

Beyond the Hype: Social Media Marketing and Purchase Intention in the Indian Cosmetic Industry

Liya Peter*, John Mathew, Christy George Mannaly Joseph

St. Paul's College, Kalamassery, HMT Colony, P.O, Kalamassery, Ernakulam, Kerala, Pin– 683503, India

*Correspondence: liyapeter@stpauls.ac.in

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ABSTRACT: This study explored the influence of Social Media Marketing (SMM) on the PI (PI) of female consumers of branded cosmetic products from the viewpoints of differential age and the possible mediating role of Consumer Scepticism (CS). A sample of 192 women in India was surveyed using a structured questionnaire, and the data were analysed using ANOVA, correlation, and mediation analysis with Hayes' PROCESS Macro. The results indicated that younger consumers were more positive about SMM than older consumers, who were more sceptical. A significant positive relationship between SMM and PI was found, but CS did not mediate the relationship. The direct path between SMM and PI was significant ($\beta = 0.5839$, $p < .001$), while the indirect effects through CS were not. These findings demonstrated that SMM exerted a direct influence on purchase intentions and that marketers could gain more advantage from SMM by focusing on increasing authenticity and engagement rather than decreasing scepticism.

KEYWORDS: Social media marketing; purchase intention; consumer scepticism; branded cosmetics

1. Introduction

The advent of social media transformed the marketing communication landscape, especially in consumer-oriented sectors like cosmetics. Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook were viewed as crucial tools that helped brands communicate with audiences using highly visual, interactive, and influencer-created content. The ability of brands to customise messages, establish brand communities, and create real-time engagement with consumers made SMM critical to consumer behaviour and purchase decision processes [1]. In the cosmetic sector, this shift toward digital advertising transformed the way consumers learned about, evaluated, and engaged with brands. Visual storytelling, influencer endorsements, and user-generated content became key elements of brand strategy. Previous literature suggested that product tutorials, online reviews, and social proof on social networks increasingly affected consumers, especially women [2].

The inherently aspirational and aesthetic qualities of cosmetic products rendered them particularly suited to social media marketing, where brand narratives were communicated in immersive, visually engaging, and highly personalised forms. With the rise of SMM, which gained increasing importance in recent years, it became vital to pay attention to the

psychological reactions it provoked. CS was one such reaction, as it reflected a lack of trust in marketing statements. Although social media offered transparency and authenticity, it also engendered consumer scepticism, characterised by a tendency to disbelieve or suspect marketing claims. Such scepticism could be triggered by excessive exposure to advertisements, loss of confidence in influencers, or the belief that endorsements were not genuine [3], and it affected how consumers decoded marketing messages and whether such messages translated into purchase behaviour. Age was another major factor influencing consumer reactions to SMM; younger consumers were more receptive to digital content and navigated online platforms more effectively, whereas older consumers tended to be more reserved and sceptical of marketing communications [4]. Due to variations in digital engagement across age groups, the effectiveness of social media campaigns in influencing purchase decisions varied as well.

Although the importance of SMM in India became more widely recognised, there was still limited empirical research on the Indian cosmetic industry. Much of the available literature on online markets focused on Western contexts and overlooked cultural and demographic differences that influenced consumer perceptions of online brand communication. Furthermore, although age was cited as a factor in digital involvement, generational differences in attitudes toward cosmetic marketing were under-researched. Additionally, consumer dubbing in influencer marketing, which grew increasingly important, was not adequately examined in the Indian context, where social validation and aesthetics often prevailed over objective assessments. The current study addressed these gaps by investigating how SMM affected PI among different age groups and whether CS mediated this effect. Specifically, this research focused on the impact of SMM on the PI of female consumers of branded cosmetic products and on how CS and age differences contributed to these effects. The objectives of the study were to determine age-wise variations in perceptions of SMM, consumer scepticism, and purchase intention; to investigate the relationship between SMM, consumer scepticism, and purchase intention; and to examine the direct and indirect effects of SMM on PI through the mediating role of consumer scepticism.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. SMM.

