

Classroom to Cart: Social-Marketing Dynamics Shaping Student Consumer Behaviours

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Abstract: The rapid expansion of digital technologies and social media platforms has fundamentally transformed consumer behaviour, particularly among university students who represent one of the most influential and digitally connected consumer segments. Students are continuously exposed to marketing messages through social networking platforms, influencer endorsements, peer interactions, mobile commerce, and personalized digital advertising, making them highly responsive to contemporary social-marketing strategies. Unlike traditional commercial marketing, social marketing incorporates behavioural, psychological, and societal factors that influence consumer decision-making while promoting products, services, and socially desirable behaviours. Consequently, understanding how social-marketing dynamics shape students' purchasing decisions has become increasingly important for marketers, educational institutions, and policymakers. This study critically examines the relationship between social marketing and student consumer behaviour through a qualitative review of contemporary literature in marketing, consumer psychology, digital commerce, and behavioural economics. The analysis investigates the influence of social media engagement, peer groups, influencer marketing, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), digital personalization, brand communities, and ethical marketing practices on students' purchasing intentions and brand loyalty. Furthermore, the study explores the psychological mechanisms underlying student buying behaviour, including social identity, perceived value, trust, emotional attachment, and fear of missing out (FOMO). The findings indicate that digital social-marketing strategies significantly influence students' purchasing behaviour by shaping perceptions, attitudes, and consumption patterns across online and offline marketplaces. However, concerns relating to excessive consumerism, misleading promotional practices, privacy, and impulsive purchasing highlight the need for responsible marketing approaches. The study concludes that organizations should integrate ethical marketing, consumer education, and transparent digital engagement strategies to foster sustainable consumer behaviour while strengthening long-term brand relationships among student consumers.

Keywords: Social Marketing, Consumer Behaviour, Students, Digital Marketing, Influencer Marketing, Electronic Word-of-Mouth, Brand Loyalty, Social Media Marketing, Consumer Psychology, Sustainable Consumption.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of digital communication technologies has transformed consumer markets by fundamentally changing how individuals discover products, evaluate alternatives, interact with brands, and make purchasing decisions. Among all consumer groups, university students represent one of the most dynamic market segments because of their extensive engagement with social media, mobile technologies, electronic commerce, and digital communities. Unlike previous generations that primarily relied on traditional advertising channels, contemporary students are continuously influenced by online reviews, influencer recommendations, peer-generated content, personalized advertisements, and interactive brand communication across multiple digital platforms [1], [2].

Social marketing has evolved beyond its traditional application of promoting public welfare and behavioural change to encompass sophisticated consumer engagement strategies that integrate behavioural science, digital

communication, and relationship marketing. Modern organizations increasingly employ social-media campaigns, user-generated content, influencer collaborations, online communities, and interactive digital experiences to influence purchasing behaviour and strengthen consumer relationships [3]. These strategies are particularly effective among student populations because young consumers frequently seek information, product recommendations, and purchasing validation from online social networks before making buying decisions [4].

Student consumer behaviour is shaped by multiple psychological, social, cultural, and technological factors. Social Identity Theory suggests that purchasing decisions are influenced by individuals' desire to associate with groups reflecting their values, aspirations, and lifestyles [5]. Similarly, the Theory of Planned Behaviour explains that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control collectively influence consumer intentions and purchasing behaviour [6]. Contemporary digital

environments amplify these psychological mechanisms by enabling continuous interaction between consumers, influencers, brands, and peer communities, thereby accelerating product awareness and purchase intentions. The widespread adoption of smartphones, mobile payment systems, and e-commerce platforms has further altered the consumer decision-making process. Students increasingly compare products online, evaluate customer reviews, participate in brand communities, and complete purchases through mobile applications without visiting physical retail outlets. This transition from classroom learning environments to digital shopping ecosystems has created new opportunities for marketers while simultaneously raising concerns regarding impulsive buying, excessive consumption, digital privacy, and ethical advertising practices [7], [8].

