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A Comparative Study of Social Media Advertising and Traditional Advertising on Consumer Purchase Decisions

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Abstract: This paper compares social media advertising with traditional advertising (television, radio, print, direct mail, and outdoor) and examines how each influences consumers at different stages of the purchase decision. Because "effectiveness" can mean awareness, attitude change, purchase intention, or completed sales, a channel that performs well on one measure may perform poorly on another, which makes simple claims about which medium is better unreliable. The analysis draws on consumer decision-making theory, including the five-stage buyer decision process and the Elaboration Likelihood Model; empirical research on advertising effectiveness, word-of-mouth, and brand building; and the legal rules governing advertising in the United States and the European Union. On this foundation, the paper compares the two forms of advertising on six dimensions: reach and attention, targeting and relevance, credibility and trust, engagement and interactivity, measurement and attribution, and cost efficiency. The central finding is that neither approach prevails at every stage of the buying journey or in every product category. Traditional channels are stronger at producing broad awareness, building lasting emotional brand meaning, and lending institutional credibility, though they suffer from high cost, coarse targeting, and slow feedback. Social platforms are stronger at precise targeting, rapid measurement, and shortening the path from interest to purchase, and they generate peer validation through influencer endorsements and user-generated content. They struggle, however, with ad fatigue, uneven trust, and attribution problems. The paper also addresses legal and ethical issues. Both forms are subject to the prohibition on deceptive practices, but social media advertising faces added obligations concerning the disclosure of paid endorsements, the protection of personal data used for targeting, and the treatment of children and other vulnerable audiences. These obligations bear directly on consumer trust and therefore on advertising performance. The paper concludes that the two forms are better understood as complements than as substitutes. Traditional media tends to create demand and brand meaning, while social media tends to capture, shape, and amplify that demand at the point of decision. Campaigns that integrate both, measure incremental impact rather than relying on platform-reported conversions, and communicate transparently are best positioned to influence purchasing over time.

***Index Terms*- Social media advertising; traditional advertising; consumer purchase decisions; consumer behaviour; influencer marketing; social proof; advertising effectiveness; integrated marketing communications; data privacy; FTC endorsement guidelines**

I. Introduction

Every advertisement is ultimately an attempt to affect one event: a person deciding whether to buy. What has changed over the decades is the route by which advertisers reach that person. Through most of the twentieth century, brands depended on a handful of mass channels, namely newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and billboards, each of which sent the same message to a broad and mixed audience. Platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, X, and LinkedIn then changed the arrangement. They let advertisers address small, carefully defined groups with tailored messages and watch the responses come in almost immediately.

That change has left marketers and scholars with a stubborn puzzle: is social media advertising actually better at shaping purchases than the older channels? The puzzle resists a simple answer. "Effective" might refer to awareness, a shift in attitude, an intention to buy, a completed sale, or lasting brand strength, and a medium that does well on one of these may do poorly on another. Consumers also do not meet ads one channel at a time. They drift between media, and a message seen in one place can make a response in another place more likely.

Three questions guide the discussion:

1. By what mechanisms do social media and traditional advertising each affect the stages of a consumer's purchase decision?
2. On which dimensions does each hold an advantage over the other?
3. What legal and ethical limits apply to each, and how do those limit bear on consumer trust?

II. THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. How Consumers Reach a Purchase Decision

The most widely used account of buying behaviour divides it into five stages: recognizing a need, searching for information, weighing alternatives, deciding to buy, and reflecting afterward.[3] Real decisions are often messier than this sequence implies, yet the model remains handy because advertising can enter at any of the stages and does different work in each.