SMM emerged as a prevailing force in online marketing that altered the way brands communicated with their customers. The term SMM was used to denote the utilisation of social media to market products, develop relationships, and influence consumer perceptions [1, 2]. Its user-created and interactive attributes allowed it to stand out among more traditional marketing methods and made it particularly efficient in industries where visuals and experience dominated product promotion, such as cosmetics. The Uses and Gratifications Theory [5] was used to explain why consumers were eager to engage with brand content on social media. Through these platforms, users obtained information, entertainment, personal identity, and social interaction, and thus became susceptible to marketing messages that resonated with these motivations. Specifically, the visual and aesthetic characteristics of Instagram and YouTube made these platforms particularly influential in the cosmetics industry because they allowed brands to convey product advantages, influencer promotions, and customer reviews [2].

Research revealed that properly executed social media campaigns increased brand involvement and consumer purchasing behaviour. Scholars [6] explained that interactivity,

content credibility, and brand trust were key elements of positive consumer responses to SMM. Similarly, researchers [7] established that personalised marketing on social media led to stronger connections between customers and companies, thus increasing the likelihood of purchase. SMM emerged as one of the core channels of brand–customer interaction, particularly in the cosmetics industry. According to recent studies, interactive content, influencer recommendations, and user-generated reviews had a strong impact on consumer purchase intentions [8, 9, 10]. The affective and cognitive responses generated by the multidimensional features of SMM such as entertainment, customisation, interaction, and trendiness, resulted in improved purchasing intentions [6, 11, 12]. Nevertheless, several studies revealed that its impact differed across age groups and cultures, and younger consumers responded more positively to visual and influencer-based cues than older consumers [13–15]. This emphasised the need to understand generational differences in the effectiveness of SMM, particularly in the context of the Indian cosmetic market.

2.2. CS.

CS was defined as the propensity of an individual not to believe or trust marketing claims. Due to its reliance on perceptions of overstatement, dishonesty, or lack of authenticity, it typically involved resistance to advertising [3]. Brand communication on social media was largely centred on influencers and user-generated content, which heightened concerns regarding paid endorsements and deceptive information. The concept of CS had its theoretical foundation in the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) by Friestad and Wright [16], which proposed that consumers acquired persuasion knowledge over time, enabling them to recognise and resist marketing tactics. Consequently, social media posts that were overly promotional or fake could backfire, particularly among experienced consumers. However, scepticism did not necessarily reduce purchase intention. The Elaboration Likelihood Model [17] identified two routes to persuasion: the central (rational) route and the peripheral (emotional) route. In highly visual industries such as beauty, consumers were often more sensitive to peripheral cues such as aesthetics, influencer credibility, or peer validation than to rational message processing. As a result, even sceptical consumers could still make purchases when the content aligned with their self-image or emotional needs. This could explain why CS did not always mediate the effect of SMM on purchase intention.

Although SMM increased brand exposure, an overload of promotional content could generate consumer scepticism. Studies indicated that digital users became increasingly aware of the authenticity of influencer recommendations and paid content [18–20]. Perceived overload and manipulative intent shaped scepticism, which in turn moderated the relationship between consumer responses and marketing stimuli [21–23]. According to the Persuasion Knowledge Model, consumers developed cognitive defence mechanisms to cope with persuasion attempts [16], which diminished PI when consumers perceived insincerity. Contemporary evidence supported this model by demonstrating that perceived truthfulness and sincerity in social media campaigns helped reduce scepticism and restored trust [11, 24, 25]. Nevertheless, the relationship between SMM and scepticism was not entirely negative. A study by researchers [10] indicated that scepticism could be reduced through authenticity and transparency in brand communication. Providing clear information about partnerships and presenting honest content increased consumer trust by mitigating sceptical attitudes. This possible two-way influence, whereby SMM attenuated CS while scepticism did not strongly

affect purchase intention, motivated the current study to empirically test this mediation relationship. Age was another factor influencing the development of scepticism. Older consumers, having experienced greater marketing exposure and being less digitally fluent, were more likely to be sceptical of online advertising [4]. In contrast, younger users displayed greater familiarity with influencer culture and tended to evaluate content based on peer validation or aesthetics rather than message credibility.

