

Consumer Preferences for Social Media Advertising in Romanian E-Commerce

Dragoş BUJOR ¹[[0009-0009-3549-7620], **Ştefan-Ionuţ ANGHEL** ¹[0009-0000-5261-2031], **Antonia-Gabriela MALOŞ** ²[0009-0002-2763-3695], ¹ and **Cosmin CARACAS** ⁴[0009-0004-5747-401X]

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Abstract: *The diffusion of the internet and the pervasive adoption of social media have profoundly reshaped how consumers discover, evaluate, and purchase products, pushing marketing communication decisively towards digital platforms. As social commerce matures, brands compete intensely for consumer attention, yet the rapid evolution and complexity of the digital landscape make it difficult to identify which promotional formats most effectively translate engagement into purchase. Despite a substantial international literature on social media marketing and consumer behaviour, empirical evidence remains comparatively scarce for Romania, an emerging Central and Eastern European market with high internet penetration but a still-developing e-commerce ecosystem. This study addresses that gap by examining how social media engagement relates to online purchasing behaviour and to consumers' preferences for different advertising and promotion formats. Drawing on a cross-sectional survey of 130 Romanian online shoppers analysed through descriptive statistics, the study maps platform usage, product discovery, purchase frequency and spending, decision speed, and format preferences. The findings indicate that social media is a routine channel of product discovery and acquisition, that messaging and video platforms dominate everyday usage, and that content from micro-influencers and peers is valued on a par with paid advertising, while traditional influencer endorsements are received more cautiously. Interpreted through the Stimulus–Organism–Response framework and complementary theories of technology acceptance, uses and gratifications, source credibility, and parasocial interaction, the results offer a foundation for refining social media advertising strategies and supporting e-commerce growth in the Romanian market.*

Keywords: social media, e-commerce, social commerce, advertising formats, influencer marketing, consumer behaviour, Romania.

JEL Classification: M31, M37, L81.

I. Introduction

The contemporary consumer is connected, mobile-first, and channel-agnostic, moving fluidly between online and offline touchpoints when making purchase decisions while still valuing genuine human interaction. Increasingly, consumers place greater trust in their own social connections than in corporate messaging or established brand names (Kotler et al., 2017). Social media platforms sit at the centre of this shift: they are simultaneously spaces for socialising, sources of product information, and storefronts, and they have become indispensable instruments through which firms build relationships, communicate value, and stimulate demand.

The scale of social media adoption underscores its commercial importance. By April 2026 there were approximately 5.79 billion active social media user identities worldwide, equivalent to roughly 70 percent of the global population, while global online consumer spending reached an estimated US\$3.66 trillion in 2025 (DataReportal, 2026a). Romania reflects these global dynamics. At the end of 2025 the country counted around 17.7 million internet users, corresponding to an internet penetration rate of about 94 percent, and roughly 12.9 million social media user identities, equivalent to some 68 percent of the population (DataReportal, 2026b). With mobile connections exceeding the size of the population and the great majority of internet users active on at least one social platform, the Romanian market combines a near-saturated connectivity base with substantial untapped commercial potential.

That potential is increasingly being realised. According to the Romanian Association of Online Stores (ARMO), e-commerce in Romania reached approximately €11.7 billion in 2024, equivalent to 3.4 percent of gross domestic product, and was projected to grow to around €12.8 billion in 2025, placing the country third in Central and Eastern Europe after Poland and the Czech Republic (ARMO, 2025). Goods-only estimates from industry observers place the market closer to €8 billion, but all sources concur on a sustained, mobile-led growth trajectory in which video content, marketplaces, and a digitally native Generation Z play an expanding role (GPeC/MerchantPro, 2025). In 2024, roughly 72.9 percent of Romanian internet users made at least one online purchase, with notable growth in rural areas (ARMO, 2025).

