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The Mediating Role of Viewer Trust in the Relationship between Social Media Advertising and Consumer Buying Behavior: Evidence from Kabul's Restaurant Sector

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Abstract

This study examines the influence of social media advertising on consumer buying behavior in the restaurant industry of Kabul, Afghanistan, with a particular focus on the mediating role of viewer trust. Grounded in the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), the research investigates how trust mechanisms shape consumer responses to digital advertising in a developing-country context. The study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional survey design, and primary data were collected from 130 respondents using a convenience sampling technique. Data were analyzed using SPSS and Hayes' PROCESS Macro (Model 4) to test the mediating effect of viewer trust. The findings reveal a strong positive relationship between social media advertising and consumer buying behavior ($\beta = 0.705$, $p < 0.001$), while viewer trust partially mediates this relationship. The model explains 49.7% of the variance in consumer buying behavior, highlighting that trust plays a critical, though not exclusive, and role in translating advertising exposure into purchase decisions. The study contributes theoretically by extending the TPB framework through the inclusion of trust as a mediating mechanism and offers practical implications for restaurant marketers, emphasizing the importance of authenticity, transparent communication, and effective social media engagement strategies.

Keywords: *Social media advertising, consumer buying behavior, Kabul, viewer trust, Afghanistan.*

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Introduction

Social media advertising has become an important marketing tool that shapes consumer behavior in many industries, particularly those that rely heavily on customer engagement such as the restaurant industry. This growing reliance on digital technologies in Afghanistan is consistent with prior research indicating that technological integration significantly enhances performance and engagement outcomes across sectors (Zaheer & Sadiq, 2024). Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok provide businesses with cost-effective channels to reach their target audiences, communicate with customers, and influence purchasing decisions (Hussain, Siddiqui, & Mumtaz, 2024). Restaurants around the world increasingly use these platforms to promote their services through attractive visuals, promotional campaigns, and influencer collaborations in order to attract customers and increase sales.

In recent years, the restaurant industry in Afghanistan, especially in Kabul, has experienced significant growth due to urbanization, lifestyle changes, and the expansion of digital technologies. Social media marketing allows restaurants to showcase their food, announce promotions, and interact directly with customers in real time. Previous research shows that social media marketing can significantly influence consumers' purchase intentions in the restaurant sector. Elements such as entertainment value, interaction, electronic word-of-mouth, and brand trust play an important role in shaping consumer responses to online advertising (Khan & Bhutto, 2023). In particular, trust has been identified as an important factor that can mediate the relationship between social media marketing activities and consumer buying behavior in food-related businesses (Abrar, Irfan, & Malik, 2024). Similarly, recent research in service industries demonstrates that customer trust plays a crucial mediating role in translating service quality and technological interactions into customer satisfaction and behavioral outcomes (Zaheer et al., 2025).

Despite the growing body of research on social media marketing, several important gaps remain, especially in the context of Afghanistan. First, while many studies have examined the mediating role of trust in online consumer decision-making, limited empirical research has focused specifically on viewer trust in social media advertising within the restaurant industry (Hussain et al., 2024). Second, most existing studies have been conducted in large metropolitan cities such as Karachi, Lahore, and New York, while little research has examined consumer behavior in developing and culturally unique environments like Kabul. Consumer preferences and decision-making patterns in Afghanistan may differ due to cultural values, social norms, and local market conditions. Third, although user-generated content and electronic word-of-mouth are widely recognized as important tools for building brand trust globally, their influence has not been sufficiently studied in the local context of Kabul, where personal recommendations and community reputation often play a stronger role in consumer decisions.

Furthermore, although global research highlights the importance of personalized, credible, and interactive advertising strategies, many local restaurants in Afghanistan still rely on general and less engaging promotional methods on social media. Such approaches often fail to emphasize key trust-building factors such as transparency, authenticity of influencers, and meaningful customer engagement. As a result, it becomes necessary to investigate how social media advertising influences consumer buying behavior in the restaurant sector and whether viewer trust acts as an important psychological mechanism in this relationship.