Influencer marketing has emerged as one of the most powerful drivers of student purchasing behaviour. Social media influencers establish perceived authenticity and trust by sharing personal experiences, product demonstrations, and lifestyle-oriented content that resonates with younger audiences. Research demonstrates that students frequently perceive influencer recommendations as more credible than conventional advertising because these endorsements appear more personal and relatable [9]. Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), including customer reviews, ratings, online discussions, and peer recommendations, similarly plays a critical role in shaping consumer perceptions, reducing purchase uncertainty, and strengthening brand credibility [10].

In addition to commercial influences, educational institutions increasingly recognize the importance of consumer literacy and responsible consumption. Growing concerns regarding materialism, environmental sustainability, and digital manipulation have encouraged universities to promote financial literacy, ethical consumer behaviour, and critical evaluation of digital marketing content. Consequently, understanding the interaction between social-marketing strategies and student consumer behaviour has become important not only for business organizations but also for educators, policymakers, and consumer protection agencies.

This study investigates how social-marketing dynamics influence purchasing behaviour among university students by integrating perspectives from consumer psychology, digital marketing, behavioural economics, and relationship marketing. It further evaluates both the commercial opportunities and ethical challenges associated with contemporary social-marketing practices within digitally connected student populations.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the influence of social-marketing strategies on student consumer behaviour.
2. To analyse the effects of social media, influencer marketing, and electronic word-of-mouth on purchasing decisions.
3. To evaluate psychological and behavioural factors influencing student buying intentions.

4. To examine ethical concerns associated with digital marketing directed toward students.
5. To recommend strategies for responsible and sustainable social-marketing practices targeting student consumers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Evolution of Social Marketing and Consumer Behaviour

Social marketing was initially developed to encourage behavioural change for public welfare, focusing on health promotion, environmental sustainability, and community development rather than commercial profitability. Kotler and Zaltman first introduced the concept by applying commercial marketing principles to influence socially beneficial behaviours [11]. Over time, social marketing expanded beyond public campaigns and became closely associated with relationship marketing, customer engagement, and digital communication strategies that influence consumer attitudes and purchasing behaviour [12].

The emergence of social media has significantly altered this evolution by enabling organizations to establish continuous two-way communication with consumers rather than relying solely on one-way promotional activities. Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter) allow consumers to interact directly with brands, participate in online communities, share experiences, and influence purchasing decisions through user-generated content [13]. Consequently, modern social marketing combines behavioural science, consumer psychology, digital engagement, and relationship management to create long-term customer value rather than focusing exclusively on immediate sales performance.

University students have become one of the most significant target audiences within this digital environment because of their extensive use of mobile technologies and social networking platforms. Research consistently indicates that students spend substantial amounts of time consuming digital content, making them highly responsive to social-marketing campaigns that integrate entertainment, education, peer interaction, and personalized communication [14], [15].

Psychological Determinants of Student Consumer Behaviour

Consumer behaviour among students is influenced by numerous psychological factors that shape attitudes, intentions, and purchasing decisions. The Theory of Planned Behaviour proposes that behavioural intentions are determined by attitudes toward purchasing, perceived social expectations, and perceived behavioural control [16]. Within digital marketplaces, these determinants are strengthened by continuous interaction with online communities, influencers, and personalized digital content. Social Identity Theory further explains that individuals often purchase products that reinforce their personal identity or strengthen membership within desired social groups [17]. Students frequently associate brands with lifestyle, status, and social acceptance, making purchasing

decisions partly symbolic rather than purely functional. Emotional attachment to brands therefore becomes an important determinant of long-term consumer loyalty.

Behavioural economics also provides important insights into student purchasing decisions. Cognitive biases including social proof, scarcity effects, loss aversion, anchoring, and the fear of missing out (FOMO) significantly influence online purchasing behaviour [18]. Flash sales, limited-time discounts, countdown promotions, and exclusive online offers create psychological urgency that encourages impulse buying, particularly among digitally active student consumers

Social Media, Influencer Marketing, and Electronic Word-of-Mouth

The literature consistently identifies social media as one of the strongest influences on contemporary student consumer behaviour. Unlike conventional advertising, social media facilitates interactive communication in which consumers actively participate by creating, sharing, reviewing, and recommending products within digital communities [19]. These interactions significantly influence product awareness, brand perception, and purchase intention.