Against this backdrop, a clear research gap remains. While the international literature has extensively examined social media marketing and its effects on consumer behaviour, comparatively little empirical work investigates the Romanian context, and in particular the interrelationships among everyday social media engagement, online purchasing behaviour, and consumer attitudes towards specific advertising and promotion formats. Understanding which formats Romanian consumers prefer, and how engagement converts into discovery and purchase, is of direct relevance to firms seeking to allocate scarce marketing resources effectively. The present study addresses this gap by investigating, through a survey of Romanian online shoppers, how social media shapes purchasing behaviour and preferences towards on-platform advertising. The contribution is twofold: it provides up-to-date descriptive evidence on the Romanian digital consumer, and it interprets that evidence through an integrated theoretical lens, generating implications for e-commerce growth and for revenue generation via social media advertising.

II. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Social Media and the Transformation of Consumer Behaviour

Social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok function as relationship technologies that allow firms to engage consumers directly and cost-effectively (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). As the number of available channels has proliferated, the visibility of marketing communication on social media and the quality of brand-consumer interaction have become central to organisational strategy (Lindermann, 2004). A consistent stream of research links online content communication to competitive performance: effective communication fosters customer loyalty and strengthens a brand's competitive position (Wiktor & Sanak-Kosmowska, 2021), enhances company competitiveness by reinforcing customer relationships and brand awareness (Dwivedi et al., 2021), builds brand value and equity (Momen et al., 2020), and nurtures the brand-consumer relationships on which competitiveness ultimately rests (Alvarado-Karste & Kidwell, 2021).

Crucially, social media does not merely transmit brand messages; it reconfigures the consumer decision journey itself. Peer content, reviews, and recommendations now intervene at every stage from need recognition to post-purchase evaluation, and the boundary between earned, owned, and paid media has blurred. Appel et al. (2020) argue that the future of social media in marketing will be defined by the convergence of omni-social presence, real-time engagement, and increasingly autonomous, data-driven personalisation, a trajectory that places the analysis of platform-specific consumer behaviour at the centre of the marketing research agenda.

2.2 From E-Commerce to Social Commerce

Within e-commerce, firms increasingly leverage social networks to acquire and retain customers. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), in particular, depend on social media and online platforms to maintain customer relationships, extend market reach, and improve operational efficiency, even as they face well-documented barriers to adoption (Abed et al., 2015; Papadopoulos et al., 2020). Social media marketing exerts a significant and positive influence on customer loyalty in e-commerce (Yadav & Rahman, 2018), and influencer marketing has emerged as a particularly potent mechanism, associating brand image with opinion leaders whose followers co-create brand meaning on social networks (Vrontis et al., 2021; Brown et al., 2019). Paid advertising on social platforms is widely used to reach consumers, who frequently interpret such advertising as a useful source of product information (Chetioui et al., 2021).

These developments have crystallised into social commerce, a distinct subset of e-commerce in which social media technologies support relationship building, the exchange of commercial information, and buying and selling through user-generated content (Wang & Xie, 2020). The category spans both business-to-consumer and consumer-to-consumer exchange and depends on the interaction of people, technology, and information (Wang & Zhang, 2012). Adoption of social commerce services is shaped by perceived usefulness, social influence, and trust (Mamonov & Benbunan-Fich, 2017), while firm performance benefits from leveraging social platforms as a source of sustainable competitive advantage (Fitriani et al., 2023). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the format has evolved further, shifting from static image- and video-

based commerce towards live-streaming shopping, in which real-time interaction is fused with immediate transaction (Wang & Oh, 2023).

2.3 Theoretical Framework

To interpret how social media engagement translates into purchasing behaviour, this study draws on four complementary theoretical perspectives, integrated under an overarching Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) logic. The S–O–R framework (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) holds that environmental stimuli (S) elicit internal cognitive and affective states in the organism (O), which in turn drive approach or avoidance responses (R). In a social commerce setting, advertising formats, influencer content, peer recommendations, and platform design constitute stimuli; perceived usefulness, trust, enjoyment, and parasocial attachment represent the organismic states; and product discovery, purchase, and loyalty are the behavioural responses. This logic provides a parsimonious structure within which the more specific theories below can be situated.

First, the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989) and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) explain platform and channel adoption: perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use, alongside attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control, shape intention and behaviour. These models are especially pertinent to emerging markets, where recent Romanian evidence shows that perceived ease of use, together with sustainability concerns, drives Generation Z's adoption of online shopping (Catană et al., 2025). Second, Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1973) accounts for why consumers engage with platforms in the first place, identifying motivations such as information seeking, entertainment, social connection, and identity expression; this perspective has been applied directly to continuous purchase intention on TikTok (Wang & Oh, 2023).