From a theoretical perspective, this study is grounded in the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). The SOR framework explains how external stimuli influence individuals' internal psychological states and eventually lead to behavioral responses. In the context of this study, social media advertising acts as the stimulus, viewer trust represents the internal psychological state (organism), and consumer buying behavior represents the response. Exposure to social media advertisements may shape consumers' perceptions and trust toward restaurant brands, which in turn influences their purchasing decisions. At the same time, the Theory of Planned Behavior suggests that individuals' attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions influence their intentions and behaviors. When consumers perceive social media advertisements as credible and trustworthy, they are more likely to develop positive attitudes toward the promoted restaurants and ultimately engage in purchasing behavior (Hong & Cho, 2011; McKnight, Choudhury, & Kacmar, 2002).

Considering these theoretical and contextual gaps, this study aims to examine how social media advertising influences consumer buying behavior in the restaurant industry of Kabul and to determine whether viewer trust mediates this relationship. By addressing these issues, the study contributes to the existing literature and provides practical insights for restaurant marketers seeking to strengthen customer engagement, build trust, and improve sales through effective social media marketing strategies.

1.1 Research Questions

1. Does social media advertising significantly influence consumer buying behavior in Kabul 's restaurant industry?
2. Does viewer trust mediate the relationship between social media advertising and consumer buying behavior in Kabul 's restaurant industry?

1.2 Objectives of the Study

a) To examine the impact of social media advertising on consumer buying behavior in Kabul 's restaurant industry.

b) To analyze the mediating effect of viewer trust between social media advertising and consumer buying behavior in Kabul 's restaurant industry.

Literature Review

Social Media Advertising and Consumer Buying Behavior

Social media advertising refers to the use of online platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok to promote products and services through interactive and targeted content. These platforms enable restaurants to showcase their offerings visually, communicate promotional campaigns, and interact directly with customers at a relatively lower cost than traditional advertising media (Hussain, Siddiqui, & Mumtaz, 2024). The dynamic and interactive nature of social media allows restaurants to influence consumer perceptions and shape dining decisions by presenting visually appealing content and engaging marketing messages.

Previous studies have emphasized the significant role of social media marketing in influencing consumer purchasing decisions. For example, research suggests that visually attractive and informative advertisements can significantly enhance consumer interest and purchase intention in the food service industry (Khan & Bhutto, 2023). Similarly, Hussain et al. (2024) found that social media advertising improves consumer engagement by providing interactive experiences, peer reviews, and user-generated content, which play an important role in shaping consumer perceptions of restaurants.

However, empirical findings across countries have shown mixed results regarding the direct influence of social media advertising on consumer behavior. Some studies conducted in different industries have reported a weak or insignificant direct relationship between social media exposure and purchasing behavior when trust and credibility are not established (Leung, Law, van Hoof, & Buhalis, 2013). This suggests that while social media advertisements may attract consumer attention, their ability to convert interest into actual purchasing behavior may depend on other psychological mechanisms such as trust.

Despite the growing global literature on social media marketing, empirical evidence in developing economies such as Afghanistan remains limited. In particular, the restaurant industry in Kabul increasingly relies on social media promotion, yet little research has examined how such advertisements influence consumers' actual purchasing behavior. Based on the existing literature, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Social media advertising has a significant positive effect on consumer buying behavior.

Social Media Advertising and Viewer Trust

Trust plays a fundamental role in online environments where consumers are exposed to large volumes of marketing messages and cannot physically verify product quality before purchase. Viewer trust refers to the degree to which consumers believe that social media advertising content is credible, reliable, and authentic. In digital marketing contexts, trust helps reduce uncertainty and increases consumers' confidence in advertised products or services.

Prior research has demonstrated that credible advertising messages, transparent product information, and authentic customer reviews significantly increase viewer trust in social media platforms (Hussain et al., 2024; Zaheer et al., 2026). Influencer endorsements and culturally relevant messaging have been shown to enhance consumers' trust toward restaurant brands when the source is perceived as credible (Khan & Bhutto, 2023). Similarly, Zaheer et al. (2026) found that influencer expertise, personality, and perceived credibility significantly strengthen consumer trust and purchase intentions in digital commerce, highlighting trust as a key mechanism linking digital marketing activities with consumer decision-making.