When a need is first felt, an ad may awaken a dormant desire or prompt someone to replenish something they regularly use. During the search for information, advertising competes with friends, online reviews, and retailers' own content. While alternatives are being compared, it can influence which features people treat as important. At the moment of purchase, discounts and easy checkout carry the most weight. Afterward, advertising can reassure buyers and ease second thoughts, while the buyers' own posts and reviews become raw material for the next shopper's search.[4]

2.2. Hierarchy-of-Effects Thinking

Traditional hierarchy-of-effects models describe a climb from awareness to knowledge, then liking, preference, conviction, and finally purchase.[5] A shorter version, AIDA (attention, interest, desire, action), has guided advertising practice for roughly a century. Both suggest that media can be matched to stages, with mass channels handling awareness and interest and more targeted, interactive one's handling desire and action. Later work has doubted that people move through the steps in strict order, but practitioners still use the "funnel" to divide their budgets.

2.3. Two Routes to Persuasion

The Elaboration Likelihood Model separates persuasion into a central route, where recipients scrutinize the arguments in a message, and a peripheral route, where attitudes shift because of surface cues such as a likable source, an attractive presentation, or evidence that others agree.[6] The distinction helps explain differences between media. Television and print ads deliver sustained, carefully controlled messages that can work through either route. Social feeds are usually scanned quickly by people who are only half paying attention, which favors peripheral cues like endorsements, like counts, and eye-catching visuals. Social media advertising therefore leans heavily on social proof, the tendency to take cues about what to do from what others are doing.[7]

2.4. Credibility and Trust

Research on persuasion repeatedly shows that messages land better when the source is seen as credible, a quality made up of expertise and trustworthiness.[8] Traditional media can borrow credibility from its surroundings, such as a respected newspaper or a prime-time program. Social media borrows it from other places: recommendations from peers, the perceived authenticity of creators, and content made by ordinary users. Which source people trust more varies with the product, the demographic group, and the platform.

2.5. Attention as a Scarce Resource

All advertising competes for a limited supply of human attention.[9] Older media often enjoyed a captive audience, such as viewers sitting through a commercial break or readers flipping through a magazine. Digital

[3] Philip Kotler & Kevin Lane Keller, *Marketing Management* (15th ed. 2016) (describing the five-stage model of the buyer decision process); *see also* John A. Howard & Jagdish N. Sheth, *The Theory of Buyer Behavior* (1969).
[4] Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (1957) (explaining post-decision dissonance and its reduction).
[5] Robert J. Lavidge & Gary A. Steiner, *A Model for Predictive Measurements of Advertising Effectiveness*, 25 J. Marketing 59 (1961).
[6] Richard E. Petty & John T. Cacioppo, *Communication and Persuasion: Central and Peripheral Routes to Attitude Change* (1986); Richard E. Petty, John T. Cacioppo & David Schumann, *Central and Peripheral Routes to Advertising Effectiveness: The Moderating Role of Involvement*, 10 J. Consumer Rsch. 135 (1983).
[7] Robert B. Cialdini, *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* (rev. ed. 2007)
[8] Carl I. Hovland & Walter Weiss, *The Influence of Source Credibility on Communication Effectiveness*, 15 Pub. Op. Q. 635 (1951).
[9] Herbert A. Simon, *Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World*, in *Computers, Communications, and the Public Interest* 37 (Martin Greenberger ed., 1971); *see also* Thomas H. Davenport & John C. Beck, *The Attention Economy* (2001).

media must win attention against an endless stream of other content, which explains the emphasis on short video, personalization, and algorithmic tuning.

III. TRADITIONAL ADVERTISING AND PURCHASE DECISIONS

3.1. What Counts as Traditional Advertising

Traditional advertising covers paid messages sent through non-digital channels that reach many people at once: broadcast and cable television, radio, newspapers and magazines, direct mail, and outdoor formats such as billboards and transit displays. These channels share certain traits. Communication flows in one direction, placement and timing are fixed in advance, production and airtime are expensive, and the message cannot easily be adapted to the individual viewer.