2.3. *PI.*

PI was defined as a conscious decision or intention of the consumer to purchase a particular product or brand. With respect to SMM, PI depended on a combination of brand content exposure, social interaction, product value assessment, and emotional involvement. Individual attitudes toward behaviour and subjective norms explained PI as a component of the Theory of Reasoned Action [26]. Brand attitudes acquired in a social media setting were cultivated through likes, comments, shares, and influencer recommendations and thus impacted PI. Several studies affirmed that the use of social media had a positive influence on purchase intention. For instance, researchers [27] highlighted the significance of social media branding on the intention to buy cosmetics among young consumers. Similarly, scholars [28] observed that online opinions and visual imagery helped shape positive consumer attitudes, which later translated into purchase behaviour. However, scepticism could act as a mitigating or moderating variable in this association. Researchers [29] suggested that increased scepticism diminished the power of persuasive messages, including those within SMM. Nevertheless, when consumers perceived brands as open and reliable, the adverse effects of scepticism on PI could be reduced.

2.4. *Research gap.*

Although literature on the impact of SMM on consumer behaviour expanded, the majority of studies focused on the direct impact of specific variables on PI without considering the psychological processes that could mediate the relationship, especially in the context of the cosmetics market. CS was recognised as a factor that could obstruct effective marketing, but its mediating role between SMM and PI was not studied in detail, particularly among Indian consumers. The existing body of literature also tended to focus on age-homogeneous groups, such as Gen Z or millennials, without fully exploring age-based differences in perceptions of social media campaigns or levels of scepticism. As more individuals from different age groups began to engage digitally, it became essential to understand how various cohorts interpreted online messages about cosmetic brands. Therefore, the present study addressed these research gaps by examining both the direct and indirect effects of SMM on PI in circumstances where CS was introduced as a latent factor and by investigating how these constructs differed across age groups in the Indian branded cosmetics industry.

2.5. *Theoretical anchors.*

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) explained how consumers decoded persuasive information through either peripheral or central processing routes [17]. Visual appeal and influencer credibility functioned as peripheral cues that enhanced message effectiveness among younger consumers in SMM contexts [6, 9, 10]. Similarly, the Theory of Planned Behaviour

(TPB) [30] proposed that purchase intentions were influenced by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. Recent research indicated that positive perceptions of online brand communication and social conformity were significant predictors of cosmetic purchase decisions [12, 14, 25]. Although the body of literature continued to grow, few studies examined the combined roles of scepticism, social media marketing, and PI in emerging markets, thereby highlighting a gap that required further empirical investigation.

The first theoretical framework used in this study was the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) [17], and the second was the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) [30]. The ELM described how persuasive information reached consumers through two processing routes: the central route, in which cognitive evaluation occurred, and the peripheral route, in which persuasive information was evaluated based on emotional or superficial cues. Within the context of social media marketing, consumers tended to follow the peripheral route and responded to influencer credibility, visual appeal, and social approval, especially in hedonic product categories such as cosmetics. This explained why persuasion was possible even when consumers were moderately sceptical. The TPB complemented this perspective by proposing that behavioural intentions were shaped by attitudes toward behaviour (perceptions of SMM), subjective norms (influencer and peer influence), and perceived behavioural control (consumer scepticism) [30]. Together, the ELM and TPB provided a conceptual foundation for understanding how SMM affected PI, both directly and indirectly, through psychological variables such as scepticism.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research design.

This study employed a quantitative, descriptive, analytical research design to examine the effect of SMM on PI, with CS as a potential mediating variable. Primary data were collected through a cross-sectional survey.

3.2. Sampling and participants

The target population consisted of female consumers of branded cosmetic products who actively follow social media platforms such as Instagram and YouTube. A non-probability purposive sampling technique was used to select participants who were regular users of both social media and cosmetic products. Purposive sampling was considered appropriate due to the specificity of the research focus on female consumers, who are typically more active on social media and frequently purchase branded cosmetics. Therefore, this sample was suitable for examining the effect of SMM on purchase intention. A total of 192 respondents from urban/semi-urban areas participated in the study. Respondents were screened to ensure they were female, at least 20 years old, and had previously purchased branded cosmetic products.

3.3. Hypotheses

Based on relevant theories and literature, the following hypotheses were formulated to explore the relationships among SMM, CS, and PI. These hypotheses underpin the conceptual framework and form the foundation of the empirical tests.

H1: Perceptions of SMM, CS, and PI differ significantly among age groups.