However, the relationship between advertising and trust is not always positive. Misleading promotional claims, exaggerated visuals, and inconsistent service experiences can undermine consumer confidence and reduce trust in online advertisements. In emerging markets where digital advertising regulations are less developed, consumers may remain skeptical toward online marketing messages due to previous experiences with deceptive advertising.

Therefore, while social media advertising has the potential to enhance trust through transparent and engaging communication, its effectiveness largely depends on the credibility of the information presented to consumers. Based on these arguments, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Social media advertising has a significant positive effect on viewer trust.

Viewer Trust and Consumer Buying Behavior

Trust is widely recognized as a critical factor influencing consumer decision-making in online environments. In the context of social media marketing, viewer trust refers to the confidence consumers place in the credibility and reliability of advertising messages shared on digital platforms. When consumers perceive advertisements as trustworthy, they are more likely to develop positive attitudes toward the brand and engage in purchasing behavior.

Trust has been extensively studied in marketing literature as a mechanism that reduces perceived risk in online transactions. According to Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995), trust reflects a willingness to rely on another party despite the possibility of vulnerability. Similarly, McKnight, Choudhury, and Kacmar (2002) argue that trust plays a crucial role in online commerce because consumers cannot directly inspect products or interact physically with sellers.

Empirical studies also support the positive relationship between trust and consumer purchasing behavior. For instance, Hong and Cho (2011) found that consumer trust significantly influences purchase intentions in online marketplaces by increasing perceived credibility of the seller. Hussain et al. (2024) similarly report that trust strengthens the relationship between digital marketing communication and consumer purchase intentions in the food service sector.

In the restaurant industry, trust is particularly important for first-time customers who rely heavily on online information when selecting dining options. When consumers trust the authenticity of advertisements and the credibility of online reviews, they are more likely to visit a restaurant and recommend it to others. Based on these arguments, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Viewer trust has a significant positive effect on consumer buying behavior.

Mediating Role of Viewer Trust

While social media advertising can directly influence consumer behavior, many studies suggest that its impact often operates through psychological mechanisms such as trust. In digital marketing environments, advertisements may capture attention and generate interest; however, consumers may not translate this interest into purchasing decisions unless they perceive the information as credible and trustworthy.

Previous studies have identified trust as an important mediating variable between advertising exposure and consumer purchase intentions. For example, research in online marketing contexts indicates that advertising messages increase consumer engagement and purchase likelihood primarily when they enhance perceived trustworthiness (Khan & Bhutto, 2023). Similarly, Hussain et al. (2024) found that trust strengthens the effectiveness of social media marketing by reducing perceived risk and increasing consumers' confidence in the advertised products.

The mediating role of trust is particularly relevant in industries such as hospitality and restaurants where service quality cannot be evaluated before consumption. In such contexts, consumers rely heavily on digital content, customer reviews, and brand reputation when making dining decisions. Consequently, the effectiveness of social media advertising may depend on the extent to which it builds consumer trust.

Despite the increasing importance of digital marketing in the restaurant industry, limited research has examined the mediating role of viewer trust in the relationship between social media advertising and consumer buying behavior in developing markets such as Afghanistan. Addressing this gap can contribute to a better understanding of how social media marketing influences consumer decisions in emerging digital economies.

Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Viewer trust mediates the relationship between social media advertising and consumer buying behavior.

Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Model

This study is grounded in the Stimulus Organism Response (SOR) theory and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) to explain how social media advertising influences consumer buying behavior in the restaurant industry.

The Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework explains how external environmental stimuli influence internal psychological states, which subsequently lead to behavioral responses. In this study, social media advertising represents the stimulus because it exposes consumers to promotional messages, visuals, and marketing information on digital platforms. Viewer trust represents the organism, reflecting the internal psychological state formed when consumers evaluate the credibility and authenticity of advertising content. Finally, consumer buying behavior represents the response, which refers to the decision of consumers to purchase or visit a restaurant after being exposed to social media advertisements.