Third, source credibility theory (Ohanian, 1990) explains the persuasive power of advertising and endorsements, locating influence in the perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness of the source. Fourth, the concept of parasocial interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1956) captures the one-sided, intimacy-at-a-distance relationships that audiences form with media figures, and which underpin the contemporary effectiveness of influencers and, in particular, micro-influencers. Together, these perspectives predict that formats perceived as authentic, credible, and relationally proximate, such as peer and micro-influencer content, will convert engagement into purchase more readily than formats perceived as impersonal or commercially motivated.

2.4 Advertising Formats, Influencers and Electronic Word-of-Mouth

The persuasive efficacy of social media marketing varies systematically across formats. Paid advertising (including pay-per-click and carousel formats), organic brand content, contests and giveaways, influencer endorsements, and micro-influencer or peer content each mobilise different psychological mechanisms. A recurring finding is that audiences increasingly discount overtly commercial messaging while rewarding content perceived as authentic. Micro-influencers, who combine niche expertise with perceived ordinariness and homophily with their followers, frequently generate stronger parasocial bonds and higher trust than celebrity endorsers, even though their absolute reach is smaller. Source credibility, rather than reach alone, emerges as the principal antecedent of favourable consumer attitudes.

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is a closely related driver. On platforms such as Facebook, the credibility of the source and of eWOM is decisive in reducing perceived risk, especially for high-involvement categories such as cosmetics and skincare, where information credibility significantly shapes social commerce purchase intention (Ranjith et al., 2025; Chetoui et al., 2021). Importantly, recent evidence complicates the classic satisfaction-to-eWOM paradigm: in a study of 335 Romanian consumers, personal factors such as social media usage behaviour, marketing mavenism, and the need for evaluation were stronger antecedents of the intention to write online reviews than product-related variables, including satisfaction itself (Anastasei et al., 2024). This suggests that the propensity to generate and respond to eWOM is partly dispositional, with direct implications for how firms identify and activate advocates.

2.5 The Romanian Digital Consumer

A growing body of Romanian-focused research provides essential context for the present study. Evidence on trust indicates that online trust and perceived risk are critical determinants of decision-making on social commerce platforms, with merchant integrity and benevolence mediating consumer engagement (Lăzăroiu et al., 2020). On the supply side, the quality of the system and of the technology deployed are significant predictors of perceived value and word-of-mouth in Romanian retail (Vasiliu et al., 2023). With respect to influence, a large survey of Romanian consumers found that the great majority had made at least one purchase on the basis of an influencer recommendation, with Instagram perceived as the most impactful platform and campaign success contingent on the alignment of influencer, product, and target audience (Szakal et al., 2024).

More recent work documents the rising salience of artificial intelligence and of generational change. AI-based tools such as chatbots, personalised marketing, and product recommendations are reported to influence the online shopping experience and decision process of Romanian consumers positively, particularly among younger cohorts (Allahverdiyev & Albăstroiu Năstase, 2025). Generation Z, analysed through an extension of the Technology Acceptance Model, weighs sustainability and ecological awareness alongside perceived ease of use when adopting marketplace shopping (Catană et al., 2025). At the same time, the digital commerce environment can amplify problematic behaviour: fear of missing out (FOMO), intensified by push notifications and limited-time offers, has been linked to compulsive buying among Romanian students (Barbu Kleitsch & Drămnescu, 2025). Taken together, this literature portrays a consumer who is highly connected, increasingly value- and authenticity-driven, sensitive to trust and risk, and responsive to peer and micro-influencer signals, yet about whom the specific interplay of engagement, purchase behaviour, and format preference remains under-examined.

III. Research Aims and Questions

The widespread adoption of social media has created a crowded market for digital marketing, intensifying competition for consumer attention. Although many studies examine the effect of social media on shopping in general, evidence on Romanian consumers' preferences for specific promotional formats, and on how these preferences relate to engagement and purchase, remains limited. The aim of this study is therefore to characterise the relationships among social media usage, online purchasing behaviour, and attitudes towards advertising formats in the Romanian market, and to interpret these patterns through the integrated framework outlined above.