Rationale: According to Generational Cohort Theory [31, 32], Gen Z and Millennials are more tech-savvy and receptive to digital marketing, while older cohorts tend to be more critical and sceptical [33, 34]. Therefore, age is expected to influence perceptions of SMM, levels of scepticism, and purchase intentions.

H2: SMM is significantly associated with PI.

Rationale: The Theory of Reasoned Action [26] posits that behavioural intentions are shaped by attitudes and social influences. Prior studies show that content quality, interactivity, and credibility in social media campaigns positively influence PI [6, 35].

H3: SMM is significantly associated with CS.

Rationale: According to the Persuasion Knowledge Model [16], consumers draw on prior knowledge to resist persuasive attempts. Perceived manipulation in marketing can lead to scepticism, while transparent, credible, and influencer-led campaigns reduce it [36].

H4: CS is significantly associated with PI.

Rationale: High scepticism reduces trust and negatively affects behavioural intentions [3, 29]. The Attitude–Behaviour Consistency Theory [11] supports the idea that negative attitudes such as scepticism can decrease purchase intentions.

H5: CS mediates the relationship between SMM and PI.

Rationale: While SMM may influence PI directly, it may also reduce CS, which subsequently increases PI. The Elaboration Likelihood Model [17] suggests that peripheral cues (influencer credibility, visual appeal) can override sceptical evaluations. Prior studies indicate that scepticism may function as a mediator between marketing stimuli and consumer behaviour [37].

3.4. Data collection procedure.

Information was gathered using an organised web-based survey that included four parts: demographic information, measures of attitude toward social media marketing, measures of CS and purchase intention.

3.5. Instrument development and validation.

The current research utilised the existing and validated measures to assess the existence of the constructs of SMM, CS, and PI, which were measured in a 5-point Likert scale with the range being 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). SMM Items were modified based on [38] and [35], representing the touchpoints (brand engagement, content credibility), and the fact that a social media interaction may affect consumer perception. A modified form of the content of the Advertising Scepticism Scale identified by [3] was used to measure degrees of consumer scepticism, whereby respondents were observed to judge the truthfulness or reliability of brand messages on social media. Purchase Intent was based on items adapted by [39] and measured the intention of the consumer and their likelihood to purchase the branded cosmetic products based on the social media promotions. Clarity and consistency of the questionnaire were pre-tested, and the internal reliability of each construct was established with the help of Cronbach's

Alpha. The Cronbach Alpha values (SMM- 0.927; CS- 0.727; PI- 0.892) showed that the scale items were reliable, being higher than the recommended value of 0.7 [40]. The validity and relevance of the scales were also tested in digital marketing and consumer behaviour studies in the past. Expert review was used as a measure of content validity. SPSS was used to analyse data.

3.6. Statistical analysis.

Demographic characteristics were summarised using descriptive statistics. The analysis of age-related variation in SMM, CS, and PI has been conducted using one-way ANOVA. ANOVA was employed to test the mean difference between age groups since it is the type of analysis where three or more categories are compared on continuous dependent variables (SMM, CS, PI). Pearson correlation was used to analyse the presence of relationships between the three major constructs. Pearson correlation was chosen owing to the fact that correlation gauges linear relationships among constructs. Lastly, the mediating effects of CS were used as a mediator in the association between SMM and the PI parameter through the Hayes PROCESS Macro (Model 4). The mediation has been conducted through Hayes PROCESS Model 4 since it estimates both direct and indirect effects of variable effects with their bootstrapped confidence intervals by providing a resilient mediation test at cross-sectional data [41].

4. Results And Discussion

The data was analysed in SPSS and Jamovi with emphasis on descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, ANOVA, and mediation modelling to test the connection between SMM, CS, and PI.

