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Article

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The power of social media in the decision-making of current and future professionals: a crucial analysis in the digital era

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the impact of social media on pre-purchase decision-making among both current and future professionals. For this analysis, information obtained from a previous bibliometric study was used. From this study, 6 research questions and 3 hypotheses were developed, driven by 8 variables. A 14-question survey was administered to 214 students and graduates from various programs in Medellín, Colombia. Results indicated that 92.5% of participants actively used social media for information before making purchase decisions, with Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook as preferred platforms. Instagram was notably popular among those aged 18–25, while Facebook and YouTube had a more uniform appeal across age groups. Additionally, participants also considered reviews on platforms like Google Reviews, Amazon, and Mercado Libre. The findings suggest no significant age-based differences in platform preferences, implying that personal factors beyond age influence social media choice. Furthermore, the use of social networks to research products or services is a common practice among students and professionals, regardless of their educational level. In conclusion, this study indeed offers valuable insights for organizations to refine their marketing strategies and captivate customers through the quality, impact, and dissemination of the content they post on social media.

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Introduction

Within the constantly evolving field of social media marketing, companies face various obstacles and opportunities. Effective strategies in this area focus on the use of narratives, fostering community, demonstrating transparency, and adopting authenticity (Singha, 2024). In modern culture, the use of social media is widespread, allowing people to make purchases directly on these platforms. In comparison to more conventional approaches, digital marketing has proven to be more effective (Faruk et al., 2024).

On the other hand, the prevalence of social media influencer marketing (SMI) has forced companies to adapt to a constantly changing digital landscape. This adjustment is driven by the significant influence that social media influencers have on consumer decisions (Mrisha & Xixiang, 2024a). The increasing use of social media platforms to obtain information and advice on investments has raised concerns about the impact of these networks on decision-making in various contexts and environments (Sathya & Prabhavathi, 2024).

Furthermore, in today's complex decision-making environment, it is crucial to consider the interdependencies of attributes and relationships between experts. Traditional models often assume the independence of attributes, ignoring the significant impact of expert relationships on decision outcomes. Additionally, in the dynamic and ever-changing landscape of decision-making, the effect of real-time news and updates on alternative rankings is considerable (Bisht & Pal, 2023).

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Therefore, social media platforms have emerged as powerful communication tools for marketing, promotion, and customer service, prompting a fundamental shift in marketing. This transformation has allowed companies to monitor customer behavior and preferences in unprecedented ways. By leveraging social media communications, marketers work diligently to effectively target their desired audience through strategic positioning and data categorization. The influences of social media on consumer decision-making processes highlight the transformative power of social media and digital marketing techniques, showing how companies strategically employ online communication strategies to influence consumers' purchasing decisions (Tarnanidis et al., 2023).

In the pre-purchase stage of the customer journey, the goal is to maximize purchase intention. In this regard, authors such as Hajli (2019) and Moslehpour et al. (2020) define surface credibility as individuals' first impression of the content they are provided, which directly impacts user satisfaction and purchase intention (Gupta & Maji, 2020). Surface credibility is based on users' trust in a given platform and how it can bolster their self-confidence through strategies like creating external and internal stimuli (Zhu, 2020), which, for instance, involve factors such as navigability and visual appeal (Kimiagari & Asadi Malafe, 2021). Furthermore, according to Sangwan and Sharma (2022), pre-purchase activities are significantly influenced by social media, followed by post-purchase evaluation, purchase decision, and need recognition (Y. Sun et al., 2024).

From a different angle, Dankwa (2021) claims that emotionally appealing advertisements are no longer as effective in capturing consumers' attention and swaying their purchase decisions (Abu-Salih et al., 2024). Conversely, consumers are increasingly drawn to ads offering a wealth of information and novelty. Also, research has shown that browsing innovative products and sharing information have an impact on purchase intention (Kijek et al., 2020). These elements are becoming critical factors playing a significant role in consumer decision-making (Giri et al., 2023). In this vein, Moslehpour et al. (2020) demonstrated that there exists a link between entertainment and purchase intention. Similarly, L. Sun et al. (2023) argued that social ties positively affect consumers' online purchase intention through social media because people's perception of the quality of information is determined by the strength of their social ties (Hossain et al., 2023; Ortiz et al., 2023).