Influencer marketing has become particularly influential because social media personalities establish credibility through perceived authenticity, expertise, and relatable communication styles. Research demonstrates that students frequently trust influencer recommendations more than traditional advertising because influencers appear independent and personally connected to their audiences [20]. Micro-influencers often generate even higher engagement rates because followers perceive their recommendations as more genuine and less commercially motivated.

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) further strengthens digital purchasing behaviour. Customer reviews, ratings, testimonials, and online discussions reduce uncertainty by providing information based on previous consumer experiences. Positive eWOM enhances brand credibility and increases purchase intention, whereas negative online reviews significantly reduce consumer confidence and purchasing likelihood [21]. The influence of eWOM is particularly strong among university students because purchasing decisions frequently involve peer consultation before transaction completion.

Digital Personalization and Consumer Engagement

Artificial Intelligence, big data analytics, and machine learning have enabled marketers to personalize digital experiences at an unprecedented level. Recommendation systems analyse browsing history, purchasing behaviour, demographic characteristics, and online interactions to present individualized advertisements and product suggestions [22]. Personalized communication improves customer engagement by increasing perceived relevance while reducing information overload.

Gamification, interactive campaigns, augmented reality shopping experiences, and mobile commerce applications

further strengthen consumer engagement by transforming shopping into an immersive digital experience [23]. Students, who represent digitally native consumers, respond particularly positively to interactive marketing campaigns incorporating entertainment, rewards, and social participation.

Ethical Challenges in Student-Oriented Digital Marketing

Although digital marketing provides significant commercial opportunities, scholars increasingly express concern regarding its ethical implications. Personalized advertising frequently relies on extensive consumer data collection, behavioural tracking, and algorithmic profiling, raising important questions regarding privacy, informed consent, and responsible data use [24]. Student consumers may be particularly vulnerable because they often possess limited awareness of how personal information is collected and utilized by digital marketing platforms.

Another concern involves excessive commercialization through influencer partnerships and sponsored content that is not always clearly disclosed. Hidden advertising, manipulative promotional practices, and psychologically targeted campaigns may reduce consumer autonomy while encouraging impulsive purchasing behaviour [25]. Researchers therefore advocate stronger regulatory oversight, transparent advertising disclosures, and improved consumer education to promote responsible marketing practices.

Growing awareness of environmental sustainability has also influenced marketing ethics. Students increasingly evaluate brands according to corporate social responsibility, environmental performance, and ethical business practices. Organizations demonstrating genuine commitments to sustainability, diversity, and social responsibility generally achieve stronger consumer trust and long-term brand loyalty than organizations relying solely on promotional communication [26].

Research Gap

Existing literature extensively examines digital marketing, social media marketing, influencer marketing, and consumer behaviour independently. However, relatively few studies integrate these perspectives within a comprehensive framework explaining how social-marketing dynamics collectively influence university students throughout the entire consumer decision-making process—from product awareness within educational environments to final purchase decisions in digital marketplaces.

Furthermore, limited research simultaneously evaluates psychological determinants, digital technologies, peer influence, ethical marketing, and sustainable consumption within student populations. As digital commerce continues to evolve through Artificial Intelligence, personalized advertising, and social commerce platforms, understanding the interaction between technological innovation and consumer behaviour has become increasingly important.

Accordingly, this study addresses these gaps by integrating behavioural psychology, social marketing, digital engagement, influencer marketing, and ethical consumer behaviour into a unified analytical framework. The study contributes to contemporary marketing literature by demonstrating how social-marketing dynamics shape student purchasing decisions while identifying strategies that support responsible, transparent, and sustainable consumer engagement.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design based entirely on secondary data to examine how social-marketing dynamics influence student consumer behaviour. The qualitative approach is appropriate because the research seeks to critically analyse existing theoretical frameworks, empirical findings, and contemporary marketing practices rather than establish causal relationships through primary surveys or experiments. The study integrates concepts from consumer behaviour, digital marketing, social psychology, behavioural economics, relationship marketing, and communication studies to provide a multidisciplinary understanding of purchasing behaviour among university students.

