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Social Media Advertising and Purchase Behaviour among University Students in Nairobi County, Kenya

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Abstract: *Social media advertising has become a central channel for reaching young, digitally active consumers, yet evidence on how its specific dimensions relate to purchase behaviour, rather than purchase intention, remains limited in urban African settings. This study examined the relationship between four dimensions of social media advertising, namely advertising platforms, content features, frequency of exposure, and personalisation, and purchase behaviour among university students in Nairobi County, Kenya. A cross-sectional correlational design was used, with data collected from 379 university students through a structured questionnaire (94.8% valid response rate). All five measurement scales showed acceptable reliability (Cronbach alpha 0.717 to 0.785). All four dimensions were positively and significantly associated with purchase behaviour ($r = .245$ to $.322$, $p < .01$). Regression analysis confirmed the four dimensions jointly explained 19.0% of the variance in purchase behaviour, with advertising platforms the strongest predictor, followed by personalised advertising, content features, and exposure frequency. Findings indicate that where and how an advertisement reaches a student matters somewhat more than content polish or repetition, although all four dimensions act as complementary influences. The study offers context-specific evidence on digital consumer behaviour and practical guidance for marketers, universities, and policymakers engaging young consumers in urban Africa.*

Keywords: advertising platforms, Nairobi County, personalised advertising, purchase behaviour, social media advertising

I. INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of social media platforms has reshaped how firms communicate with consumers, particularly young, digitally active audiences who spend a substantial share of their time online [1], [2]. In Kenya, rising internet penetration and smartphone ownership have accelerated the shift from traditional to social media-driven marketing, with businesses increasingly targeting university students through platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube [3]. University students in Nairobi County represent a particularly active and influential consumer segment, continuously exposed to advertising for fast-moving consumer goods, fashion, food services, and digital products, yet their consumption behaviour is also shaped by peer influence and limited disposable income.

Despite the scale of this exposure, existing research has disproportionately examined purchase intention rather than observable purchase behaviour, and has often treated social media advertising as a single, undifferentiated construct rather than a multidimensional one [4], [5]. This obscures whether specific dimensions of advertising, such as the platform through which an advertisement is delivered, the quality of its content, the frequency with which it is encountered, or the degree to which it is personalised, exert similar or divergent effects on how consumers actually behave. Limited empirical evidence exists on this question among university students specifically, and fewer studies still have examined it within the Nairobi County context, where a high concentration of public and private universities creates a distinct and understudied consumer population.

This study addressed this gap by examining the relationship between four dimensions of social media advertising, namely advertising platforms, content features, frequency of exposure, and personalisation, and purchase behaviour, operationalised through purchase frequency, impulse buying, and brand loyalty, among university students in Nairobi County. The general objective was to examine the relationship between social media advertising and purchase behaviour among this population. Four specific objectives guided the study: to examine the relationship between social media advertising platforms and purchase behaviour; to determine the relationship between advertising content features and purchase behaviour; to assess the relationship between frequency of advertisement exposure and purchase behaviour;

and to evaluate the relationship between personalised advertising and purchase behaviour. The study contributes empirical, context-specific evidence to the digital consumer behaviour literature and offers practical guidance for marketers, universities, and policymakers engaging with young, digitally connected consumers in urban African settings.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Social Media Advertising Platforms

Different social media platforms exert varying influence on consumer behaviour depending on their content-delivery mechanisms and interactive features. Alalwan [6] found that visually oriented platforms such as Instagram significantly increase impulse buying, while platforms such as Facebook are more effective in fostering repeat purchases and brand loyalty through interactive features. In the Kenyan context, Mwangi and Kimani [4] reported that Nairobi university students were more responsive to advertising on visually engaging, peer-driven platforms, with exposure on preferred platforms associated with higher purchase frequency and stronger brand attachment, though their study examined a limited range of product categories.

2.2 Advertising Content Features

The characteristics of advertising content, including visual appeal, informativeness, clarity, and emotional appeal, shape how consumers attend to and evaluate advertisements. Hudson et al. [7] found that emotionally engaging, well-crafted content increases trust and encourages impulse buying among younger consumers, while Mwaura and Kaloki [8] established that relatable, localised content improved purchase frequency among Kenyan youth, though without isolating university students as a distinct group.