3.2. How It Influences Buyers

3.2.1. Broad reach and repetition.

Television can put a message in front of enormous numbers of people at the same moment. Seeing something repeatedly makes it feel familiar, and familiarity tends to increase liking, a pattern documented in research on the mere-exposure effect.[10] Advertisers have long used frequency to get a brand into a shopper's consideration set, the short list of options weighed at the time of purchase.

3.2.2. Brand meaning and emotion.

Polished, longer-form creative work can attach feelings and meaning to a brand that last for years. Effectiveness research suggests that emotionally led campaigns can generate large long-term business results even when the short-term response is difficult to see.[11]

3.3.3. Borrowed legitimacy.

Appearing in established media can signal that a company is substantial. A brand able to pay for a national television campaign or a prominent print presence may come across as larger and more dependable, a signal that smaller advertisers cannot easily copy on a budget.

3.4.4. Reaching people who are less online.

Older consumers and those with limited internet access are often reached more dependably through broadcast, print, and direct mail. In many markets, local radio and newspapers remain important information sources for these groups.

3.3. Weaknesses

Traditional advertising has familiar drawbacks. Mass distribution means waste, because much of the audience lies outside the intended market, a problem summed up in the old, probably apocryphal, line that half of ad spending is wasted but nobody knows which half. Feedback is slow and indirect, since advertisers usually have to infer results from surveys, sales changes, or marketing-mix models instead of watching individual reactions. Lead times are long, plans are hard to change, and entry costs are steep. Fragmenting audiences and tools that skip commercials, such as DVRs and ad-free streaming, have also shrunk the reach of linear television.

IV. SOCIAL MEDIA ADVERTISING AND PURCHASE DECISIONS

4.1. What Counts as Social Media Advertising

Social media advertising includes paid placements on social platforms, such as sponsored posts, in-feed video, stories, and promoted accounts, along with related practices like influencer marketing, branded content, and community management. Its technical hallmarks are data-driven targeting, interactivity, and a feedback loop in which user responses (clicks, shares, comments, purchases) are recorded and used to improve later delivery.

[10] Robert B. Zajonc, *Attitudinal Effects of Mere Exposure*, 9 J. Personality & Soc. Psych. 1 (Monograph Supp. No. 2, pt. 2, 1968).
[11] Les Binet & Peter Field, *The Long and the Short of It: Balancing Short and Long-Term Marketing Strategies* (2013).

4.2. How It Influences Buyers

4.2.1. Precise targeting.

Platforms gather extensive behavioural and demographic data, allowing advertisers to target by interests, location, browsing and buying habits, and "lookalike" audiences modelled on existing customers. This cuts waste and lets a message be matched to where a consumer probably stands in the buying journey, for example by retargeting someone who viewed a product page.

4.2.2. Interaction and shorter paths to purchase.

On social platforms people can react, ask questions, and often buy without leaving the app. Shrinking the distance between seeing an ad and completing a purchase matter most for impulse and low-involvement goods, and newer social commerce features have strengthened the effect.

4.3.3. Social proof and peer influence.

Because these platforms are built around relationships, ads often appear alongside visible signs that others approve. Studies of word-of-mouth and online reviews indicate that peer opinion can sway purchases strongly, sometimes more than messages coming from the brand itself.[12] Electronic word-of-mouth is also persistent, searchable, and easy to scale.[13]

4.4.4. Influencer endorsements.

Influencers act as go-betweens, pairing the credibility of an apparent peer with the audience size of a media outlet. Part of their pull comes from Para social relationships, the one-sided but emotionally real bonds audiences form with media personalities.[14] Micro-influencers, who have small but engaged followings, are often seen as more authentic than celebrities.

4.4.5. User-generated content and co-creation.

Consumers do more than receive social media ads; they make and circulate their own content about brands. This blurs the boundary between paid and earned media, and it means a campaign's results depend partly on whether people choose to take part.