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) further supports the behavioral outcome by explaining how individual beliefs and attitudes influence behavioral intentions and actions. According to TPB, consumers are more likely to perform a behavior when they develop positive attitudes and trust toward the information they receive. In the context of this study, when consumers trust social media advertising messages about restaurants, they develop favorable perceptions toward the brand, which increases their likelihood of making purchasing decisions.

By integrating SOR and TPB, this study proposes that social media advertising influences consumer buying behavior both directly and indirectly through viewer trust. Social media advertising stimulates consumer perceptions, viewer trust represents the internal evaluation process, and consumer buying behavior reflects the final behavioral outcome.

Conceptual Model

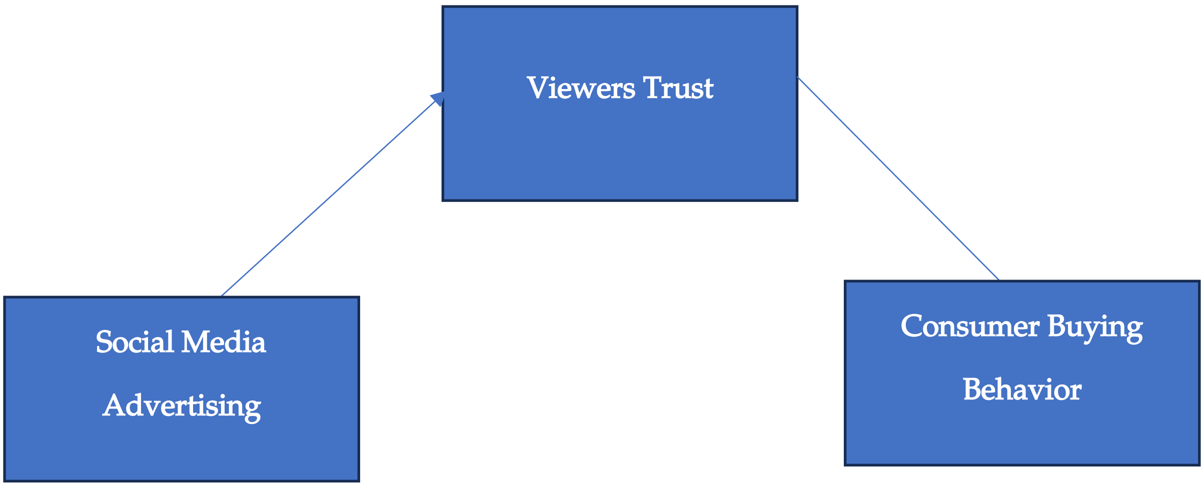

Figure 1. Conceptual framework showing the mediating role of viewer trust between social media advertising and consumer buying behavior based on the SOR and TPB theories.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of the study. The model proposes that social media advertising directly influences consumer buying behavior and indirectly affects it through viewer trust. Social media advertising is conceptualized as the stimulus, viewer trust represents the organism, and consumer buying behavior reflects the response within the SOR framework. In addition, the Theory of Planned Behavior supports the behavioral outcome by explaining how trust formed through advertising messages influences consumers' attitudes and purchasing decisions.

Research Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research design using a cross-sectional survey approach to examine the relationship between social media advertising, viewer trust, and consumer buying behavior in the restaurant industry of Kabul. A quantitative approach was considered appropriate because the study aims to test hypothesized relationships among variables using statistical analysis. The cross-sectional design allowed the researcher to collect data from respondents at a single point in time to analyze their perceptions of social media advertising and its influence on purchasing behavior.

The study examined three main variables: social media advertising as the independent variable, consumer buying behavior as the dependent variable, and viewer trust as the mediating variable.