4.1. Descriptive statistics.

Table 1 Demographic profile portrays that the mean age of the respondents was 24.0 years, with the majority (45.8%) being aged between 20 and 30 years, indicating the high demographic density of digitally engaged consumers in this category. This aligns with the idea pointed out by [2] that younger groups of consumers are more sensitive to online information and depend on the services of social networks like Instagram or YouTube to get cosmetic suggestions. The majority worked in the private sector (72.9%), and resided in towns (54.2%). Maybelline (27.1%) and Lakme (20.8%) were the most favourite brands. The strong brand preference of the Maybelline and Lakme brands among the respondents could also be attributed to the aggressive influence-based digital campaigns of these brands, which aligns with the findings of [42] that brand-based content and endorsement of a brand on social media can be a major factor in choosing which cosmetic brand to use. Further, 27.1% of the participants used daily cosmetic products, which means that they were active in the market regularly. Regarding the social media behaviour, more than 42.7% of the sample used more than 2 hours in social media applications, including Instagram and YouTube, which reflects the appropriateness of the applications in the purchase decision-making with respect to cosmetics.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age Group	20–30 years	88	45.8%
	31–40 years	40	20.8%
	41–50 years	24	12.5%
	Above 50 years	40	20.8%
Employment Sector	Private	140	72.9%
	Government	52	27.1%
Residential Area	Urban	104	54.2%
	Semi-urban/Rural	88	45.8%
Preferred Cosmetic Brand	Maybelline	52	27.1%
	Lakme	40	20.8%
	Others	100	52.1%
Frequency of Cosmetic Use	Daily	52	27.1%
	Weekly/Occasionally	140	72.9%
Social Media Usage (per day)	Less than 1 hour	48	25.0%
	1–2 hours	62	32.3%
	More than 2 hours	82	42.7%

4.2. Inferential statistics.

A one-way ANOVA was used to assess the significance between perception of SMM and age, CS, and PI (see Table 2). Findings have revealed that the constructs showed significant differences among all the three age groups including SMM perception ($F(3,188) = 3.74$, $p = .012$, $\eta^2 = .06$), CS ($F(3,188) = 4.29$, $p = .006$, $\eta^2 = .06$), and PI ($F(3,188) = 10.09$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .14$). These η^2 values intimate that the effect of SMM and CS are moderate, and that of PI is large [43], implying that age to explain the coefficient of variance in the aforementioned variables is of significance.

Table 2. One-Way ANOVA Results for Age-Based Differences in SMM, CS, and PI.

Variable	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	η^2	Effect Size Interpretation
SMM	4.21	3	1.40	3.74	.012	.06	Moderate
CS	5.16	3	1.72	4.29	.006	.06	Moderate
PI	11.09	3	3.70	10.09	<.001	.14	Large
Error	69.90	188	0.37				

Note. $N = 192$. Effect size interpretation based on Cohen's (1988) benchmarks: $\eta^2 = .01$ (small), $.06$ (moderate), $.14$ (large).

Table 3. Mean scores of SMM, CS, and PI by age group.

Age Group (years)	N	SMM (M $\pm$ SD)	CS (M $\pm$ SD)	PI (M $\pm$ SD)
20–30	58	3.71 $\pm$ 0.48	2.12 $\pm$ 0.64	3.50 $\pm$ 0.58
31–40	47	3.45 $\pm$ 0.53	3.20 $\pm$ 0.61	3.36 $\pm$ 0.55
41–50	51	3.60 $\pm$ 0.50	3.85 $\pm$ 0.59	3.71 $\pm$ 0.62
50+	36	3.21 $\pm$ 0.57	4.13 $\pm$ 0.55	3.29 $\pm$ 0.49

As shown in Table 3, respondents aged between 20 and 30 had the highest perception of SMM ($M = 3.71$), suggesting that they were more positively affected by social media campaigns than the other groups, especially those above 50 ($M = 3.21$). This tendency could be linked to the fact that younger consumers were more familiar with the internet and actively used online services. On the other hand, the degree of scepticism increased with age, with the 50+ segment rated much higher ($M = 4.13$) than the 20–30 group, who were much less sceptical ($M = 2.12$). This implied that older consumers were more sceptical than younger buyers when assessing the authenticity or credibility of social media advertisements, which may have resulted from intergenerational differences in media beliefs and attitudes about digital literacy [3, 29].

SMM campaigns impacted younger consumers more positively, and scepticism increased with age, particularly among consumers older than 50 years. This was consonant with the results provided by [3], who found that older consumers were more resistant and sceptical of advertising due to their experience and belief that they could no longer be easily influenced by persuasive messages. In addition, elderly consumers might have been less exposed or receptive to online marketing campaigns because they were less active in digital media [4].