Understanding that internal stimuli foster entertainment and, consequently, enhance purchase intention (Kimiagari & Asadi Malafe, 2021), companies may use public figures who enjoy a certain level of recognition and credibility among users to create a positive atmosphere and attitude towards both advertising and the product. This makes it possible to establish a psychological legacy through construct association, fosters a stronger connection with the product or service, and ultimately increases purchase intention (Pick, 2021). In this context, Sloan et al. (2015) suggest that the use of information sources influencing online purchase decisions varies significantly across cultures. For example, compared to individualists, relationship-oriented collectivists trust more in social media, considering it an alternative for interpersonal communication (Kala Kamdjoug, 2023; Magadán-Díaz & Rivas-García, 2023).

In their study, Le et al. (2022) showed that trust in online markets in Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam depends on the perceived effectiveness of social media platforms, particularly in components such as images, comments, and star ratings. This variable not only adds value to such components, serving as endorsements to purchasing trends through social media platforms in markets like those of China or Vietnam, but is also applicable to other markets (Aboulilah et al., 2022). Analyses based on other variables, such as gender or age, however, call for distinct approaches (Le et al., 2022).

However, technological advancement and the existence of social media have significantly transformed consumer interactions and behaviors. Firstly, social media platforms have redefined the fashion landscape, serving as virtual stages where a wide range of individuals, from influencers and celebrities to ordinary users, share their styles and preferences. Instagram, TikTok, and Pinterest are prominent examples of these spaces, where trends can emerge and spread rapidly due to the virality generated by interactions such as likes, shares, and comments. This dynamic leads to quick adoption of trends by fashion-interested consumers (Muturi, 2024). Secondly, social media has deeply impacted purchasing habits, acting as a powerful driver of consumer decisions. The visual nature of platforms like Instagram facilitates product exploration and discovery, as users can browse through a wide variety of fashion items curated by brands, influencers, and other users (Muturi, 2024).

Besides, integrated shopping features further streamline the purchasing process, enabling consumers to buy products directly from posts or ads. Additionally, user-generated content and peer recommendations enhance trust and authenticity, significantly influencing purchasing decisions. Ultimately, this shift in consumer behavior has resulted in an increase in impulse purchases and a greater willingness to explore new brands or products showcased on social media platforms. This, in turn, has driven sales and shaped market dynamics significantly. Studies, such as, Casagrande Yamawaki and Sarfati (2019) support this phenomenon, highlighting the fundamental role of social media in shaping consumer purchasing behavior.

Despite the significant impact of social networks on user behavior and decision-making, it's essential to consider their effects on individuals. For instance, XX's study examines the impact of using IoT in intelligent information systems, particularly those supported by 5G networks. They focus on the Quality of Experience (QoE) for users and the specific effects of 5G networks on QoE. The research indicates a growing trend in using IoT-based applications for tracking and monitoring to enhance business processes (Vila-Boix et al., 2024). Additionally, the widespread adoption of digital technologies has transformed business operations and consumer behavior. XX's investigation tracks key themes over five-year intervals, revealing that digitalization has evolved from a supplemental tool to an integral part of traditional consumption patterns (Güngör & Çadırcı, 2022). This document will be based on responding to the research objective to analyze the impact of social media on pre-purchase decision-making among current and future professionals.

Theoretical framework

According to Alhakimi and Alwadhan (2021), social media has a significant impact on the pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase stages of the customer journey. In the pre-purchase stage, social media users are urged to recognize the need for a product or service. Little et al. (2020), for their part, found that groups/forums and social media platforms were regarded as influential sources of advice. In particular, previous online shopping experiences and customer reviews of products and services provide a clear picture of how good or bad a product or service is, which can influence future purchases (Tung et al., 2023). Moreover, as indicated by Nash (2019) in the high-street fashion retail sector, consumers use a variety of internal and external motivations—facilitated and driven by the use of social media—that shape their behaviors and perceptions of retailers. In a similar context, Lindsey-Mullikin and Borin (2017) pointed out that, in order to effectively plan a social media presence that is in line with the consumer decision-making process, it is imperative to understand such process.

Authors like Sidhu and Saini (2022), for instance, studied how social media platforms—particularly, Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube—affect the pre-purchase stage. Their findings revealed that, of the examined platforms, Instagram was the most popular among Generation Z, also known as plurals (Margom & Amar, 2023; Tung et al., 2023). Additionally, the first phase of our research, which included a bibliometric analysis based on the PRISMA 2020 statement for literature reviews (Haddaway et al., 2022; Page et al., 2021) and which provided the theoretical and conceptual framework for the construction and application of a questionnaire, revealed a growing interest in analyzing the role of social media in the consumer decision-making process. Moreover, we identified that research of this kind tends to concentrate on distinct consumer generations. In the 96 documents that were examined, nonetheless, we observed a lack of in-depth analysis on how individuals' educational background and professional training influence their purchase decisions, especially prior to making a purchase. Consequently, we looked for additional information to understand how this factor is incorporated into the consumer decision-making process.