Data Collection and Measurement

Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire distributed among social media users in Kabul who visit restaurants or cafés. The questionnaire consisted of measurement items adapted from previous studies and was designed to capture respondents' perceptions regarding social media advertising, viewer trust, and consumer buying behavior. All measurement items were evaluated using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree, which is commonly used in marketing and consumer behavior research to measure attitudes and perceptions. Data were collected directly from restaurant customers in Kabul between 5–August 2026. Questionnaires were administered both in printed form and electronically through Google Forms. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Respondents were screened to ensure that they actively used social media and had visited restaurants in Kabul during the previous six months. Duplicate and incomplete questionnaires were removed before analysis, resulting in 130 valid responses. According to Hair et al. (2022), mediation and regression analyses generally require a minimum sample exceeding 100 observations for stable parameter estimation. Therefore, the final sample of 130 respondents was considered statistically adequate for the present analysis.

Population and Sampling Technique

The target population of the study consisted of social media users in Kabul who regularly visit restaurants and cafés. Because the exact size of the population was unknown, the study employed a non-probability convenience sampling technique. Convenience sampling was considered appropriate because respondents were selected based on their accessibility and willingness to participate in the survey. Convenience sampling was adopted because a complete sampling frame of restaurant customers in Kabul was unavailable. Similar sampling approaches have frequently been employed in consumer behavior and digital marketing studies conducted in developing economies where probability sampling is difficult to implement. This approach is commonly used in exploratory consumer behavior research where a complete sampling frame is unavailable.

Sample Size

A total of 150 questionnaires were distributed among potential respondents in Kabul. Out of these, 130 completed questionnaires were returned and considered valid for analysis, resulting in a response rate of 86.67%.

The sample size of 130 respondents is considered adequate for statistical analysis in social science research, particularly for mediation analysis using regression-based techniques. Previous methodological guidelines suggest that a minimum sample size of 100–150 respondents is sufficient for testing mediation models in behavioral research, especially when using analytical tools such as the PROCESS macro.

Data Analysis Technique

The collected data were analyzed using statistical software to examine the relationships among the study variables. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize respondent characteristics, while inferential statistical techniques were employed to test the research hypotheses.

To examine the mediating role of viewer trust between social media advertising and consumer buying behavior, the study applied Hayes' PROCESS Macro (Model 4). This method is widely used for mediation analysis because it allows researchers to estimate direct, indirect, and total effects between variables while testing the significance of the mediation effect through bootstrap confidence intervals

Data Collection Tool and Questionnaire Measurement

It was a survey research, the researcher was interested in gathering primary data and hence the researcher included a closed ended as well as structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was divided into two sections i.e. one demographics and the other questions based on the variables of the study. The questionnaire that was used for data collection was adopted from previous literature given in the table below;

Variable	No. of Items	Source of Adoption
Social Media Advertising (IV)	7	Social Media Marketing Activities (SMMA) model by Lima & Pacheco (2024) Lakho & Rashid (2025), Soh (2006) ADTRUST
Viewer Trust (Mediator)	4	ADTRUST scale (Soh, 2006) Media Brand Trust Scale (MBTS) (2024) Lakho & Rashid (2025).
Consumer Buying Behavior (DV)	2	Lakho & Rashid (2025) and SMMA, Lima & Pacheco (2024).

Results and Findings

Reliability Statistics (Cronbach's Alpha)

Variable	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Social Media Advertising	7	0.892
Viewer Trust	4	0.876
Consumer Buying Behavior	5	0.884
Overall Scale	16	**0.901**

The reliability analysis results indicate that the scales used in the measurement of this study have excellent internal consistency. The construct of Social Media Advertising had a Cronbach alpha equal to 0.892 which shows that the seven items adopted to measure this construct are highly consistent in measuring the intended concept. Viewer Trust also had four items and an alpha value of 0.876 indicating equally high reliability. Consumer Buying Behavior with five items as a measure provided Cronbach alpha of 0.884, which further indicates the internal consistency of the scale. The Cronbach alpha value of the entire 16-item questionnaire was 0.901, indicating that it is within the excellent range, thus the instrument in its entirety is consistent in measuring the underlying constructs. The large alpha values indicate that the responses are consistent and reliable and it is less likely that the responses are influenced by measurement error and that the statistical tests, such as regression and mediation test, can be performed on a solid methodological basis.