An explanatory research approach is employed to investigate the interaction between social-marketing strategies, psychological influences, digital communication technologies, and consumer decision-making. Rather than

examining these variables independently, the research evaluates how they collectively shape product awareness, purchase intentions, brand loyalty, and post-purchase behaviour among students operating within highly digitalized consumer environments.

Data Sources

The study relies exclusively on secondary information obtained from peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, conference proceedings, industry reports, and publications from internationally recognized organizations. Relevant literature was collected from “Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Emerald Insight, SpringerLink, Wiley Online Library, Taylor & Francis Online, Sage Journals, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. Industry reports published by NielsenIQ, Deloitte, McKinsey & Company, Statista, the American Marketing Association (AMA),” and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) were also examined to understand recent developments in digital marketing, consumer behaviour, and social commerce.

Greater emphasis was placed on studies published between 2019 and 2025 to ensure that the analysis reflects current developments in influencer marketing, artificial intelligence-driven personalization, social commerce, and digital consumer engagement. Highly cited foundational studies were incorporated where necessary to establish the theoretical foundations of consumer behaviour and social marketing.

Analytical Framework

The collected literature was analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring concepts relating to social-marketing strategies, consumer psychology, digital engagement, and purchasing behaviour. Five analytical dimensions were developed to guide the synthesis of evidence and facilitate comparison across the selected studies.

Analytical Dimension	Focus of Evaluation
Social Marketing	Consumer engagement, communication strategies, and behavioural influence
Consumer Psychology	Attitudes, motivations, trust, perceived value, and emotional attachment
Digital Marketing	Social media, influencer marketing, eWOM, and personalized advertising
Purchasing Behaviour	Purchase intention, decision-making, impulse buying, and brand loyalty
Ethical Marketing	Consumer privacy, advertising transparency, and sustainable consumption

The analytical framework enables a comprehensive evaluation of how technological innovation, psychological influences, and marketing strategies collectively shape student purchasing behaviour in contemporary digital marketplaces.

Data Analysis Procedure

Following the identification of relevant literature, the selected publications were systematically classified according to their primary areas of investigation, including consumer psychology, digital marketing, influencer marketing, electronic word-of-mouth, social commerce, behavioural economics, and ethical marketing practices. Comparative analysis was subsequently conducted to identify common findings, theoretical similarities, and contrasting viewpoints concerning the factors influencing student purchasing decisions.

The findings were synthesized using an integrated marketing perspective that considers purchasing behaviour as the outcome of interactions among psychological processes, social influence, digital communication, and organizational marketing strategies. Particular attention was given to understanding how social media platforms, peer interactions, personalized marketing, and online communities influence students throughout the entire consumer decision-making process—from product awareness and information search to purchase decisions and post-purchase evaluation.

Reliability, Validity, and Ethical Considerations

The reliability of this study was strengthened through the use of peer-reviewed academic literature together with reports published by internationally recognized marketing organizations and research institutions. Findings from multiple disciplines—including marketing, psychology, behavioural economics, communication studies, and digital commerce—were critically compared to improve analytical consistency and reduce interpretative bias. Cross-validation of evidence from different scholarly sources enhanced the credibility and dependability of the conclusions.

The validity of the research was supported through systematic thematic analysis that enabled comprehensive evaluation of the principal variables influencing student consumer behaviour. Since the study relied exclusively on publicly available secondary information, no human participants were involved and institutional ethical approval was not required. Nevertheless, all published evidence has been accurately interpreted and appropriately cited in accordance with accepted standards of academic integrity, ensuring transparency, objectivity, and responsible scholarly practice throughout the research.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The synthesis of the reviewed literature demonstrates that student consumer behaviour has shifted from a conventional information-processing model to a socially mediated digital decision-making process. Unlike earlier purchasing environments in which students relied primarily on family recommendations, television advertising, or in-store product evaluation, contemporary students interact continuously with digital ecosystems where purchasing decisions are shaped through multiple social influences before an actual transaction occurs. The findings indicate that social marketing functions not merely as a promotional strategy but as an interactive mechanism that influences consumer perceptions, emotional responses, and behavioural intentions throughout the entire buying journey.