From such additional search, we found that, according to authors like Oude Ophuis and Steenkamp (1987), individuals with higher levels of education tend to prioritize 'ethical' criteria such as animal welfare or the environmental impact of the product in product evaluations. Likewise, in a study on food consumption, Steenkamp (1997) reported that people with higher educational attainment are capable of processing more information about products. In a more recent research, Khan and Chawla (2014) stated that the education received in business schools and engineering institutes equips individuals to develop a profound understanding of the market, product, brand, and utility, which better prepares them to make informed purchase decisions. In other words, educated consumers are more influenced by their position and status in society (Hejase et al., 2018).

Impact of social media on purchase decisions

As mentioned earlier, surface credibility is based on users' trust in a given platform and how it can bolster their self-confidence through strategies like creating external and internal stimuli (Zhu, 2020), which, for instance, involve factors such as navigability and visual appeal (Kimiagari & Asadi Malafe, 2021). On the other hand, Schivinski and Dabrowski (2015) highlight the role of company-generated content on social media in strengthening consumer relationships. Leveraging content generated on social media platforms by companies facilitates the establishment, maintenance, and enhancement of relationships with their intended consumer segments (Shakuntala & Ramantoko, 2023). For example, one strategy to engage with consumers and promote company products and services is through social media influencers. According to Liu et al. (2023), social media influencers play a crucial role in creating persuasive content that facilitates purchasing decisions. Additionally, Cheung et al. (2022) suggest that this type of content reduces user effort when seeking information about products and services (Kumar et al., 2024). Furthermore, influencers can personalize their content, increasing its appeal to followers and establishing a direct connection with them (Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Liu et al., 2023). This approach reflects the traditional strategy of enhancing interactions between consumers and brands (Scarth, 2017) and can encourage consumer engagement by encouraging comments and sharing of posts, thereby promoting purchasing decisions (Shakuntala & Ramantoko, 2023).

The influence of platform choice on purchase decisions

The surge in social media users experienced a 34.2% increase in 2017, marking it as the highest up to that point. However, this growth began to decelerate, reaching only 6.3% the following year. Across various regions, several social media platforms are frequented by users, with WhatsApp recording a staggering 88.7% usage, Instagram at 84.8%, and Facebook at 81.3%. Additionally, TikTok and Telegram have garnered 63.1% and 62.8% of users, respectively (M. I. 2022; Vellamy et al., 2023).

Key factors influencing purchase decisions on social media

According to Nash (2019), in the high-street fashion retail sector, consumers use a variety of internal and external motivations—facilitated and driven by the use of social media—that shape their behaviors and perceptions of retailers. On the other hand, the influence of social media metrics on purchasing decisions is significant for many consumers. Before acquiring an item, it's common for people to research on the internet or on social media, seeking information about the product through content creators they trust. Product reviews on social media serve as a crucial source of information for consumers when making purchasing decisions. What was once known as 'word of mouth' has now transitioned into the digital realm. Pre-purchase research focuses on aspects such as price, quality, product promotions, content creators presenting the product or service, and the opinions of other customers.

Additionally, security concerns pose a common obstacle to online purchases. Before completing a transaction, consumers must provide personal information, such as address and phone number, for product delivery. This process raises concerns about the security and potential misuse of personal data. Although delivery is a necessity, the requirement to share personal data may lead to mistrust among some consumers. However, those who already trust the store may be more willing to provide this information (Vellamy et al., 2023). In this manner, when making online purchases through social media, consumers are particularly concerned about the aforementioned factors, but especially about the quality of the products offered and the security of their personal data.

How business content on social media influences purchase decisions

Social media has compelled individuals and organizations to alter communication strategies, engage with consumers, build brands, and promote products. Consumers can easily gather product-related information on social media platforms (Ali & Naushad, 2023). The user-friendly nature of social media enables consumers to choose products of their preference (Blackshaw & Nazzaro, 2004). Martin and Ramsaran-Fowdar (2013) revealed that social media marketing is highly effective in managing long-term

relationships with consumers and engaging them by facilitating online information exchange. This clearly confirms that social media marketing leads to consumer satisfaction and loyalty. Anjum et al. (2012) mentioned that social media marketing helps organizations attract and retain customers. Consumers can also benefit from interacting with companies on social media platforms, such as obtaining discounts, clarifying queries, negotiating prices, and viewing product reviews and ratings (Ali & Naushad, 2023). Studies in the field suggest that consumers are increasingly drawn to ads offering a wealth of information and novelty. Also, research has shown that browsing innovative products and sharing information have an impact on purchase intention (Kijek et al., 2020). These elements are becoming critical factors playing a significant role in consumer decision-making (Giri et al., 2023).

