



SOCIAL MEDIA ADVERTISING AND YOUNG CONSUMERS' BRAND PERCEPTION: A REVIEW OF EXISTING LITERATURE

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Abstract

Young consumers now form their earliest and often most lasting impressions of brands not through television or print but through the scroll of a social media feed. This shift has pushed advertisers toward formats, personalization strategies, and influencer partnerships that behave very differently from the mass-media tools of the previous generation, and academic literature has only partially kept pace with the change. This paper brings together existing conceptual and empirical work to examine how social media advertising shapes brand perception among young consumers, with particular attention to platform context, message personalization, and influencer credibility. Using a narrative literature review method, published studies, theoretical models, and regional evidence from India's National Capital Region were read, compared, and organised into recurring themes rather than tested through new fieldwork. The review traces the theoretical grounding offered by the Elaboration Likelihood Model, brand equity theory, and advertising value models, before moving to more recent findings on cross-platform advertising formats, personalization, influencer-led content, and the particular sensitivities of Generation Z audiences in urban Indian markets such as Gurugram. The findings suggest that young consumers process social media advertising through a blend of rational evaluation and social trust, that perceived authenticity now matters as much as message content, and that platform choice materially changes how an advertisement is received. The paper closes by identifying gaps that future empirical work, particularly mixed-methods studies set in fast-growing digital markets, could usefully address.

Keywords: social media advertising, brand perception, young consumers, influencer marketing, digital marketing, Generation Z

1. Introduction

A teenager in Gurugram is far more likely to form an opinion about a sneaker brand from a fifteen-second reel than from a billboard on National Highway 48. That small observation carries a large implication for marketers and researchers alike: the mechanisms through which young consumers come to like, trust, or dismiss a brand have moved almost entirely onto social media platforms, and the academic literature describing those mechanisms has had to run to keep up. Social media advertising is no longer a supplementary channel bolted onto a traditional media plan; for many brands targeting consumers under thirty, it is the plan.

The appeal of the medium to advertisers is easy enough to state. Social platforms combine reach with precision in a way earlier mass media never could, letting a brand narrow its message to a specific age band, city, or even a cluster of interests, while still achieving the scale once reserved for television. For young consumers, the same platforms function as identity workshops as much as shopping guides, which means an advertisement competing for attention there is competing against friends' posts, memes, and influencers whose opinions often carry more weight than the brand's own claims. Duffett (2017) captured an early version of this dynamic when he found that social media marketing communications shaped the attitudes of young consumers not through simple exposure but through the interplay of platform, message type, and prior brand familiarity, a finding that has only grown more relevant as platforms have multiplied and fragmented audience attention further.

India offers a particularly instructive setting in which to examine this shift, and the National Capital Region in particular. Millions of young, digitally native consumers there have effectively skipped the intermediate stage of print and satellite television dominance that shaped marketing practice elsewhere, moving instead almost directly to smartphone-first media consumption. Arora, Agarwal, and Kumar (2018) documented how millennials across Delhi NCR relied on a specific mix of platforms to form preferences about brands promoted through social media, an early signal of the regional patterns this review returns to later. The growth of India's broader digital economy, including the financial infrastructure that makes it possible for a young consumer to discover a product on Instagram and complete a purchase within the same app, has been part of what enables this shift; work on the underlying architecture of digital financial inclusion, such as that by Anand et al. (2026), speaks to the ecosystem-level conditions that allow such frictionless, platform-native commerce and advertising to flourish in emerging markets, even though that particular study addresses accounting and fintech transparency rather than advertising itself.

Brand perception is the concept sitting at the centre of this review, and it deserves a moment's care before the literature is surveyed. Following Keller's (1993) foundational treatment of customer-based brand equity, brand perception here is understood as the mental associations, judgments, and feelings a consumer attaches to a brand, built cumulatively from every touchpoint the consumer has with it. Social media advertising is one such touchpoint, but an unusually active one: unlike a print advertisement, a social media post can be liked, commented on, shared, mocked, or ignored in full public view, and each of those reactions becomes part of the signal other young consumers use to judge the brand. This makes brand perception in the social media era a more social, more visible, and arguably more fragile construct than it was in the era Keller was writing about.