4.3. Weaknesses

Social media advertising has its own problems. Feeds are crowded, attention is brief, and audiences tire of repeated ads quickly. Brand safety is a standing worry, since an ad may appear beside objectionable material. Platform algorithms are opaque and change often, leaving advertisers reliant on intermediaries whose interests may not match theirs. Bots and fraudulent traffic can inflate metrics, and engagement measures such as likes do not necessarily turn into sales. Consumers also feel uneasy about what they see as surveillance, a theme taken up in Part VI.

V. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

5.1. Reach and Attention

Television in particular delivers simultaneous mass reach, which is still useful when launching a product or building general awareness. Social media can match that scale in aggregate, but exposure is split into individual, fragmented moments. As for the quality of attention, a thirty-second spot watched in a relaxed setting may hold a viewer far longer than the second or two spent glancing at a scrolling feed, although feed exposures can occur more often. Which medium has the edge therefore depends on the goal: traditional media for concentrated, high-impact exposure, and social media for frequent, personalized contact.

5.2. Targeting and Relevance

Targeting is the best-known difference between the two. Relevant messages are more likely to be noticed and acted on, and they lower the cost of winning each customer. Traditional media can aim only roughly, through the choice of program, publication, or region. Precision has limits, however, and it carries privacy costs. Heavy

[12] Judith A. Chevalier & Dina Mayzlin, *The Effect of Word of Mouth on Sales: Online Book Reviews*, 43 J. Marketing Rsch. 345 (2006).
[13] Thorsten Hennig-Thurau et al., *Electronic Word-of-Mouth via Consumer-Opinion Platforms: What Motivates Consumers to Articulate Themselves on the Internet?* 18 J. Interactive Marketing 38 (2004).
[14] Donald Horton & R. Richard Wohl, *Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance*, 19 Psychiatry 215 (1956).

personalization can provoke reactance, in which people push back against messages that feel manipulative or intrusive.

5.3. Credibility and Trust

Industry surveys have repeatedly found that people trust recommendations from those they know more than any brand-originated advertising.[15] Between the two categories, the findings are mixed. Traditional media may enjoy a halo of institutional credibility, while social media contends with misinformation, fake accounts, and undisclosed sponsorships. Yet the peer-based signals on social platforms can persuade more than any brand voice. For high-risk or high-involvement purchases, such as financial products or medical devices, many consumers still look for authoritative sources, which favours established media and expert channels. For fashion, beauty, food, and entertainment, peer and creator influence tend to be stronger.

5.4. Engagement and Interactivity

Engagement is where the two diverge most. Traditional advertising is a monologue; social media advertising is a dialogue, or at least a conversation consumers may join. Interactivity can deepen involvement, supply information, and strengthen relationships with a brand. It can also backfire, since brands are open to public criticism and negative comments can spread as far as the original message. Engagement is also only an intermediate measure, and its link to buying depends on context and should not be taken for granted.

5.5. Measurement and Attribution

Digital platforms report detailed figures on impressions, clicks, view-through rates, and conversions, which supports fast testing and optimization. Traditional media measurement relies on panel ratings, circulation counts, and econometric models, with longer feedback cycles. But the apparent exactness of digital data can mislead. Last-click attribution credits the final touchpoint and so undervalues upper-funnel media such as television, which may have created the demand that a later search or social ad captured. Incrementality testing, in which a control group is deliberately not shown the ads, is widely viewed as a more trustworthy gauge of causal impact than attributed conversions.

5.6. Cost Efficiency

Social media advertising generally has lower entry barriers, flexible budgets, and the ability to pause or adjust spending quickly, which suits small and medium-sized businesses. Traditional advertising demands larger commitments, though its cost per thousand impressions for broad reach can be competitive when mass awareness is the aim. Efficiency should also be judged against the objective: a cheap click that never converts is worth less than a pricey impression that builds lasting preference. As more advertisers bid for the same digital inventory, auction pricing pushes costs up and narrows the old gap.