2.3 Frequency of Advertisement Exposure

The relationship between exposure frequency and consumer response is generally regarded as non-linear. Moorman et al. [9] found that moderate exposure enhances brand recall and purchase frequency, while excessive repetition can generate advertising fatigue. Yoon et al. [10] demonstrated that repeated exposure influences impulse buying primarily through peripheral processing, and Otieno and Wambua [11] observed that Nairobi-based students exposed to frequent advertisements reported increased purchasing alongside some irritation at excessive repetition.

2.4 Personalised Advertising

Personalisation is understood to increase perceived relevance and engagement. Bleier and Eisenbeiss [12] found that personalised advertisements improve conversion rates and brand loyalty by aligning messages with individual preferences, while Nduta and Omwansa [5] found that personalised advertising increased repeat purchases among Nairobi students, though with limited evidence on its longer-term influence on loyalty.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

This study drew on three complementary theoretical perspectives. Uses and Gratifications Theory [13] frames media users as active, goal-oriented agents who select platforms to satisfy needs such as entertainment, information, and social interaction, providing a basis for understanding how platform choice shapes exposure to, and engagement with, advertising content. The Elaboration Likelihood Model [14], a dual-process model of persuasion, distinguishes between central-route processing, involving careful cognitive evaluation of message content, and peripheral-route processing, which relies on cues such as visual appeal, repetition, and emotional tone; it is used here to explain how advertising content features and repeated exposure influence attitudes and purchasing responses depending on the depth of processing involved. The Theory of Planned Behaviour [15] explains behaviour as a function of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control, and is applied to explain how repeated exposure and personalisation shape purchase-related attitudes and perceived relevance, which in turn relate to purchase frequency and brand loyalty. Rather than being applied uniformly to every finding, each theory is drawn upon selectively in the Discussion section to explain the specific result it best accounts for.

III. METHODOLOGY

A cross-sectional descriptive correlational design was adopted, appropriate for assessing associations between social media advertising and purchase behaviour at a single point in time [16]. The target population comprised university students aged 18 to 30 years enrolled in public and private universities in Nairobi County. Using Cochran's [17] formula at a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error, a minimum sample size of 384 was computed; questionnaires were distributed to 400 students to accommodate anticipated non-response. A multistage sampling procedure was applied,

involving stratification of universities by category (public and private), stratification of students by faculty and year of study, and simple random sampling of respondents within each stratum.

Primary data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire comprising six sections: demographic characteristics (Section A); social media advertising platforms, measured through five-point Likert items capturing exposure across Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube and perceived ease of access to influential advertising (Section B); advertising content features, covering visual appeal, informativeness, clarity, and emotional appeal (Section C); frequency of advertisement exposure (Section D); personalised advertising (Section E); and purchase behaviour, operationalised through purchase frequency, impulse buying, and brand loyalty (Section F). Items for Sections C to F were adapted from prior validated studies [12], [18]. Content validity was established through expert review, and internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with 0.70 adopted as the minimum acceptable threshold [19]. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and based on informed consent, with data stored in password-protected files in accordance with ethical research guidelines.

Of the 400 questionnaires distributed, 388 were returned and 379 were retained for analysis following the exclusion of nine incomplete submissions, yielding a valid response rate of 94.8%.

IV. ANALYSIS

Data were analysed in three stages. Descriptive statistics, comprising frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were first computed to characterise the sample and summarise responses on each construct. Pearson product-moment correlation was then used to establish the strength, direction, and statistical significance of the bivariate relationships between each dimension of social media advertising and purchase behaviour. Finally, multiple linear regression was estimated to determine the combined and independent predictive contribution of the four dimensions to purchase behaviour. Prior to regression estimation, diagnostic tests were conducted for normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity; variance inflation factor values for all predictors ranged from 1.135 to 1.200, well below the threshold of concern, indicating that multicollinearity did not compromise the reliability of the regression estimates. All analyses were conducted at a 95% confidence level, with statistical significance evaluated at $p < .05$.

V. RESULTS

5.1 Response Rate and Reliability

Table 1 summarises the questionnaire response rate. The valid response rate of 94.8% exceeds the 70% threshold classified as excellent by Mugenda and Mugenda [20], supporting the adequacy of the sample for analysis and generalisation to the target population.

