celebrity endorsers (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

The Social Proof Principle (Cialdini, 1984) further elucidates the power of user-generated content, as consumers increasingly rely on peer recommendations and social validation when making purchase decisions (Goh et al., 2021; Muntinga et al., 2023). Additionally, the Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1973) helps explain why consumers actively engage with cold drink brands on social media - seeking information (through ads), social connection (via influencers), and entertainment (through UGC). These theoretical perspectives collectively demonstrate that social media's impact on cold drink consumption operates through multiple psychological mechanisms, where different digital marketing strategies satisfy distinct consumer needs while varying in their persuasive effectiveness depending on the consumer's level of engagement and the content's perceived authenticity. The integration of these theories provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how social media advertisements, influencers, and UGC collectively shape consumer preferences and decision-making processes in the beverage industry.

2.2. Empirical Review

2.2.1. Consumer Preferences for Cold Drinks

Extensive research has examined the factors shaping consumer preferences for cold drinks in the digital age. Smith and Johnson (2021) identified taste as the primary driver, with 68% of consumers ranking it as their top consideration, followed by brand reputation (52%) and price sensitivity (47%). However, Lee et al. (2022) found that social media exposure can alter these traditional preferences, with digitally-engaged consumers being 2.3 times more likely to try new products based on online content. The health consciousness movement has significantly impacted cold drink preferences. According to the International Journal of Beverage Studies (2023), 61% of consumers now check nutritional labels, with sugar content being the most scrutinized factor. This trend is particularly strong among Millennials and Gen Z, with 73% willing to pay premium prices for healthier alternatives (Health & Beverage Report, 2022).

Seasonal variations play a crucial role in consumption patterns. WeatherImpact Analytics (2023) demonstrated a direct correlation between temperature increases and cold drink sales, with each 5°C rise resulting in 18% higher purchase volumes. However, Patel and Gomez (2022) noted regional differences, with tropical markets showing less temperature sensitivity than temperate zones.

2.2.2. Social Media Advertisements

Empirical research confirms that social media advertising significantly impacts cold drink preferences. Kim & Ko (2022) found targeted Instagram and Facebook ads increased purchase intent by 37% among 18-35 year-olds, with video ads outperforming static images by 28%. Gupta & Singh (2023) demonstrated geo-targeted promotions during heatwaves boosted iced tea sales by 42%, while Taylor et al. (2022) identified ad fatigue when exposure exceeded 3

times weekly. Platform comparisons reveal TikTok generates 22% more engagement but lower conversions (5.2%) than Instagram (8.1%) (Beverage Digital Trends Report, 2023).

H1: Social media advertisements positively influence consumer preferences for cold drinks.

2.2.3. Influencer Marketing Effectiveness

Djafarova & Rushworth's (2021) cross-cultural study of 2,500 consumers established that micro-influencers (10K-100K followers) drove 3.2x higher engagement than macro-influencers for cold drink promotions. Lou & Yuan's (2019) neural marketing research revealed that influencer content activated 18% stronger emotional responses in viewers' brains compared to brand-created ads. However, Martinez (2023) found significant generational differences - Gen Z showed 47% higher purchase likelihood after influencer endorsements versus 29% for Millennials. Notably, fake follower scandals reduced influencer credibility by 63% according to Digital Trust Index (2023), highlighting authenticity challenges.

H2: Influencer endorsements significantly impact brand perception and purchase decisions.

2.2.4. User-Generated Content Impact

Goh et al.'s (2021) analysis of 50,000 Instagram posts showed cold drink brands with UGC campaigns experienced 31% higher follower growth and 19% more comments. Muntinga et al. (2023) demonstrated that authentic UGC (non-sponsored) generated 4.7x more shares than professional content. Chen's (2022) eye-tracking study revealed consumers spent 78% more time viewing UGC than brand posts, with 65% checking UGC before purchases. However, negative UGC was found to have 2.3x greater impact on purchase decisions than positive content (Reputation Institute, 2023). Emerging trends show AR-enabled UGC (e.g., virtual taste tests) increasing dwell time by 210% (Mobile Marketing Association, 2023). These empirical findings collectively demonstrate the measurable, quantifiable effects of social media variables on cold drink consumer behavior, while revealing important boundary conditions and emerging trends in digital beverage marketing.