The purpose of this paper is to review, rather than newly test, what the existing literature says about how social media advertising shapes brand perception specifically among young consumers. The review draws on theoretical models of persuasion and advertising value, on empirical studies of platform-specific advertising effects, on work examining influencer-driven content, and on regional evidence from India, in order to build a coherent picture of where scholarly understanding currently stands and where it remains thin. The paper does not report new survey or interview data; its contribution lies in organising and interpreting what has already been published, in the tradition of a narrative literature review, and in pointing toward the gaps that future mixed-methods work, including work situated in fast-growing urban markets such as Gurugram, could usefully close.

2. Materials and Methods

This paper follows a narrative, conceptual literature review design rather than a systematic review or meta-analysis. The choice of method reflects the aim of the paper, which is to synthesise and interpret a body of theoretical and empirical work spanning several disciplines, including marketing, communication studies, and consumer psychology, rather than to produce a statistically pooled estimate of effect sizes across a

narrowly defined set of studies. No primary data were collected, and no survey, interview, or experiment was conducted for this paper; every claim made below rests on a previously published source that is cited and referenced in full.

The literature search drew on academic databases and publisher platforms including Scopus-indexed journals, Emerald Insight, Frontiers, Springer Nature Link, F1000Research, and regional outlets such as the Indian Journal of Marketing and Advances in Consumer Research, alongside the specific sources the author had been directed to incorporate regardless of their indexing status. Search terms combined variants of "social media advertising," "brand perception," "young consumers," "Generation Z," and "influencer marketing," with additional regional terms such as "India," "Delhi NCR," and "Gurugram" used to surface locally grounded studies. Preference was given, wherever the literature allowed, to work published within the last decade and appearing in Scopus-listed or ABDC-ranked outlets, on the reasoning that advertising formats and platform affordances change quickly enough that older empirical findings can lose relevance even when the underlying psychological theory does not.

Two categories of source were deliberately retained outside that recency-and-indexing preference. The first covers foundational theoretical work, specifically the Elaboration Likelihood Model set out by Petty and Cacioppo (1986), the brand equity framework developed by Keller (1993), and the advertising value model proposed by Ducoffe (1996); these papers predate the social media era entirely but continue to underpin how contemporary researchers explain persuasion and brand response, and excluding them purely on grounds of age would have weakened rather than strengthened the review. The second category covers one specific source that the author was instructed to include in this review regardless of its journal's indexing profile: a theoretical study on fintech-driven financial inclusion published in the Journal of Theoretical Accounting Research (Anand et al., 2026). This source is identified transparently here as included by direction rather than by the same selection criteria applied elsewhere in the review; it sits somewhat outside the immediate scope of advertising research and is drawn on only for its bearing on the digital infrastructure that underpins social commerce.

Sources were read in full where access allowed, organised into recurring thematic clusters, and cross-checked against one another for consistency of findings before being written into the sections that follow. Where a source's full bibliographic detail, including an individual author's name, could not be independently confirmed through the publisher's own metadata despite repeated attempts, that gap is noted plainly in the reference list rather than filled in with an invented name.

3. Findings / Results

3.1 Theoretical Foundations: From Persuasion to Brand Equity

Long before social media existed, researchers were already working out how a message changes an attitude, and those older frameworks turn out to travel remarkably well into the platform era. Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) Elaboration Likelihood Model remains the most frequently invoked lens for understanding why a young consumer might process one advertisement carefully and scroll past another without a second thought. The model's central distinction, between a central route in which the consumer engages deliberately with argument quality and a peripheral route in which cues such as source attractiveness or production quality do the persuading, maps unusually well onto the fast, low-effort scrolling behaviour typical of social feeds, where most advertising content is processed peripherally unless something arrests attention long enough to prompt closer engagement.

Ducoffe's (1996) advertising value model supplies a second piece of the theoretical scaffolding, proposing that a consumer's attitude toward an advertisement is a function of its perceived informativeness, entertainment value, and irritation. That three-part structure has proven durable precisely because it does not depend on any particular medium; researchers examining banner ads in the 1990s and researchers examining Instagram Reels three decades later have both found the same basic trade-off at work, where content that entertains or informs earns tolerance and content that merely interrupts earns irritation and, eventually, ad avoidance.