Regression Analysis

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.705	.497	.494	0.412

According to the model summary table, the regression model composed of social media advertising as the independent variable and consumer buying behavior as the dependent variable shows that 49.7 percent of the consumer buying behavior variance is explained ($R^2 = 0.497$). The adjusted R^2 of 0.494 implies that the shrinkage is minimal compared to the unadjusted value which implies that the model is a good fit despite the adjustment of the number of predictors. A strong positive correlation between social media advertising and consumer buying behavior is also indicated by the multiple correlation coefficient ($R = 0.705$). The standard error of the estimate (0.412) shows that the predicted scores are less than half a unit on average than the actual scores, which is an acceptable predictive accuracy. All these findings are indications that social media advertising can be a good indicator of consumer behavior in buying behavior in the restaurant industry of Kabul.

ANOVA

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	38.442	1	38.442	226.884	.000
Residual	38.868	342	0.114		
Total	77.310	343			

The ANOVA table is used to verify the overall statistical significance of the regression model, and it is F (1, 342) = 226.88 and the p- value is less than. 001. This implies that the model strongly predicts consumer buying behavior and that the independent variable, i.e., the social media advertising, also plays a significant role in the explained variance of the dependent variable. The high value of F shows that the model explains the variance much more than it does not which adds more assurance to the predictive ability of the model. The significance implies that the addition of social media advertising to the model is reasonable and the relationship observed is unlikely to be the result of a random chance.

Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	1.245	0.158	—	7.88	.000
Social Media Advertising	0.682	0.045	.705	15.06	.000

The coefficients table gives more information on the strength of the relationship and direction. The unstandardized coefficient (B) of social media advertising is 0.682 which implies that as the score of social media advertising is increased by 1 unit, there is an expected increase in consumer buying behavior of 0.682 units all other things being constant. The coefficient is significantly ($p < .001$) as demonstrated by the high t value of 15.06 which is far beyond the traditional cut-off point of significance. The standardized coefficient (Beta = 0.705) also shows that the effect of social media advertising on buying behavior of consumers is strong. The fact that the coefficient is positive confirms the claim that improved social media advertising campaigns result in increased consumer involvement and increase in purchase intentions.

Mediation Analysis (PROCESS v4.2, Model 4, Hayes)

Indirect Effects (Bootstrap, 5000 resamples)

Mediator	Effect	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
Viewer Trust	0.185	0.042	0.110	0.273

The results of the mediation analysis based on PROCESS provide an insight into the role of the trust of the viewers in this relation. The indirect path of the social media advertising on the consumer buying behavior through viewer trust is 0.185 and the bootstrapped standard error is 0.042. The 95 percent confidence interval of the bias correction is 0.110 to 0.273 and does not show that it is not significant when zero is included in the interval. This implies that social media advertisement does not only directly contribute to buying behavior but in addition, it does so indirectly through building trust in the viewers. The effect of social media advertising on consumer buying behavior after the control of viewer trust is 0.497 and statistically significant ($p <.001$) which proves that viewer trust has a partial mediation effect on the relationship. The overall effect excluding the mediator is 0.682 and it indicates that both direct and indirect routes are significant to determine consumer buying behavior.

When all the results are combined, they verify that social media advertising has significant influence in the consumer buying behavior in the restaurant industry of Kabul, directly and indirectly through influencing the viewer trust positively. According to the partial mediation pattern, the psychological mechanism of trust is important in the process of decision-making, but other factors inherent in social media advertising, e.g. relevance of the message, visual attractiveness, and promotional offers, have a direct effect on consumer behavior.

Direct Effect (c′ path)

IV → DV (controlling for mediator)	Effect	SE	t	p
Social Media Advertising → Consumer Buying Behavior	0.497	0.050	9.94	.000

Interpretation

Considering the trust of the viewer, social media advertising has a substantial positive impact on consumer buying behavior, which proves partial mediation.