Given the exploratory nature of the enquiry and the descriptive design of the data collection, the study is structured around research questions rather than formal hypothesis tests. This framing reflects the analytical scope of the dataset, which supports the characterisation of distributions and patterns but not inferential causal testing; it is consistent with the recommendation to align the form of research questions with the available evidence (Leavy, 2017). Three research questions guide the analysis:

RQ1. How is social media engagement (platform usage and time spent) related to online purchasing behaviour among Romanian consumers, in terms of product discovery, purchase frequency, spending, and decision speed?

RQ2. Which social media advertising and promotion formats do Romanian consumers prefer, and how do paid advertising, micro-influencer and peer content, traditional influencer endorsements, contests, and organic brand content compare?

RQ3. Through which platforms do Romanian consumers prefer to connect with brands, and what do these preferences imply for the design of social media advertising strategies?

For the purposes of analysis, social media marketing methods were categorised into the following format types: paid advertising (pay-per-click), influencer marketing, micro-influencer or peer content, organic brand promotion, contests and giveaways, events, and carousel advertisements.

IV. Methodology

4.1 Research Design and Sample

The study adopts a quantitative-dominant, cross-sectional design with a complementary qualitative component, consistent with established guidance on mixed-methods research (Leavy, 2017). Primary data were collected through a structured online survey administered to 130 individuals with online shopping experience, spanning a range of age groups, shopping habits, and preferences. Data were gathered at a single point in time, at the beginning of 2024, providing a snapshot of consumer attitudes and behaviour. The questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms and circulated through WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram, channels that proved efficient for reaching active social media users. Respondents' personal information and answers were kept confidential and were not shared with third parties; participation was anonymous and voluntary.

Because recruitment relied on online self-selection through the authors' networks, the sample is a non-probability convenience sample. This approach is appropriate for an exploratory study of an active online-shopper population but limits statistical generalisation to the wider Romanian population, a point revisited in the limitations. Secondary data from sources such as DataReportal, ARMO, and industry reports were used to contextualise the primary findings.

4.2 Instrument and Measurement

The questionnaire comprised two sections. The first captured the focal constructs, social media usage, online purchasing behaviour, and attitudes towards advertising formats, while the second collected respondent characteristics including age, gender, occupation, education, and place of residence. Attitudinal items were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “agree” (1) to “disagree” (5). Closed-ended items were complemented by open-ended questions that allowed respondents to articulate motivations and feelings in their own words, providing qualitative depth to the quantitative results.

4.3 Analytical Approach

Responses were compiled in a spreadsheet and transferred to IBM SPSS for analysis. The analysis proceeded in two stages. First, the demographic profile of the sample was established. Second, descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, maximum values, and standard deviations, were computed to verify data integrity and to characterise the distribution of responses across the focal constructs (Kaur et al., 2018). Open-ended responses were read thematically to triangulate and enrich the quantitative findings. Consistent with the exploratory aim and the descriptive nature of the data, no inferential or causal tests were performed; the results that follow are therefore presented as patterns and associations rather than as tests of statistical significance.

V. Results and Discussion

5.1 Sample Profile

The sample skews towards young, educated, economically active adults, the segment most relevant to social commerce. Women constitute a small majority of respondents, and more than half fall within the 25–39 age bracket, indicating a respondent base with established purchasing power. The great majority are employed, and most hold a bachelor’s degree or higher. Table 1 summarises the demographic profile.

Table 1. Demographic profile of respondents (N = 130)

Characteristic	Category	Share
Gender	Female	56.2%
	Male	43.8%
Age	25–39 years (dominant group)	52.3%
Occupation	Employed	78.5%
Education	Bachelor’s degree	56.9%
	Master’s degree	18.5%
	MBA / CFA	16.9%
Daily time on social media	1–3 hours (65 respondents)	50.0%

Source: authors’ survey data.

5.2 Platform Awareness and Usage

Platform awareness is high and broad: Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and TikTok all achieve recognition rates above 90 percent. Usage, however, tells a more nuanced story. Although Facebook enjoys the greatest name recognition, WhatsApp is the most heavily used platform, followed by YouTube, with Facebook and Instagram tied behind them. The prominence of a messaging application and a video platform at the top of the usage ranking signals that everyday social media activity in Romania is oriented towards private communication and video consumption as much as towards traditional feed-based networking, a pattern with direct consequences for where commercial messages are likely to be encountered. Table 2 reports the usage shares.