Keller's (1993) treatment of customer-based brand equity completes the theoretical triangle by shifting attention from the advertisement itself to what the advertisement is meant to build: a structured set of brand associations in the consumer's memory, varying in favourability, strength, and uniqueness. Applied to social media advertising, Keller's framework suggests that a single sponsored post rarely does much on its own; what accumulates over repeated exposures, comments, and peer reactions is a broader pattern of association

that either strengthens or erodes the brand's position in a young consumer's mind. This cumulative, associative view of brand perception is what makes the more recent, platform-specific studies reviewed below worth reading as extensions of, rather than replacements for, these older theories.

3.2 The Shift from Mass Advertising to Platform-Native Formats

The literature is fairly consistent in describing a shift away from advertisements that look like advertisements and toward formats that borrow the visual grammar of ordinary user content. Kothari, Choudhary, Jain, Singh, Prasad, and Vani (2025) captured this shift directly in their study of social media advertising's impact on consumer behaviour, finding that credibility and perceived authenticity emerged as the strongest predictors of favourable response, ahead of more conventional measures such as message clarity or brand familiarity. Their results imply that the format an advertisement takes, and how convincingly it blends into the surrounding content, now matters at least as much as what the advertisement actually says.

Duffett's (2017) earlier work on young consumers reinforces this picture from a slightly different angle, showing that attitude formation among younger audiences depended heavily on the specific platform through which a marketing communication reached them, with platforms perceived as more personal or peer-oriented generating stronger attitudinal shifts than those perceived as broadcast-like. Read together, these studies point toward a fairly settled conclusion in the literature: young consumers do not evaluate social media advertisements in isolation from the platform carrying them, and any account of brand perception that ignores platform context is likely to be incomplete.

3.3 Personalization, Platform Context and Perceived Relevance

Personalization occupies a curious position in this literature, valued by consumers when it feels helpful and resented when it feels intrusive, often with only a fine line separating the two. That line is drawn, in large part, by how much a consumer trusts the platform and brand with their personal data in the first place, which is what makes Singh, Anand, Singh, Angirish, Das Sengupta, and Amin's (2025) study of personal data breaches so relevant here even though its focus is e-commerce trust rather than advertising specifically. Their findings show that exposure to, or even awareness of, data breaches measurably erodes consumer trust and pushes consumers toward more guarded privacy-protection behaviour, a shift that plausibly extends to how the same consumers respond to personalized social media advertisements built on the data those platforms hold. This connection sits comfortably alongside Ducoffe's (1996) much older observation that irritation is one of the strongest predictors of negative attitude toward advertising, since over-personalization, especially once a consumer has reason to distrust how their data is handled, appears to function as a contemporary trigger for exactly that irritation.

Rahman, Nithya, Yoganandan, and Meero (2026) extended this line of enquiry with survey evidence from Indian consumers across urban, semi-urban, and rural locations, finding that social media marketing shaped both perception and purchase decisions, though the strength of that influence varied by the consumer's familiarity with the platform and by how relevant the advertised product felt to their immediate needs. Their findings suggest that personalization and relevance are closely linked constructs in practice, even where researchers treat them as conceptually distinct, and that studies focused only on urban, digitally fluent young consumers may understate the variation in response that exists across a market as large and diverse as India's.

3.4 Influencer-Led Content and the Credibility Question

No theme recurs more often in recent literature than the influence of influencers, and for good reason: much of the advertising young consumers now encounter on social platforms is mediated, in whole or in part, by an individual creator rather than delivered directly by the brand. The credibility and authenticity effects that Kothari et al. (2025) identified as central to consumer response are, if anything, sharpened when the message comes from a creator a young consumer already follows and, in some sense, trusts as a peer rather than as a paid spokesperson; the influencer becomes a filter through which the advertised brand's own perceived authenticity and expertise are judged, a transfer effect that is considerably harder to achieve through conventional, brand-fronted advertising.

Chavare, Nayak, Birau, and Alapati (2025) approached a closely related question with an eye specifically on Indian Generation Z consumers, examining whether brand attitude complements or substitutes for influencer credibility in shaping purchase intention. Their findings indicated that the two work together rather than as alternatives: influencer credibility raised purchase intention most strongly among consumers who already held a favourable prior attitude toward the brand, suggesting that influencer marketing amplifies existing brand perception more reliably than it manufactures a new one from nothing. This nuance matters for the present review because it complicates any simple narrative in which influencers are treated as a shortcut

around the slower work of brand building; the evidence instead points to influencer content and underlying brand equity, in Keller's (1993) sense, as mutually reinforcing rather than substitutable.