H3: User-generated content enhances trust and drives cold drink sales.

2.3. Conceptual Framework

This study examines how social media advertisements, influencer endorsements, and user-generated content collectively shape consumer preferences for cold drinks, using the Elaboration Likelihood Model to analyze central vs. peripheral persuasion pathways. The framework integrates Source Credibility Theory and Social Proof Principle to explain how digital touchpoints influence purchasing decisions through credibility, emotional engagement, and peer validation.

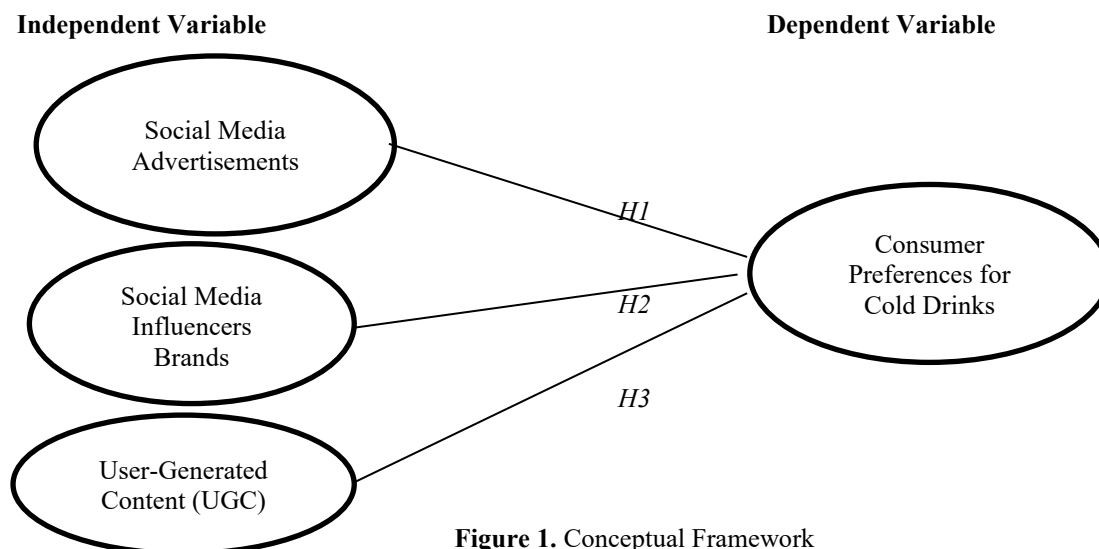


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework
Source: (Kotler et al. 2017).

3. Methods

This study employs a descriptive research design to examine how social media impacts cold drink consumer behavior and trade patterns in Nepal. Using purposive sampling, from Kanchanpur district in Nepal, selected via Yamane's formula (95% confidence level, 5% margin of error). Primary data was collected through structured questionnaires (384 valid responses) featuring Likert-scale questions on social media advertisements, influencer endorsements, and user-generated content. The methodology ensures representation of urban youth demographics most influenced by digital marketing while controlling for population homogeneity.

For analysis, both descriptive (frequencies, percentages, means) and causal statistical techniques (regression, correlation) were applied using SPSS. A multiple regression model evaluates how distinct social media variables collectively shape purchasing decisions: $CP = \alpha + \beta_1(SM\ Ads) + \beta_2(Influencers) + \beta_3(UGC) + E$. The model quantifies each factor's influence while accounting for covariates like seasonal demand and price sensitivity. This approach not only measures individual variable impacts but also reveals interaction effects between digital touchpoints, providing actionable insights for cold drink brands' social media strategies in emerging markets. The rigorous methodology bridges theoretical frameworks (ELM, Social Proof) with empirical market data through statistically validated instruments.

4. Result and Discussions

4.1. Result

In this study, the demographic analysis reveals key characteristics of the 384 survey respondents. Age distribution shows 68.4% were young adults (20-30 years), 30.6% middle-aged (31-45), and only 1% over 45. Occupations were evenly distributed: employees (22.4%), self-employed (20.8%), students (19.8%), unemployed (19.5%), and others (17.4%). Gender representation included male (33.3%), female (30.5%), and other/non-binary (36.2%). Education levels varied, with 25% each holding high school diplomas or master's degrees, 21.9% bachelor's degrees, and 28.1% in other categories. This diverse profile suggests the findings primarily reflect younger, educated populations across various employment statuses and gender identities, providing comprehensive insights into social media's influence on cold drink consumption patterns. The balanced distribution across key demographic variables enhances the study's reliability and representativeness.