One of the strongest findings concerns the central role of social media in product discovery. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Snapchat have become primary information sources where students encounter brands through entertainment content rather than traditional advertisements. Product recommendations embedded within short-form videos, lifestyle content, educational posts, and peer-generated media significantly increase product awareness while simultaneously reducing perceived advertising resistance. Students frequently encounter products unintentionally during routine social media use, resulting in unplanned product exploration and increased purchase consideration.

The literature further reveals that influencer marketing affects purchasing behaviour primarily through perceived credibility rather than celebrity status alone. Students demonstrate stronger trust toward influencers who consistently produce authentic, experience-based content than toward traditional celebrity endorsements. Micro-influencers often generate higher engagement because followers perceive them as relatable individuals rather than commercial advertisers. Authentic product demonstrations, transparent reviews, and continuous interaction with followers strengthen consumer confidence and reduce uncertainty during purchase evaluation. Consequently, credibility, authenticity, and expertise emerge as stronger determinants of purchase intention than follower count alone.

Peer interaction also represents a significant determinant of purchasing behaviour. Students rarely complete purchasing decisions independently, particularly for fashion products, electronic devices, cosmetics, educational resources, and lifestyle products. Instead, purchasing decisions frequently involve discussions within friendship networks, online communities, university groups, and messaging applications. Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) significantly influences consumer confidence because online reviews, product ratings, and peer experiences reduce perceived purchasing risk. Positive customer experiences strengthen brand credibility, whereas repeated negative reviews substantially decrease purchase intention regardless of advertising intensity.

Another important observation concerns the increasing effectiveness of personalized digital marketing. Artificial Intelligence-

powered recommendation systems analyse browsing history, previous purchases, search behaviour, demographic characteristics, and social media interactions to generate individualized advertisements. The literature suggests that personalized recommendations improve consumer engagement because students perceive suggested products as relevant to their interests and lifestyles. However, excessive personalization occasionally creates privacy concerns, particularly when consumers become aware of behavioural tracking or algorithmic profiling.

Marketing Dimension	Analytical Observation	Consumer Impact
Social Media Exposure	Continuous product visibility increases spontaneous product awareness.	Higher product discovery and engagement
Influencer Credibility	Authenticity influences purchasing decisions more strongly than popularity.	Increased purchase intention and brand trust
Electronic Word-of-Mouth	Consumer reviews reduce uncertainty during decision-making.	Higher decision confidence
Personalized Marketing	AI-driven recommendations improve shopping relevance but increase privacy concerns.	Greater engagement with mixed privacy perceptions
Peer Communities	Student purchasing decisions are strongly influenced by social validation.	Stronger brand preference and repeat purchasing

The findings also indicate that emotional marketing strategies significantly influence impulsive purchasing among university students. Limited-time offers, flash sales, exclusive student discounts, reward programmes, and fear-of-missing-out (FOMO) campaigns stimulate emotional responses that frequently override rational product evaluation. Behavioural economics explains that students often prioritize perceived scarcity and immediate gratification over long-term financial considerations, particularly within mobile commerce environments where purchasing can be completed within seconds.

Despite the commercial effectiveness of these strategies, the literature identifies several ethical concerns. Students represent a digitally connected yet psychologically vulnerable consumer segment because they are exposed to continuous commercial communication across multiple online platforms. Hidden sponsorships, misleading influencer endorsements, algorithmically targeted advertising, and excessive behavioural tracking raise important concerns regarding advertising transparency and consumer autonomy. Several studies therefore advocate stronger disclosure requirements, improved digital literacy programmes, and responsible social-marketing practices that balance commercial objectives with consumer protection.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that contemporary student purchasing behaviour is influenced by an integrated digital ecosystem in which psychological motivation, peer interaction, influencer communication, personalized technology, and social engagement collectively shape purchasing decisions. Organizations that successfully integrate authenticity, transparency, consumer trust, and meaningful digital engagement are more likely to establish sustainable brand relationships than firms relying solely on aggressive promotional strategies.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that the transition from the classroom environment to the digital marketplace represents more than a technological change; it reflects a fundamental transformation in the way students evaluate information, construct preferences, and develop purchasing intentions. Student consumers no longer function as passive recipients of marketing communication. Instead, they actively participate in digital communities where purchasing decisions are continuously influenced by peer interactions, online experiences, influencer content, and algorithmically personalized information.