With regard to purchase intention, the 41–50 age group had the highest average score ($M = 3.71$), slightly above the 20–30 age group ($M = 3.50$). This tendency may have been attributed to greater financial autonomy, brand loyalty, and selective trust [8, 33], as these authors reported that middle-aged consumers were more selective in their approach and were more likely to make purchases when the brand aligned with their personal values and trust.

Overall, the findings suggested that age played a significant role in determining CS and purchase behaviours in relation to SMM practices in the cosmetic sector, confirming the hypothesis that there was a marked difference in the perceptions of SMM, CS, and PI among different age groups.

The age differences indicated that peripheral cue processing dominated younger consumers, whereas older consumers relied more on central processing, as suggested by the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). Younger consumers were more responsive to influencer content and visual stimuli, which aligned with the ELM view that peripheral processing pathways were more prevalent in online environments [17]. This implied that SMM strategies focused on aesthetics and engagement could be a powerful tool for youth-oriented cosmetic brands. Results confirmed previous studies indicating that younger consumers trusted peripheral cues more (influencer credibility, aesthetics), while older consumers engaged in higher levels of central processing and were more sceptical of marketing claims [2, 17, 35].

The research also found age-related differences in perception, which aligned with modern generational marketing literature [6, 10, 11]. As digital natives, younger buyers were more likely to follow peer advice and influencer reviews rather than product specifications. This confirmed the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), which posited that social norms played a key role in shaping behavioural intentions. Conversely, older groups were more sceptical and less responsive, possibly due to greater persuasion knowledge or privacy concerns [22–24]. In general, these results connected both theoretical and empirical perspectives on how demographic groups processed social media-based persuasion. They supported the importance of authenticity, trust, and interactivity as key intermediaries between digital marketing strategies and consumer decision-making [13–15].

4.3. Correlation analysis.

Two-tailed significance test of Pearson correlation coefficients (r) was applied to investigate the associations between the variables SMM, PI and CS. As revealed in Table 4, by the correlation analysis, SMM has a significant positive correlation with PI ($r(190) = .579$, $p < .001$), confirming the findings of [6], [8], [12] who showed that content quality, interactivity, and perceived credibility of SMM have a positive influence on consumers' purchase intention. The inverse correlation between SMM and CS ($r(190) = -.169$, $p = .019$) confirms the reasoning that when the marketing material is transparent and engaging, doubts and resistance are less likely to occur, as suggested by [32]. Similarly, a negative correlation exists between CS and PI ($r(190) = -0.158$, $p .027$). This is consistent with the persuasion knowledge

perspective [8] and the findings of previous studies that show scepticism may hamper the persuasive results when brand trust is lacking [29].

Table 4. Pearson's correlation between key variables.

Variables	r (190)	p-value
SMM & PI	0.579	< .001
SMM & CS	-0.169	.019
CS & PI	-0.158	.027

4.3. Mediation analysis.

Mediation analysis was also carried out using Hayes' PROCESS Macro (Model 4) to test the hypothesis that CS is a mediating factor through which SMM impacts PI on the female consumer of branded cosmetic products. The results of the Mediation analysis are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Mediation analysis.

Effect	Path	β	SE	p-value	95% CI (Bootstrap)	Result
Indirect Effect	SMM $\rightarrow$ CS $\rightarrow$ PI	-0.0045	0.0125	0.668	[-0.029, 0.018]	Not significant
Path A	SMM $\rightarrow$ CS	-0.1691	0.0407	0.035	[-0.259, -0.011]	Significant
Path B	CS $\rightarrow$ PI	0.0264	0.1359	0.647	[-0.214, 0.263]	Not significant
Direct Effect	SMM $\rightarrow$ PI	0.5839	0.0777	< .001	[0.431, 0.744]	Significant
Total Effect	SMM $\Rightarrow$ PI	0.5794	0.0404	< .001	[0.498, 0.661]	Significant

The findings clearly showed that SMM had a direct positive impact on PI, which was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.5839$, $SE = 0.0777$, $p < .001$), supporting the assumption that SMM strategies directly influenced consumers' intention to purchase branded cosmetic products. This confirmed Hypothesis H2 and was consistent with previous research showing that interactive, credible, and visually rich SMM enhanced PI [6, 8]. The analysis also revealed that SMM had a significant negative effect on CS ($\beta = -0.1691$, $SE = 0.0407$, $p = 0.035$), supporting H3. However, the subsequent link in the mediation chain between CS and PI was not significant ($\beta = 0.0264$, $SE = 0.1359$, $p = .647$). As a result, the indirect (mediated) effect of SMM on PI through CS was not significant ($\beta = -0.0045$, 95% CI [-0.029, 0.018]). These results showed that CS did not act as a mediator in the relationship between SMM and PI, leading to the rejection of Hypothesis H5.