3.5 Trust, Scepticism and the Attitudes of Generation Z

A recurring caution in the more recent literature is that Generation Z audiences, precisely because they have grown up immersed in social media advertising, tend to bring a more practised scepticism to it than earlier cohorts did. Kothari et al. (2025) found that perceived authenticity acted almost as a gatekeeping variable, with young consumers dismissing outright any content that read as inauthentic, regardless of how well-produced or widely seen it was. This finding is broadly consistent with the peripheral-route mechanisms described by Petty and Cacioppo (1986), since a young consumer who suspects manipulation is likely to reject even a well-argued message rather than engage with it on its merits.

Qaim and Gupta's (2026) study of social media influencers and Gen Z purchase intentions in Delhi-NCR adds a further layer to this picture, though its immediate subject, electric vehicles, sits at some distance from the more general advertising contexts discussed elsewhere in this review. Even so, their finding that influencer-driven content measurably shaped both awareness and purchase intent among consumers aged eighteen to twenty-five in the capital region offers useful corroborating evidence that the mechanisms described in the broader literature operate in this specific market and age group as well, rather than being an artefact of studies conducted elsewhere.

3.6 Regional Evidence from India's National Capital Region

Because this review is written with an eye toward the National Capital Region, and Gurugram in particular, it is worth drawing together what the regional literature specifically says rather than treating Indian studies as incidental illustrations of globally derived theory. Arora, Agarwal, and Kumar's (2018) study of millennial preferences for social media advertising in Delhi NCR remains a useful baseline, documenting which platforms young consumers in the region relied on and how platform choice interacted with the type of product being advertised. Their finding that preference patterns differed noticeably by platform, rather than treating social media as a single undifferentiated channel, anticipates the platform-context arguments made almost a decade later by Kothari et al. (2025).

The more recent regional evidence, including Qaim and Gupta's (2026) Delhi-NCR study of influencer-driven purchase intention among Gen Z consumers, suggests that the region has become something of a natural laboratory for this line of enquiry, combining high smartphone penetration, a young population, and a dense influencer ecosystem. Taken together with Rahman et al.'s (2026) broader Indian survey evidence and the data-privacy findings of Singh et al. (2025), whose author team is likewise drawn substantially from Indian institutions, the regional literature supports the view that findings from Western, platform-mature markets translate into the Indian context in broad outline but with locally specific variation in which platforms, formats, and influencer types carry the most weight, a variation that a purely conceptual review such as this one can describe but cannot fully resolve without further empirical work grounded specifically in Gurugram and comparable NCR markets.

3.7 Enabling Infrastructure: The Wider Digital Economy

A theme easy to overlook in a literature review focused on advertising content is the underlying digital infrastructure that makes platform-native advertising and near-instant purchase possible in the first place. Anand et al.'s (2026) theoretical treatment of fintech-driven financial inclusion and accounting transparency in emerging economies does not address advertising directly, but its broader argument, that transparent and inclusive digital financial systems lower the friction involved in participating in digital commerce, has an indirect bearing on the subject of this review. A young consumer's ability to act on a favourable brand perception formed through a social media advertisement, by completing a purchase within the same app a moment later, depends on exactly the kind of financial infrastructure Anand and colleagues describe. This paper does not attempt to test that connection empirically, and it should be read as a contextual observation rather than a finding drawn from advertising-specific evidence, but it is included here because the literature on social media advertising rarely acknowledges the economic scaffolding that its own subject matter quietly depends on.

4. Discussion

Read as a whole, the literature surveyed above supports a picture of brand perception among young consumers as something built through repeated, socially visible encounters with content that only sometimes announces itself as advertising. The theoretical foundations laid by Petty and Cacioppo (1986), Ducoffe

(1996), and Keller (1993) continue to explain the underlying psychological mechanics reasonably well, but the more recent empirical work makes clear that platform, format, personalization, and influencer involvement now determine, in practice, which of those mechanics get triggered for any given piece of content. A brand cannot simply produce a persuasive message and expect the older, medium-agnostic theories to predict its reception; the platform carrying that message, as Kothari et al. (2025) demonstrate, is now an active variable rather than passive scenery.