Table 2. Most-used social media platforms

Platform	Usage share
WhatsApp	73.8%
YouTube	69.2%
Facebook	64.6%

Platform	Usage share
Instagram	64.6%

Source: authors' survey data. Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp and TikTok each exceed 90% awareness.

5.3 Social Media, Product Discovery and Purchase Behaviour

Social media is not merely a communication environment for these respondents; it is an active channel of discovery and acquisition. A large majority report having purchased products promoted on social media, and an even larger share say they have discovered brands or products through these platforms that they now use regularly. This dual finding, that social media both prompts one-off purchases and seeds durable brand relationships, is central to its commercial value and aligns with the S-O-R logic in which platform stimuli generate both immediate responses and longer-term attachment.

Purchase frequency and spending confirm an engaged shopper base. More than four in ten respondents shop online at least monthly, and a further substantial share do so weekly; nearly half report monthly online spending in the 1,001–2,000 lei band. Satisfaction with online shopping is high, with the overwhelming majority declaring themselves satisfied or very satisfied. Decision-making is notably swift: a third of respondents purchase as soon as they find the desired product, and a further fifth decide within one to two days, underscoring the premium that firms must place on timely, well-targeted prompts within a limited attention window. Table 3 consolidates these behavioural indicators.

Table 3. Online shopping behaviour and the role of social media

Indicator	Share of respondents
Purchased a product promoted on social media	82.3%
Discovered brands/products now used regularly	83.1%
Shop online at least monthly	42.3%
Shop online weekly	37.7%
Monthly online spend of 1,001–2,000 lei	46.9%
Satisfied with online shopping	59.2%
Very satisfied with online shopping	33.1%
Purchase immediately upon finding the product	33.3%
Decide within 1–2 days	≈20%

Source: authors' survey data.

5.4 Preferences for Advertising and Promotion Formats

The format-preference results speak directly to RQ2 and yield the study's most managerially significant finding. Promoted advertisements and content from followed micro-influencers are favoured equally, each by a small majority of respondents. Contests and giveaways follow, ahead of traditional influencer endorsements, while organic content posted by companies and brands is the least preferred format. Table 4 reports the distribution.

Table 4. Preferred social media promotion formats

Promotion format	Preference
Promoted ads (paid)	54.6%
Content from followed micro-influencers / peers	54.6%
Contests / giveaways	38.5%
Influencer endorsements	32.3%
Organic content from companies / brands	27.7%

Source: authors' survey data. Multiple responses permitted.

The parity between paid advertising and micro-influencer content, and the relatively cautious reception of traditional influencer endorsements, is theoretically coherent. Source credibility theory (Ohanian, 1990) holds that persuasion depends on perceived trustworthiness and expertise rather than reach alone, while parasocial interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1956) explains why followed micro-influencers and peers, perceived as relationally proximate and authentic, can match or exceed the appeal of overtly commercial messaging. The finding that non-celebrity sources such as friends and micro-influencers can promote brands without provoking the scepticism sometimes directed at paid endorsements echoes

Romanian evidence on the centrality of authenticity and influencer–audience alignment (Szakal et al., 2024) and on the dispositional, person-centred drivers of eWOM (Anastasiei et al., 2024). It also illustrates the role of recommendation algorithms in surfacing relevant content, a mechanism that warrants further investigation.

5.5 Connecting with Brands

With respect to RQ3, respondents most often connect with brands through Facebook, followed by Instagram. This indicates that, although WhatsApp and YouTube dominate general usage, feed- and profile-based platforms remain the primary venues for explicit brand interaction. Qualitative responses add an important nuance regarding advertising tolerance: interruptive advertising during immersive activities such as watching a show is experienced as intrusive, whereas the same advertising is regarded as acceptable, even useful, when consumers are browsing or actively seeking entertainment. The implication is that the value of an advertising format depends not only on its design but on the consumer's momentary mode of engagement, a contextual sensitivity that firms should build into placement and timing decisions.