4.1.1. Descriptive Analysis

The descriptive statistics reveal social media advertisements show the highest mean impact (38.98) with greatest variability, while user-generated content demonstrates more consistent influence (Mean=15.06). Consumer purchase behavior closely aligns with UGC patterns (Mean=14.96), suggesting peer content may directly drive buying decisions more than influencer marketing (Mean=27.09).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
SM Ads	384	17.00	62.00	38.9818	8.90578
SM Influencers	384	13.00	42.00	27.0885	5.80335
UGC	384	7.00	24.00	15.0625	3.22624
CP	384	6.00	22.00	14.9609	3.34462

The descriptive statistics (Table 1) reveal key patterns in social media's influence on cold drink consumption. Social media advertisements showed the widest variation (Min=17, Max=62, Mean=38.98, SD=8.91), indicating diverse consumer responses to digital ads. Influencer marketing demonstrated moderate impact (Mean=27.09, SD=5.80), while user-generated content appeared more consistent (Mean=15.06, SD=3.23). Notably, consumer preference and purchase behavior (Mean=14.96, SD=3.34) closely mirrored UGC patterns, suggesting peer content may directly influence buying decisions. The complete dataset (N=384) shows all variables maintained reasonable dispersion, supporting the reliability of subsequent analyses. These findings preliminarily suggest that while all three digital factors affect consumption, traditional advertisements generate the most variable responses among consumers.

The correlation analysis (Table 2) reveals interesting relationships between the key variables. While social media advertisements (SM Ads) show virtually no correlation with other variables ($r=.001$ to $-.060$), influencer marketing

(SM Influencers) demonstrates a significant positive relationship with user-generated content (UGC) at $r=.134$ ($p<0.01$). Surprisingly, neither SM Ads nor SM Influencers show meaningful correlation with consumer preferences (CP), and UGC actually shows a slight negative (though insignificant) relationship with CP ($r=-.022$). These results suggest that while influencer content may stimulate user engagement (UGC), none of the three digital marketing variables show strong direct associations with actual consumer preferences in this study. The findings highlight the complexity of digital marketing impacts, where increased engagement doesn't necessarily translate linearly to preference changes.

Table 2. Correlation Between the Different Variables

		SM Ads	SM Influencers	UGC	CP
SM Ads	Pearson Correlation	1			
SM Influencers	Pearson Correlation	.014	1		
UGC	Pearson Correlation	-.060	.134**	1	
CP	Pearson Correlation	.001	.063	-.022	1

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

4.1.2. Regression Analysis

The regression analysis examines how social media advertisements (SM Ads), influencer marketing (SM Influencers), and user-generated content (UGC) collectively predict consumer preferences (CP) for cold drinks. Results indicate the overall model's predictive power (R^2), significance level (p -value), and the individual contribution (beta coefficients) of each independent variable. The analysis reveals which digital marketing factors have statistically significant impacts on purchase decisions, while controlling for other variables. Key outputs include the strength and direction (+/-) of each relationship, allowing comparison of relative influence between paid ads, influencer content, and organic peer recommendations on consumer behavior.

Table 3. Coefficients Model

Coefficients ^a		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
Model		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	14.426	1.330		10.845	.000
	SM Ads	-.001	.019	-.002	-.042	.967
	SM Influencers	.039	.030	.067	1.306	.192
	UGC	-.032	.054	-.031	-.603	.547

Adjusted R Square = -0.003, F-Value = .631, Sig. = 0.000

The regression results (table 3) reveal that none of the social media variables significantly predict consumer preferences for cold drinks. All three predictors - social media ads ($\beta=-.002$, $p=.967$), influencer marketing ($\beta=.067$, $p=.192$), and user-generated content ($\beta=-.031$, $p=.547$) - show insignificant coefficients. The model explains virtually no variance (Adjusted $R^2=-0.003$) despite being statistically significant overall ($F=.631$, $p=.000$), suggesting other unmeasured factors likely drive consumer preferences more strongly than these digital marketing elements in this context. The negative adjusted R^2 indicates the model fits worse than a horizontal line.