The influencer-related findings from Chavare et al. (2025), read alongside Kothari et al.'s (2025) credibility-and-authenticity results, suggest that the field is moving away from a simple question of whether influencer marketing works toward a more useful question of when and for whom it works. The evidence that influencer credibility interacts with pre-existing brand attitude rather than acting as an independent lever is a genuinely useful refinement, since it implies that brands with weak existing perception cannot expect influencer partnerships alone to repair that weakness quickly.

The privacy and trust findings from Singh et al. (2025) add a dimension that the advertising-specific literature tends to underplay: personalization is usually discussed as a feature that improves relevance, but its effectiveness rests on a foundation of consumer trust in data handling that a single breach can quietly undermine. This suggests that studies of personalization's effect on brand perception, including the present review's own reading of that literature, should be read as conditional on a background level of platform trust that cannot be assumed to hold steady over time.

The regional evidence from Arora et al. (2018), Rahman et al. (2026), and Qaim and Gupta (2026) is encouraging in its consistency with the broader international literature, but it is also thinner than one might expect given how large and fast-growing the Indian young consumer market is. The one source included in this review by direction rather than by the same selection criteria applied elsewhere, Anand et al.'s (2026) fintech study, sits in a journal whose indexing and editorial standing are difficult to verify with confidence, which is worth acknowledging openly rather than glossing over; readers relying on this review for decision-making purposes should weigh that particular finding alongside the more clearly indexed sources rather than treating all cited work as carrying equal evidentiary weight.

A further limitation worth naming is that almost all the empirical studies reviewed here rely on self-reported attitudes and purchase intentions gathered through surveys, rather than on behavioural or transaction data. Self-reported measures are a reasonable and long-established tool in this field, but they leave open the possibility that stated attitudes toward social media advertising diverge from actual purchasing behaviour, a gap that mixed-methods designs combining survey data with platform analytics or transaction records could help close.

Finally, the enabling-infrastructure observation drawn from Anand et al. (2026) points toward a broader methodological suggestion for future research: studies of social media advertising's effect on brand perception rarely account for the digital-payments and fintech context within which that advertising operates, even though the ease of completing a purchase immediately after forming a favourable impression plausibly shapes how strongly that impression translates into behaviour. This is offered here as a direction worth exploring rather than as a claim this review can substantiate on its own.

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6. Declaration of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest associated with this manuscript.

7. Conclusion

This review set out to bring together what the existing literature says about how social media advertising shapes brand perception among young consumers, and the picture that emerges is one of an established theoretical base being actively reworked by platform-specific empirical findings. The Elaboration Likelihood Model, advertising value theory, and customer-based brand equity remain the conceptual backbone of the field, but studies published in just the last few years, on format and personalization, on influencer credibility, and on Generation Z's particular blend of engagement and scepticism, show that these older frameworks now need to be applied with careful attention to platform context rather than treated as medium-neutral.

The regional evidence from India, and from the National Capital Region specifically, indicates that the broad patterns found internationally hold locally as well, while also suggesting that Gurugram and comparable

NCR markets would benefit from more sustained empirical attention given their combination of a young population, high digital adoption, and an active influencer economy. The paper has also been transparent about the mixed evidentiary standing of some of the sources it was directed to include, on the view that a literature review serves its readers better by naming such limitations openly than by presenting every citation as equally authoritative.

For researchers designing future studies in this area, the clearest gap identified here is the near-total reliance on self-reported survey measures; a mixed-methods design combining stated attitudes with behavioural or platform-level data would speak more directly to the practical question most marketers actually care about, which is not simply whether young consumers notice and like an advertisement, but whether that liking translates into brand preference and purchase behaviour over time. A study set specifically in Gurugram, drawing on the theoretical and empirical groundwork reviewed here, would be well placed to address that question.

For practitioners, the review's findings converge on a fairly practical set of implications: advertising content aimed at young consumers is judged as much by its perceived authenticity and platform fit as by its persuasive content in the traditional sense, personalization helps only up to the point where it begins to feel intrusive, and influencer partnerships work best as amplifiers of an already reasonably positive brand perception rather than as a substitute for building one. None of these conclusions is entirely new in isolation, but the literature reviewed here suggests they now operate together, in the specific and fast-changing context of social media, in ways that continue to reward close and ongoing scholarly attention.

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