5.6 Discussion

Read together, the results portray a Romanian online shopper for whom social media is a routine, trusted, and fast-acting purchase channel, but one who discriminates sharply between formats on the basis of perceived authenticity and context. Through the S–O–R lens, the high rates of social-media-prompted discovery and purchase represent strong approach responses to platform stimuli, mediated by trust and perceived usefulness, consistent with technology acceptance and with Romanian evidence on the decisive role of online trust and perceived risk in social commerce (Davis, 1989; Lăzăroiu et al., 2020). The swiftness of purchase decisions and the salience of limited-window prompts also connect to the affective, impulse-oriented dynamics documented in the Romanian FOMO literature (Barbu Kleitsch & Drămnescu, 2025), suggesting that emotional activation is an important, if double-edged, component of the organismic stage.

The format-preference pattern carries the clearest strategic message. The equivalence of micro-influencer and peer content with paid advertising, and the comparatively muted response to celebrity-style endorsements, indicates that credibility and relational proximity, rather than reach, are the currency of persuasion in this market. This is congruent with the broader shift towards authenticity-driven communication anticipated in the marketing literature (Appel et al., 2020) and with the finding that information credibility drives social commerce purchase intention in high-involvement categories (Ranjith et al., 2025). For practitioners, it implies that budget allocated to large-scale influencer campaigns may yield lower returns than investment in micro-influencer partnerships, peer-advocacy programmes, and credibility signals such as transparent reviews and verified user-generated content. The contextual tolerance finding further suggests that native, non-interruptive formats aligned with the consumer's mode of engagement will outperform intrusive placements.

These micro-level patterns are reinforced by the macro-level trajectory of the Romanian market. With e-commerce expanding towards and beyond €12 billion, a near-saturated connectivity base, a mobile-first purchase journey, and a Generation Z that privileges video content and sustainability (ARMO, 2025; Catană et al., 2025), the conditions for social commerce growth are firmly in place. The convergence of these supply- and demand-side factors implies that firms able to combine credible, authentic content with frictionless mobile checkout and value-aligned positioning are best placed to capture the market's continued expansion.

VI. Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research

This study set out to characterise the relationships among social media engagement, online purchasing behaviour, and advertising-format preferences among Romanian consumers, and to interpret them through an integrated theoretical framework. The descriptive evidence shows that social media is a central channel of product discovery and purchase, that messaging and video platforms dominate everyday usage while feed-based platforms remain the locus of brand interaction, and that micro-influencer and peer content is valued on a par with paid advertising, whereas traditional influencer endorsements are received more cautiously. Interpreted through the S–O–R framework and the complementary theories of technology acceptance, uses and gratifications, source credibility, and parasocial interaction, these patterns point to authenticity, credibility, and contextual fit as the decisive levers of effective social media marketing in Romania.

The study has several limitations that also define its boundary conditions. The sample is a non-probability convenience sample of 130 active online shoppers recruited through social media, which constrains generalisation to the wider population and may over-represent digitally engaged, urban, and younger consumers. The cross-sectional design captures a single moment in early 2024 and cannot speak to change over time, and the reliance on self-reported attitudes and behaviour introduces the usual response biases. Most importantly, the analysis is descriptive: it maps distributions

and associations but does not test causal relationships or statistical significance, and the originally envisaged hypotheses have accordingly been reframed as research questions. The findings should therefore be read as an evidence-informed characterisation rather than as confirmatory tests.

These limitations chart a clear agenda for future research. Larger probability-based samples would permit inferential and structural modelling (for example, structural equation modelling) to test the relationships among credibility, parasocial attachment, trust, and purchase intention that this study can only describe. Comparative and longitudinal designs would establish how preferences evolve as the market matures, and category-specific studies would clarify how format effectiveness varies across product types. Finally, the rapidly emerging frontiers of live-streaming commerce, artificial-intelligence-driven personalisation, and authenticity dynamics in an increasingly synthetic content environment represent especially promising directions for extending the present findings. Despite its descriptive scope, the study contributes timely Romanian evidence and a coherent theoretical reading that together offer practical guidance for firms seeking to convert social media engagement into sustainable e-commerce growth.

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