The lack of CS as a mediating variable suggested that emotional and visual persuasive cues helped consumers overcome rational resistance during purchase decisions. According to the ELM [17], aesthetic and lifestyle products rely more on peripheral processing, characterised by visual attractiveness, influencer credibility, and social validation, even when message credibility is questioned. These results were also corroborated by [2, 35, 37], who found that emotional resonance was more likely to drive PI than cognitive persuasion in beauty-related contexts. This finding also aligned with the Persuasion Knowledge Model [16], which posits that consumers generate resistance when they recognise persuasion attempts. Recent evidence reiterated this trend by showing that perceived manipulateness decreased trust and PI [9, 20, 25]. Therefore, brands needed to strike a balance between promotional intensity and authenticity to maintain believability in the competitive online environment.

These results implied that, although scepticism may emerge, its influence on PI can be weakened by marketing tactics in the context of cosmetic products on social media. This could

be explained by the fact that cosmetic consumers particularly those active on platforms such as Instagram and YouTube, tended to rely more on visual cues, peer approval, and perceived authenticity rather than objective, critical evaluation [2]. In this way, even sceptical consumers proceeded with purchases when the content was emotionally appealing or endorsed by trustworthy influencers. This result contradicted traditional conceptualisations of advertising resistance [3, 16], which proposed that scepticism reduced the effectiveness of persuasive messages. Nonetheless, it corresponded with more recent literature [8, 44], which suggested that emotional, aesthetic, and social elements of social media content could override cognitive resistance, including scepticism, in lifestyle and beauty-related contexts.

Therefore, while SMM significantly influences CS, consumer scepticism does not significantly mediate the relationship between SMM and PI (Table 6). This underscores the dominant role of visual and peripheral cues in the online marketing of cosmetic products. Overall, the mediation analysis confirms the central role of SMM as a direct determinant of purchase intention, whereas Consumer Scepticism plays only a minimal role in this pathway. These findings indicate that marketers should prioritise strategies that enhance engagement, authenticity, and visual appeal, rather than focusing primarily on reducing scepticism.

Table 6. Mediation analysis: hypotheses summary.

Hypotheses	Decision
H2: SMM is significantly associated with PI.	Supported
H3: SMM is significantly associated with CS.	Supported
H4: CS is significantly associated with PI.	Not Supported
H5: CS mediates the relationship between SMM and PI.	Not supported

5. Conclusion

This study examined the effect of SMM on the PI of branded cosmetic products among female consumers, considering age differences and the potential mediating role of CS. The results revealed a significant and direct positive relationship between SMM and PI, indicating that intentional and thoughtfully designed social media campaigns can effectively enhance purchase intentions in the cosmetics industry. Although SMM was found to reduce consumer scepticism, CS did not significantly predict PI and therefore did not mediate the SMM–PI relationship. These findings suggest that the emotional appeal, visual aesthetics, and social interaction features of SMM exert a stronger influence on consumer decision-making than sceptical evaluation, particularly in a visually driven industry such as cosmetics. This explains why marketers should prioritise authenticity, engaging content, and visually appealing imagery and messaging that build trust and closeness, rather than merely attempting to reduce scepticism. Practically, the findings highlight the strategic value of visually persuasive content on social media as a key driver of PI among Indian consumers. Theoretically, the results align with the Elaboration Likelihood Model and the Persuasion Knowledge Model, which propose that emotional attachment and peripheral cues can override scepticism in high-involvement, aesthetic product categories such as cosmetics.

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Author Contribution

The specific roles of the authors in this study are as follows: John Mathew was responsible for the conceptualisation of the research, while Christy George M J developed the methodology and performed the data analysis. Data collection was carried out by Liya Peter, who also contributed to the writing of the manuscript.

Competing Interest

The authors state that they do not have any financial, personal, or professional conflicts of interest, which may have manifested themselves in the work reported in this paper. The present study did not receive any external funding.

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