An important implication of this study is that social marketing has evolved from persuasive communication toward relationship-building and community engagement. Organizations achieving long-term success among student consumers are those that establish credibility through transparent communication, meaningful engagement, and authentic digital interactions rather than relying exclusively on repetitive promotional campaigns. Trust therefore emerges as a strategic organizational asset influencing customer retention and long-term brand loyalty.

The study further demonstrates that technological innovation has significantly increased the effectiveness of

digital marketing while simultaneously creating ethical and regulatory challenges. Artificial Intelligence, behavioural analytics, and personalized recommendation systems improve customer experiences but also increase concerns regarding consumer privacy, algorithmic manipulation, and responsible use of personal information. Marketing organizations should therefore adopt ethical data governance, transparent advertising practices, and privacy-by-design approaches to strengthen consumer confidence while complying with evolving digital regulations.

Another significant observation concerns the growing importance of consumer education. Universities and educational institutions increasingly have a role in strengthening financial literacy, digital literacy, and critical evaluation of online marketing content. Students equipped with stronger consumer awareness are better positioned to distinguish authentic product information from misleading promotional practices, thereby supporting more informed purchasing decisions and responsible consumption.

Overall, the study suggests that future social-marketing strategies targeting student consumers should prioritize authenticity, ethical communication, digital transparency, and sustainable consumer engagement rather than focusing solely on short-term sales performance. Such an approach strengthens organizational reputation while promoting healthier and more responsible consumer behaviour within increasingly digital marketplaces.

CONCLUSION

The digital transformation of contemporary markets has significantly altered the purchasing behaviour of university students, creating an environment where social interactions, technological innovation, and marketing communication collectively influence consumer decision-making. This study examined how social-marketing dynamics shape student consumer behaviour by integrating perspectives from consumer psychology, digital marketing, behavioural economics, and relationship marketing. The findings demonstrate that purchasing decisions are no longer influenced solely by product characteristics or price but increasingly depend on social media engagement, influencer credibility, electronic word-of-mouth, peer recommendations, and personalized digital communication.

The analysis further indicates that social media platforms have evolved into comprehensive consumer ecosystems where students discover products, evaluate alternatives, seek peer validation, and complete purchases within interconnected digital environments. Influencer marketing and online communities strengthen consumer trust by providing authentic product experiences, while artificial intelligence-driven personalization enhances customer engagement through individualized product recommendations. These developments have enabled organizations to establish stronger customer relationships while improving marketing efficiency and consumer satisfaction.

However, the study also identifies several emerging

challenges associated with digital marketing directed toward student consumers. Behavioural targeting, excessive personalization, hidden sponsored content, algorithmic manipulation, and continuous exposure to promotional material may encourage impulsive purchasing behaviour while raising important concerns regarding consumer privacy and digital ethics. The findings therefore suggest that sustainable marketing success depends not only on technological innovation but also on transparency, responsible advertising, consumer protection, and ethical data management.

Overall, the study concludes that social marketing has evolved from a communication strategy into a comprehensive behavioural influence system that shapes student purchasing decisions throughout the consumer journey. Organizations seeking long-term success within student markets should prioritize authentic engagement, trust-building, ethical communication, and socially responsible marketing practices rather than focusing exclusively on short-term commercial outcomes. Such an approach strengthens customer loyalty while promoting more informed and sustainable consumer behaviour.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future studies should investigate how emerging technologies such as generative Artificial Intelligence, virtual influencers, augmented reality shopping, and immersive metaverse platforms influence student purchasing behaviour across different cultural and economic contexts. Comparative empirical research involving universities from multiple countries would further improve understanding of cross-cultural differences in digital consumer behaviour and social-marketing effectiveness.

Additional research is also required to examine the long-term psychological effects of algorithmically personalized advertising, continuous social media exposure, and influencer marketing on financial decision-making, brand loyalty, and consumer well-being. Future investigations integrating marketing, psychology, behavioural economics, data analytics, and digital ethics can contribute to the development of responsible social-marketing frameworks that balance commercial effectiveness with consumer protection, privacy preservation, and sustainable consumption among young consumers.

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