Table 1. *Questionnaire Response Rate*

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Questionnaires distributed	400	100
Questionnaires returned	388	97
Excluded (incomplete)	9	2.3
Valid questionnaires analysed	379	94.8

Source: Research Data (2026)

All five measurement scales exceeded the 0.70 reliability threshold (Table 2), ranging from 0.717 for advertising content features to 0.785 for purchase behaviour, confirming that items within each scale consistently measured the same underlying construct.

Table 2. *Reliability Statistics for the Study Constructs*

Construct	Items	Alpha	Remark
Social Media Advertising Platforms	5	0.742	Reliable
Advertising Content Features	5	0.717	Reliable
Frequency of Advertisement Exposure	4	0.768	Reliable
Personalised Advertising	5	0.762	Reliable

Construct	Items	Alpha	Remark
Purchase Behaviour (overall)	6	0.785	Reliable

Source: Research Data (2026)

5.2 Respondent Characteristics

The sample was drawn from 379 respondents. Female respondents constituted a slight majority (52.8%) over male respondents (47.2%). Most respondents fell within the 21 to 23 years age bracket (41.4%), and public university students accounted for 63.1% of the sample compared with 36.9% from private universities. Respondents were fairly evenly distributed across years of study, with third-year students forming the largest group (24.8%) and postgraduate students the smallest (9.8%). The largest proportion of respondents (36.9%) reported a monthly allowance or income of KES 5,001 to 10,000, and only 9.8% reported an allowance above KES 20,000, indicating that most respondents operated on modest and constrained budgets, summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. *Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (n = 379)*

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	179	47.2
	Female	200	52.8
Age	18–20 years	100	26.4
	21–23 years	157	41.4
	24–26 years	82	21.6
	27–30 years	40	10.6
University type	Public	239	63.1
	Private	140	36.9
Year of study	First year	77	20.3
	Second year	86	22.7
	Third year	94	24.8
	Fourth year	85	22.4
	Postgraduate	37	9.8
Monthly allowance (KES)	Below 5,000	105	27.7
	5,001–10,000	140	36.9
	10,001–20,000	97	25.6
	Above 20,000	37	9.8

Source: Research Data (2026)

5.3 Descriptive Statistics

Construct-level means were interpreted using the benchmark 4.21 to 5.00 (very high), 3.41 to 4.20 (high), 2.61 to 3.40 (moderate), 1.81 to 2.60 (low), and 1.00 to 1.80 (very low). As shown in Table 4, personalised advertising recorded the highest construct mean (M = 3.52, high), followed by frequency of advertisement exposure (M = 3.49, high), social media advertising platforms (M = 3.33, moderate), and advertising content features (M = 3.28, moderate). Overall purchase behaviour was rated moderate (M = 2.96, SD = 0.81), with purchase frequency recording the highest sub-dimension mean (M = 3.06) and impulse buying the lowest (M = 2.84), suggesting that students respond to social media advertising more through gradually repeated purchasing than through spontaneous, immediate buying, consistent with the constrained monthly allowances reported in Table 3.

Table 4. *Construct-Level Descriptive Statistics*

Construct	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Social Media Advertising Platforms	3.33	0.81	Moderate
Advertising Content Features	3.28	0.78	Moderate

Construct	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Frequency of Advertisement Exposure	3.49	0.92	High
Personalised Advertising	3.52	0.82	High
Purchase Frequency	3.06	1.00	Moderate
Impulse Buying	2.84	0.93	Moderate
Brand Loyalty	2.98	1.01	Moderate
Overall Purchase Behaviour	2.96	0.81	Moderate

Source: Research Data (2026)

5.4 Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis (Table 5) showed that all four dimensions of social media advertising were positively and significantly correlated with purchase behaviour at the 0.01 level. Social media advertising platforms recorded the strongest bivariate association (r = .322), followed by personalised advertising (r = .291), advertising content features (r = .283), and frequency of advertisement exposure (r = .245). Following Cohen's [21] benchmarks, these coefficients fall within the weak-to-moderate range. Inter-correlations among the independent variables ranged from .174 to .332, suggesting multicollinearity was unlikely to be a serious concern, a matter formally confirmed through variance inflation factor diagnostics (all VIF values between 1.135 and 1.200). Correlation does not, on its own, establish causal direction; the cross-sectional design permits inference about co-occurring patterns rather than causal claims.