VI. LEGAL AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

6.1. Truthfulness and Deception

In the United States, both traditional and social media advertising fall under the Federal Trade Commission Act, which bars unfair or deceptive acts or practices affecting commerce.[16] The FTC's long-standing policy statement treats a practice as deceptive when it involves a material representation, omission, or practice likely to mislead a reasonable consumer.[17] The standard is the same whatever the medium; what differs is how it is applied in practice.

6.2. Endorsements and Influencer Disclosure

Social media's dependence on endorsements has attracted specific regulatory attention. The FTC's Guides Concerning the Use of Endorsements and Testimonials in Advertising require clear and conspicuous disclosure

[15] *See, e.g.*, Nielsen, *Global Trust in Advertising* (various years), https://www.nielsen.com
[16] Federal Trade Commission Act § 5, 15 U.S.C. § 45(a).
[17] Fed. Trade Comm'n, *FTC Policy Statement on Deception* (Oct. 14, 1983), https://www.ftc.gov/legal-library/browse/ftc-policy-statement-deception.

of material connections between endorsers and advertisers.[18] The agency's plain-language guidance for influencers explains that a disclosure buried among hashtags or hidden behind a "more" link may fall short.[19] The FTC has also adopted a rule addressing fake and deceptive consumer reviews and testimonials.[20] Disclosure lets consumers discount a biased endorsement, so failing to disclose damages the very trust influencer marketing relies on. Traditional media has long had comparable norms, such as the requirement that paid broadcast content identify its sponsor.[21]

6.3. Privacy and Data Protection

The data practices behind social media targeting raise separate concerns. In the European Union, the General Data Protection Regulation requires a lawful basis, transparency, and purpose limitation for processing personal data, including for advertising.[22] The United States takes a more fragmented approach, combining sector-specific federal statutes, FTC enforcement, and state laws such as the California Consumer Privacy Act.[23] Traditional advertising does not depend on individual-level tracking and so faces fewer of these constraints, although direct mail and telemarketing have their own rules.[24] Surveys and scholarship on the "privacy paradox" suggest that people voice concern about data collection yet keep sharing data, but the legal trend favours tighter limits, with possible consequences for the targeting that gives social media advertising its edge.[25]

6.4. Vulnerable Audiences

Both categories draw heightened concern when aimed at children. The Children's Online Privacy Protection Act restricts online collection of personal information from children under thirteen,[26] a limit with no direct counterpart in broadcast. Worries have also been raised about the effect of social media advertising on adolescent well-being, including body image and compulsive use. Television advertising to children has long been subject to regulatory and self-regulatory limits.

6.5 Broader Ethical Questions

Beyond legal compliance, ethical issues arise from persuasion techniques that exploit cognitive biases. Behavioural research shows that framing and the design of choices can steer decisions without people noticing.[27] Personalized advertising that draws on inferred vulnerabilities, such as emotional state, raises questions about autonomy that mass media cannot pose to the same degree. Transparency, meaningful consent, and restraint with sensitive data are therefore central to keeping consumer trust.

VII. DISCUSSION

7.1. Working Together

The comparison suggests that asking which channel is "better" is the wrong question. Each performs a different job along the purchase journey. Traditional media can build the broad awareness and brand familiarity that make later digital ads work harder, and social media can turn that latent interest into action and then enlist satisfied customers as advocates. Marketing-mix research indicates that cross-media synergies exist, with exposure in one channel boosting response in another, though the size of the effect varies by category and campaign.[28]

In practice, integration might mean running the same story in television and social video, using broadcast events to spark live social conversation, retargeting on social media people previously reached by offline campaigns,