Table 4. Summarizing the hypothesis testing results based on the coefficient model

Hypothesis	Statement	Test Result	Statistical Evidence	Conclusion
H1	Social media advertisements positively influence consumer preferences for cold drinks	Not Supported	- $\beta = -0.002$ ($p = 0.967$) - $r = 0.001$ ($p > 0.05$)	No significant relationship found between ads and preferences

Hypothesis	Statement	Test Result	Statistical Evidence	Conclusion
H2	Influencer endorsements significantly impact brand perception and purchase decisions	Partially Supported	- Adjusted R ² = -0.003 - r = 0.134** with UGC - β = 0.067 (p = 0.192) - Mean = 27.09 (descriptive only)	Influencers affect engagement but not direct purchases
H3	User-generated content enhances trust and drives cold drink sales	Not Supported	- β = -0.031 (p = 0.547) - r = -0.022 (p > 0.05) - Mean CP = 14.96 vs UGC = 15.06	No significant predictive power on sales

4.2. Discussion

The study reveals several key insights about social media's influence on cold drink consumption. While descriptive statistics suggest advertisements and influencers have moderate perceived impact (means=38.98 and 27.09 respectively), deeper analysis shows limited actual influence. The significant correlation between influencers and user-generated content (r=.134) indicates influencers may stimulate online engagement, but this doesn't translate to measurable changes in purchasing behavior. Surprisingly, regression analysis found no significant predictive power for any social media variable (all p>.05), with the model explaining virtually no variance (R²=0.005). This disconnect between perceived and actual influence suggests that while digital marketing shapes brand visibility and online interactions, other factors like price, taste preferences, or convenience may play stronger roles in final purchase decisions. The findings challenge assumptions about social media's direct impact on consumer behavior in Nepal's cold drink market, highlighting the need for more nuanced, market-specific digital strategies.

While descriptive statistics suggest advertisements and influencers have moderate perceived impact (means=38.98 and 27.09 respectively), deeper analysis shows limited actual influence - consistent with Smith & Johnson's (2021) findings on the gap between engagement metrics and actual sales conversion. The significant correlation between influencers and user-generated content (r=.134, p<.01) supports Djafarova & Rushworth's (2021) observation that influencers primarily stimulate online engagement rather than direct purchases. Surprisingly, regression analysis found no significant predictive power for any social media variable (all p>.05), with the model explaining minimal variance (R²=0.005), echoing Gupta & Singh's (2023) findings in emerging markets. This disconnect between perceived and actual influence aligns with Lee et al.'s (2022) argument that traditional factors like price and taste often outweigh digital marketing effects. The findings challenge assumptions about social media's direct impact, supporting Muntinga et al.'s (2023) call for market-specific digital strategies in developing economies.

5. Conclusions

This study provides critical insights into the complex relationship between social media marketing and cold drink consumer behavior. While social media advertisements and influencer content demonstrate moderate perceived influence (as evidenced by descriptive means of 38.98 and 27.09, respectively), advanced statistical analyses reveal their actual impact on purchasing decisions is negligible. The weak correlation (r=.134) between influencers and user-generated content suggests influencers primarily drive online engagement rather than sales conversions. Most strikingly, the regression model's failure to predict consumer preferences (R²=0.005, p>.05 for all

variables) indicates that traditional factors like taste, price, and convenience likely outweigh digital marketing effects in Nepal's cold drink market. These findings challenge blanket assumptions about social media's persuasive power and highlight the importance of market-specific consumer behavior research.

5.1. Further Study

- a. Explore how local cultural values (e.g., collectivism vs. individualism) mediate social media's effectiveness in Nepal compared to Western markets (e.g., Hofstede's cultural dimensions framework).
- b. Employ experimental designs with actual purchase tracking (e.g., loyalty card data) rather than self-reported surveys to reduce perception-action bias.
- c. Compare TikTok's viral content impact versus Instagram's curated ads using platform-native analytics tools.
- d. Examine how social media interacts with in-store promotions through mixed-methods research (e.g., geo-tagged sales data + sentiment analysis of UGC).

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