Table 5. *Pearson Correlation Matrix*

Variable	SMP	CF	FE	PA	PB
Social Media Advertising Platforms (SMP)	1.000				
Advertising Content Features (CF)	.280**	1.000			
Frequency of Advertisement Exposure (FE)	.272**	.203**	1.000		
Personalised Advertising (PA)	.174**	.332**	.243**	1.000	
Purchase Behaviour (PB)	.322**	.283**	.245**	.291**	1.000

** *Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); n = 379.*

Source: Research Data (2026)

5.5 Regression Analysis

Multiple linear regression was conducted to determine the combined and individual predictive influence of the four dimensions of social media advertising on purchase behaviour. As shown in Table 6, the model produced an R of .436 and an R^2 of .190, indicating that the four predictors jointly accounted for 19.0% of the variance in purchase behaviour (adjusted R^2 = .182). The model was statistically significant, $F(4, 374) = 21.97$, $p < .001$, indicating that the model fits the data significantly better than a model with no predictors.

Table 6. *Regression Model Summary*

R	R^2	Adj. R^2	F (4, 374)	Sig.
.436	.190	.182	21.97	.000

Source: Research Data (2026)

Table 7 presents the regression coefficients. All four predictors made statistically significant, positive, and independent contributions to purchase behaviour. Social media advertising platforms emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = .221$, $p < .001$), followed by personalised advertising ($\beta = .179$, $p < .001$), advertising content features ($\beta = .139$, $p = .007$), and frequency of advertisement exposure, the weakest but still significant predictor ($\beta = .113$, $p = .023$).

Table 7. *Regression Coefficients (Dependent Variable: Purchase Behaviour)*

Variable	B	SE	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	.781	.237	—	3.297	.001
Social Media Advertising Platforms	.222	.050	.221	4.434	.000
Advertising Content Features	.144	.053	.139	2.731	.007
Frequency of Advertisement Exposure	.100	.044	.113	2.280	.023
Personalised Advertising	.176	.050	.179	3.554	.000

Source: Research Data (2026)

The estimated regression equation is specified as:

$$PB = 0.781 + 0.222(SMP) + 0.144(CF) + 0.100(FE) + 0.176(PA) + \varepsilon \quad (1)$$

where PB is purchase behaviour, SMP is social media advertising platforms, CF is advertising content features, FE is frequency of advertisement exposure, and PA is personalised advertising. Holding other predictors constant, a one-unit increase in advertising platforms exposure is associated with the largest predicted increase in purchase behaviour (0.222 units), followed by personalised advertising (0.176 units), advertising content features (0.144 units), and frequency of exposure (0.100 units).

VI. DISCUSSION

6.1 Social Media Advertising Platforms and Purchase Behaviour

Social media advertising platforms recorded a positive, statistically significant relationship with purchase behaviour ($r = .322$, $p < .01$) and emerged as the strongest individual predictor in the regression model ($\beta = .221$, $p < .001$). This finding is consistent with Alalwan [6], who found that platform-based advertising features significantly shape purchase intention, and with Mwangi and Kimani [4], who reported that Nairobi students exposed to advertising on their preferred platforms recorded higher purchase frequency and stronger brand attachment. Item-level results suggest this effect is driven more by exposure on high-reach platforms such as Facebook and TikTok than by a generalised sense of easy, influence-generating access, which was the lowest-rated item within this construct. Within Uses and Gratifications Theory [13], which frames platform selection as driven by users' needs for entertainment, information, and social interaction, this finding suggests that the platforms students actively choose to gratify these needs are also the platforms through which advertising exposure most effectively translates into purchasing action.