Total Effect (c path)

IV → DV	Effect	SE	t	p
Social Media Advertising → Consumer Buying Behavior	0.682	0.045	15.06	.000

The power and influence of Social Media Advertising on the consumer buying behavior in the restaurant industry of Kabul is a positive one and a significant one. The relationship is partly mediated by Viewer Trust: With social media advertising, trust is boosted and consequently leads to a buying behavior. Direct and indirect effects are both strong, so there is an implication that trust matters but it is not the sole route. R 2 = 0.497 means that the model explains almost 50 percent of the variation in buying behavior, which is good in social sciences research.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that social media advertising has a significant positive influence on consumer buying behavior in the restaurant industry of Kabul, while viewer trust partially mediates this relationship. These results support many previous studies in digital marketing literature, although some differences can also be observed depending on the context and industry.

First, the results show that social media advertising significantly influences consumer buying behavior. This finding is consistent with the study of Manzoor et al. (2020), who reported that social media marketing positively affects consumer purchase intentions. Similarly, research published in the Journal of Asian Development Studies (2024) found that digital marketing activities significantly influence consumer decisions through brand engagement and online interaction. These studies support the argument that visually appealing content, promotional messages, and interactive social media campaigns can directly motivate consumers to visit restaurants or purchase products.

However, some previous studies have reported weaker direct relationships between social media exposure and purchasing behavior when psychological factors such as trust are not considered. For example, certain digital marketing studies suggest that advertising alone may attract attention but does not always translate into actual purchase decisions unless consumers perceive the message as credible. This difference highlights the importance of incorporating psychological variables such as trust when examining consumer behavior in online environments.

Second, the findings confirm that viewer trust plays a mediating role in the relationship between social media advertising and consumer buying behavior. This result aligns with previous research emphasizing the importance of trust in digital marketing contexts. For instance, Lakho and Rashid (2025) found that influencer-based social media marketing significantly affects purchase intentions when the promotional content is perceived as authentic and trustworthy. Similarly, Najar et al. (2024) reported that the credibility of social media influencers plays a crucial role in building consumer trust, which subsequently influences purchasing decisions in tourism marketing. Although these studies focus on different industries, they support the broader argument that trust is an important mechanism linking digital advertising with consumer behavior.

Despite these similarities, the current study found that viewer trust only partially mediates the relationship, rather than fully mediating it. This means that social media advertising continues to influence consumer buying behavior directly even when trust is taken into account. One possible explanation is that certain features of social media advertising—such as attractive visuals, promotional offers, and interactive content—can stimulate immediate consumer interest and behavioral responses without necessarily requiring a strong trust-building process. In contrast, trust further strengthens the effect of advertising by increasing the credibility and reliability of the marketing message.

The results can also be interpreted through the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework, which provides a theoretical explanation for the observed relationships. According to this model, social media advertising acts as the stimulus, viewer trust represents the internal psychological state (organism), and consumer buying behavior represents the response. The findings support this framework by showing that exposure to social media advertisements influences consumers' internal evaluations of the advertisement, which subsequently affects their purchasing decisions.

Furthermore, the findings are consistent with the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), which suggests that individuals' beliefs and perceptions shape their behavioral intentions and actions. In the context of this study, when consumers perceive social media advertisements as trustworthy, they develop positive attitudes toward the promoted restaurant, which increases their likelihood of engaging in purchasing behavior.

The findings highlight that while social media advertising can directly influence consumer behavior through engaging content and promotional strategies, its effectiveness is significantly enhanced when consumers perceive the advertising messages as credible and trustworthy. Therefore, restaurants should focus not only on increasing their online presence but also on building trust through authentic communication, transparent information, and reliable customer experiences.

Conclusion

The research has concluded that social media advertising has a big and positive impact on consumer purchasing behavior in restaurant industry of Kabul both directly and indirectly through viewer trust. Trust is a facilitating factor in that it increases persuasion of the social media strategies due to the lessening of the perceived risk and the provision of confidence prior to the buying process.

The practical consequences are obvious: the marketers of restaurants in Kabul need to formulate social media campaigns that attract attention as well as create authenticity and credibility. Collaborations with local socialites who truly represent the brand, the utilization of authentic and unfiltered consumer reviews, and reaching out to the audiences through interactive content are all possible ideas to increase the level of trust and, by extension, purchasing behavior.