[18] 16 C.F.R. pt. 255 (2024)
[19] Fed. Trade Comm'n, *Disclosures 101 for Social Media Influencers* (2019), https://www.ftc.gov/business-guidance/resources/disclosures-101-social-media-influencers.
[20] Trade Regulation Rule on the Use of Consumer Reviews and Testimonials, 16 C.F.R. pt. 465 (2024)
[21] 47 U.S.C. § 317 (requiring sponsorship identification for broadcast matter); 47 C.F.R. § 73.1212 (2024).
[22] Regulation 2016/679, of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the Protection of Natural Persons with Regard to the Processing of Personal Data, 2016 O.J. (L 119) 1.
[23] Cal. Civ. Code §§ 1798.100–.199.100 (West 2024).
[24] *See, e.g.*, Telephone Consumer Protection Act, 47 U.S.C. § 227; CAN-SPAM Act, 15 U.S.C. §§ 7701–7713.
[25] Spyros Kokolakis, *Privacy Attitudes and Privacy Behaviour: A Review of Current Research on the Privacy Paradox Phenomenon*, 64 Computers & Sec. 122 (2017).
[26] Children's Online Privacy Protection Act, 15 U.S.C. §§ 6501–6506; 16 C.F.R. pt. 312 (2024).
[27] Richard H. Thaler & Cass R. Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (2008); Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011).
[28] *See* Prasad A. Naik & Kalyan Raman, *Understanding the Impact of Synergy in Multimedia Communications*, 40 J. Marketing Rsch. 375 (2003).

and using offline media to draw traffic to brand communities. Consistent messaging across channels strengthens memory and lowers the risk of confusing consumers.

7.2. Factors That Change the Balance

Several conditions shape which medium works better:

- **Product category.** High-involvement, high-risk purchases lean toward authoritative sources and longer evaluation, while low-involvement and experiential products respond to social proof and impulse-friendly formats.
- **Target demographic.** Younger consumers spend more time on social platforms and are more likely to find brands there, while older consumers remain easier to reach through traditional channels.
- **Campaign objective.** Awareness and brand building favour mass reach; performance goals favour measurable digital channels.
- **Brand maturity.** Established brands can rely on accumulated equity, while newcomers may prefer the cheap experimentation social media permits.
- **Market context.** Media infrastructure, internet penetration, and cultural attitudes toward trust and privacy differ across countries.

7.3. Limits of the Evidence

Several caveats apply to any conclusion in this area. Much industry research comes from platforms, agencies, or media sellers with a stake in particular results, and their methods are not always transparent. Self-reported intentions often diverge from real behaviour. Attribution problems make it hard to isolate the causal effect of one channel among many. Platforms and consumer habits change faster than academic work can be published, so findings age quickly. And studies define "social media advertising" inconsistently, sometimes including organic brand content and influencer partnerships and sometimes not. Future research would benefit from field experiments with randomized exposure, cross-platform datasets, and longitudinal studies of brand equity.

7.4. Implications for Managers and Policymakers

For managers, the central lesson is to match each channel to the role it plays in the purchase journey and to measure incrementality instead of trusting platform-reported conversions. Creative quality and authenticity matter in both categories. For policymakers, the findings underline the value of enforcing disclosure rules for endorsements, updating privacy protections as targeting methods evolve, and protecting minors, while avoiding rules that unintentionally entrench incumbent advertisers.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This paper set out to compare social media advertising and traditional advertising in terms of their influence on consumer purchase decisions. Rather than asking which medium is simply "better," it examined how each works on the buyer at different points in the decision process, where each holds an advantage, and what legal and ethical limits shape its use. The analysis points to a conclusion that is more nuanced than either camp in the debate usually admits.

Summary of Findings. Traditional advertising offers mass reach, emotional brand building, and institutional credibility. Its strengths lie in creating broad awareness, giving a brand meaning that lasts, and reaching audiences who spend less time online. These benefits come at a price: high entry costs, coarse targeting, long lead times, and feedback that is slow and indirect. Social media advertising offers precision targeting, interactivity, rapid measurement, and persuasion rooted in peer influence. Its strengths lie in moving consumers from interest to action, shortening the path to purchase, and turning satisfied customers into visible advocates. It struggles, however, with crowded feeds and fleeting attention, uneven trust, growing privacy scrutiny, and attribution models that can overstate its contribution.