6.2 Advertising Content Features and Purchase Behaviour

Advertising content features showed a positive, statistically significant relationship with purchase behaviour ($r = .283$, $p < .01$) and contributed significantly to the regression model, though as the third-ranked predictor ($\beta = .139$, $p = .007$). This finding aligns with Hudson et al. [7], who established that emotionally engaging, well-crafted content increases trust and encourages impulse buying among younger consumers, and with Mwaura and Kaloki [8], who found that relatable, well-designed content improved purchase frequency among Kenyan youth. The comparatively modest, though still significant, unique contribution of content features once platform exposure, frequency, and personalisation are held constant is consistent with the Elaboration Likelihood Model [14]: informativeness and visual appeal, the two highest-rated content items, tend to operate through the peripheral route of persuasion, shaping favourable but relatively transient attitudes, whereas the more durable behavioural change the model associates with central-route processing appears, in this sample, to be more strongly activated by platform-level exposure and personalisation than by content quality alone.

6.3 Frequency of Advertisement Exposure and Purchase Behaviour

A positive, statistically significant relationship was found between frequency of advertisement exposure and purchase behaviour ($r = .245$, $p < .01$), with frequency contributing significantly to the regression model as the weakest, though still significant, of the four predictors ($\beta = .113$, $p = .023$). This result is consistent with Moorman et al. [9], who found that moderate exposure enhances brand recall and purchase frequency, and with Yoon et al. [10], who showed that repeated exposure influences impulse buying through peripheral processing. It also aligns with Otieno and Wambua [11], who observed increased purchasing among Nairobi-based students exposed to frequent advertisements, though also noting respondent irritation at excessive repetition, a nuance this study's cross-sectional design could not directly test. The Theory of Planned Behaviour [15] offers a coherent explanation for the direction of this relationship: repeated exposure can

incrementally shape attitudes toward advertised products and, combined with perceived social approval and financial capability, translate into stronger purchase intention.

6.4 Personalised Advertising and Purchase Behaviour

Personalised advertising recorded a positive, statistically significant relationship with purchase behaviour ($r = .291$, $p < .01$) and was the second-strongest predictor in the regression model ($\beta = .179$, $p < .001$). This finding is consistent with Bleier and Eisenbeiss [12], who found that personalised advertisements improve conversion rates and brand loyalty by aligning content with individual preferences, and extends Nduta and Omwansa [5], who found that personalised advertising increased repeat purchases among Nairobi students. Within the Theory of Planned Behaviour [15], personalisation can be understood as enhancing perceived behavioural control and perceived relevance, both of which increase the likelihood that exposure translates into actual purchasing action. Notably, students rated the perceived usefulness and relevance of personalised advertisements considerably higher than its direct influence on their purchase likelihood, suggesting that while personalisation is well received attitudinally, its translation into concrete purchasing behaviour is only partial.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study found that social media advertising is significantly and positively associated with purchase behaviour among university students in Nairobi County across all four dimensions examined, namely platforms, content features, frequency of exposure, and personalisation. Each dimension contributed independently to purchase behaviour, confirming that social media advertising should be understood as a multidimensional construct rather than a single, undifferentiated influence. Social media advertising platforms and personalised advertising exerted the greatest influence, indicating that where and how individually an advertisement reaches students matters somewhat more than the polish of its content or the frequency with which it is repeated, although all four dimensions operate as complementary rather than competing influences on purchasing decisions. With the model explaining 19.0% of the variance in purchase behaviour, social media advertising is best understood as a statistically significant but partial explanation of student purchasing behaviour, with the substantial remaining variance attributable to factors outside the scope of this study, such as peer influence, disposable income, and product-specific considerations.

Practically, marketers targeting university students in Nairobi County should prioritise advertising placement on the platforms most strongly associated with purchase behaviour, particularly Facebook and TikTok, while continuing to invest in personalisation strategies that align advertising content with individual student interests. Given the demonstrated influence of platform-based exposure and personalisation, policymakers and regulatory bodies such as the Communications Authority of Kenya should strengthen consumer data protection guidelines governing how platforms and advertisers collect and use personal data for targeted advertising directed at young consumers.

This study is limited by its reliance on self-reported data, which may be subject to social desirability bias, and by its cross-sectional design, which precludes causal inference. The sample was confined to university students in Nairobi County, limiting generalisability to other regions or populations. Future research should incorporate additional predictors such as peer influence, disposable income, and product category to develop a more comprehensive explanatory model; adopt longitudinal designs to examine whether the associations identified here persist over time; extend comparative analysis to students in other Kenyan counties and rural or peri-urban institutions; and examine the mediating or moderating role of variables such as brand trust and perceived advertisement intrusiveness.

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