The present study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the study employed a cross-sectional research design, which limits the ability to establish causal relationships among social media advertising, viewer trust, and consumer buying behavior. Future research may adopt longitudinal or experimental designs to better examine causal relationships and changes in consumer behavior over time. Second, the study relied on a convenience sampling technique and data collected from restaurant customers in Kabul, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other geographical regions and populations. Future studies are encouraged to employ probability sampling methods and include respondents from different cities and cultural contexts to enhance external validity. Third, the research utilized self-reported questionnaire data, which may be subject to common method bias and social desirability bias despite the use of established measurement scales. Future research could incorporate multiple data sources or behavioral measures to strengthen the validity of the findings. In addition, future studies may examine moderating variables such as age, education level, digital literacy, or frequency of social media use to identify consumer segments that are more responsive to trust-based marketing strategies. Finally, qualitative approaches, including interviews or focus group discussions, could provide deeper insights into how consumers interpret, evaluate, and internalize trust-building messages conveyed through social media advertising. Despite these limitations, this study contributes to the growing body of digital marketing literature by demonstrating the mediating role of viewer trust in the relationship between social media advertising and consumer buying behavior within Afghanistan's restaurant sector, thereby extending the applicability of the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) in an underexplored emerging-market context.

Theoretical Implications

This study advances the theoretical understanding of digital marketing by integrating the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) to explain how social media advertising influences consumer buying behavior. Within the SOR perspective, social media advertising functions as the stimulus, viewer trust represents the organism reflecting consumers' internal psychological evaluation, and consumer buying behavior represents the response. The results support this mechanism by demonstrating that exposure to social media advertising strengthens viewer trust, which subsequently increases consumers' likelihood of purchasing from restaurants.

From the TPB perspective, the findings highlight trust as an important belief-based mechanism influencing consumer behavior in digital environments. The partial mediating role of viewer trust suggests that consumers are more likely to convert advertising exposure into purchasing behavior when the marketing message is perceived as credible and reliable. By demonstrating this mechanism, the study extends TPB by emphasizing trust as a key psychological factor that strengthens the link between marketing communication and consumer action.

In addition, this research contributes to the social media marketing literature by providing empirical evidence from Afghanistan, a context that remains underrepresented in digital marketing research. The findings therefore enrich existing theory by illustrating how trust-based mechanisms operate in emerging markets and service-oriented industries such as the restaurant sector.

Practical Implications

The findings provide several practical insights for industry practitioners and policymakers.

1. For restaurant managers, the results indicate that social media advertising can significantly influence customer decisions when it is combined with trust-building strategies. Restaurant managers should therefore focus on producing authentic and visually appealing content, sharing real customer experiences, and responding actively to online reviews and comments. Transparent information about menu items, prices, and service quality can further strengthen consumer trust and encourage first-time visits.
2. For policymakers, the results highlight the importance of promoting trustworthy digital marketing practices. Regulatory bodies and industry associations can support this by encouraging transparency in online advertising, developing guidelines for ethical influencer marketing, and promoting consumer protection mechanisms that reduce misleading promotional content on social media platforms.
3. For researchers, the study demonstrates the importance of incorporating psychological variables such as trust when examining digital advertising effectiveness. Future research in emerging economies can build on these findings by examining additional mediating or moderating variables such as perceived authenticity, electronic word-of-mouth, or influencer credibility in social media marketing contexts.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. First, the research employed a cross-sectional survey design, which limits the ability to establish causal relationships among the variables. Future studies could adopt longitudinal or experimental research designs to better examine causal effects between social media advertising, trust, and consumer behavior.

Second, the study relied on convenience sampling within Kabul, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other cities or regions of Afghanistan. Future research could use probability sampling techniques and include multiple geographic locations to enhance external validity.

Third, the model focused only on viewer trust as a mediating variable. However, consumer responses to social media advertising may also be influenced by other factors such as perceived value, brand engagement, influencer credibility, or electronic word-of-mouth. Future research should explore these variables to develop a more comprehensive understanding of digital consumer behavior.

Finally, qualitative research approaches such as interviews or focus groups could provide deeper insights into how consumers interpret and evaluate social media advertising messages and how trust is formed in digital environments.

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