Answering the Research Questions. The first question asked by what mechanisms each category affects the stages of the purchase decision. Traditional media operates mainly through repetition, familiarity, emotional association, and borrowed legitimacy, which makes it well suited to need recognition and the formation of consideration sets. Social media operates mainly through targeting, interactivity, and social proof, which makes it well suited to evaluation, purchase, and post-purchase advocacy. The second question asked where each holds

a comparative advantage. The six-part comparison showed that traditional media leads on concentrated reach and institutional credibility, social media leads on targeting, engagement, measurability, and low-cost entry, and the two are closer to even on cost efficiency once objectives are taken into account. The third question asked what legal and ethical constraints apply. Both categories answer to the same deception standards, but social media faces additional obligations around endorsement disclosure, data protection, and the treatment of minors, and these obligations bear directly on whether consumers trust what they see.

The Central Conclusion. Neither category dominates at every stage of the decision process or in every product category. The most defensible conclusion is that the two complement more than they replace each other. Traditional media is often better at creating demand and brand meaning, and social media is often better at capturing, shaping, and amplifying that demand at the point of decision. Treating them as rivals leads to poor budgeting, because it encourages managers to credit the channel that records the final click and to undervalue the channel that created the intent behind it. Treating them as partners allows each to do the work it does best.

Contingency and Context. The balance between the two is not fixed. It shifts with the product, since high-risk purchases call for authoritative sources while low-involvement purchases respond to peer cues and easy checkout. It shifts with the audience, since younger consumers are more reachable on social platforms and older consumers more reachable through broadcast, print, and mail. It shifts with the campaign objective, the maturity of the brand, and the market in which the campaign runs. Any recommendation that ignores these conditions should be treated with caution.

Implications for Practice. For marketers, the central lesson is to assign each channel a clear role in the purchase journey and to judge it by that role. Awareness goals should be measured differently from conversion goals, and incrementality testing should be used wherever possible in place of platform-reported conversions. Creative quality and authenticity matter in both categories, because even precise targeting cannot rescue a message that consumers find unconvincing. Consistency across channels strengthens memory and reduces confusion, while careful disclosure of sponsored content protects the credibility on which influencer marketing depends.

Implications for Policy. For regulators, the findings underline the value of enforcing disclosure rules for endorsements, keeping privacy protections in step with advances in targeting technology, and giving particular attention to children and adolescents. Rules should be designed so that they protect consumers without unintentionally favouring large incumbents that can absorb compliance costs more easily than small advertisers.

Limitations and Future Research. The conclusions drawn here should be read in light of the limits of the evidence. Much industry research is produced by parties with a commercial interest, self-reported intentions often differ from actual behaviour, definitions of social media advertising vary from study to study, and platforms change faster than scholarship can follow. Future work would benefit from randomized field experiments, cross-platform datasets that follow the same consumers across media, longitudinal studies of brand equity, and comparative research across countries with different media systems and privacy regimes. Emerging developments, including short-form video commerce, generative tools for producing ads, and further restrictions on tracking, will also require fresh study.

Closing Reflection. As rules on data and endorsements tighten and consumer scepticism grows, the advertisers most likely to succeed will be those who combine channels thoughtfully, respect consumer autonomy, and communicate truthfully and openly. Technology will continue to change the means by which messages reach people, but the underlying task remains the same: earning the attention and trust of a person who is deciding whether to buy. Advertising that serves that task honestly, through whichever mix of media fits the audience and the goal, is the advertising most likely to influence purchase decisions in a lasting way.

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[12] Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016, *General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)*, Official Journal of the European Union, L 119, pp. 1–88, May 4, 2016.
[13] Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998, 15 U.S.C. §§ 6501–6506, United States.
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