Social media: sufficient for informed purchasing

In their research, Little et al. (2020) found that groups/forums and social media platforms were regarded as influential sources of advice. Previous online shopping experiences and customer reviews of products and services provide a clear picture of how good or bad a product or service is, which can influence future purchases (Tung et al., 2023). Consumers make purchase decisions based on the exchange of benefits and value they receive (Wang & Tsai, 2014). The factors guiding these decisions include product selection, brand choice, timing of purchase, and frequency of purchase (Dwi Santy & Andriani, 2023). The relationship between product or service information and purchase decisions is closely linked (Yusuf et al., 2020). Online marketing significantly impacts purchasing behavior (Ugonna et al., 2017). Prasetya found that product or service information influences purchase decisions (Prasetya et al., 2021).

Social media: enhancing product comparison and purchase decisions

On the other hand, trust in the perceived effectiveness of social media platforms, particularly in components such as images, comments, and star ratings, is key when comparing products. These components not only add value by serving as endorsements to purchasing trends through social media platforms but are also applicable to various markets, as demonstrated by Aboulilah et al. (2022). Besides, research suggests that individuals tend to visit more websites and meticulously compare different options, indicating a higher level of product scrutiny compared to other consumers (Seock & Bailey, 2008). Additionally, the Editor Guided Selling Blog (2015) on Twitter supports this finding, noting that some consumers prefer objective information, such as brand, model, and speed, while others tend to base their decisions on emotional considerations (Kumar et al., 2024).

Gender and valuation of company's online presence

In relation to the connection between gender and a company's online presence, particularly on social media, Sharma et al. (2023) found that for small businesses heavily reliant on customer engagement for survival, social media marketing (SMM) offers broad reach and affordability. They also found that gender and educational level play a moderating role in the acceptance of a company's presence on social media. Additionally, it is crucial to identify how online technologies are accepted and adopted for a company's presence, given the existence of certain social and gender barriers. In this context, Olsson and Bernhard (2021) explored how female entrepreneurs in small businesses deal with digitalization and learn to use social media. They understand digitalization, social media use, and digital skills as part of the adaptation process for female entrepreneurs to an increasingly digital world. The authors found that hands-on learning, informal learning, and the step-by-step self-development of business behavior, along with the strategic hiring of young employees with digital skills—digital natives—allow these entrepreneurs to remain competitive and generate business growth.

Age and social media platform preference

Currently, different social groups use social media for marketing, entertainment, shopping, relationships, and professional purposes, among others. Marengo et al. (2022) note that approximately 2.7 billion people use at least one of the social media platforms owned by Facebook: Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram. Previous research has identified differences between users and non-users of these platforms.

The increasing relevance of social media influencers (SMI) has forced companies to adapt to the changing digital landscape, driven by the significant influence of these influencers on consumer decision-making (Mrisha & Xixiang, 2024b). Social technologies have quickly become part of workplace culture, with companies using them to communicate, provide customer service, gain exposure and awareness, attract new customers, increase revenue and profits, conduct marketing, network and build relationships, and recruit personnel (Nord et al., 2020).

Over the past decade, social media has grown at an unprecedented rate, encompassing users of all ages, ethnic backgrounds, and income levels (Arnaboldi & Coget, 2016). However, despite the global and ubiquitous nature of these technologies, the motives and customs for using social platforms are not homogeneous across countries (Kim et al., 2011; Nielsen & Schröder, 2014) and age groups (Fietkiewicz et al., 2016). Therefore, identifying the target population group and the appropriate social network is crucial for implementing the best marketing strategy. For instance, Nord et al. (2020) analyzed the use of social media by working women in Spain for business purposes. They found that age group II (36–45 years) was the most active on these platforms, with Google+ (52.6%), LinkedIn (50%), and Facebook (47%) being the most popular. Age group III (46+) mainly used Google+ (37%), YouTube (32%), and Twitter (31%), while age group I (20–35) predominantly used YouTube (28.6%), Twitter (26%), and Facebook (25%). Age group II showed the highest commercial use across all platforms.

Educational level and social media use for researching products or services

The use of social media has become an integral part of people's daily lives, being utilized in activities such as social interaction, education, and shopping (Ali & Naushad, 2023). Similar to the preferences in social media use among cultural groups and different age groups, there are also variations in preferences according to the educational level of different social groups. According to Gencer et al. (2024), dependence on social media decreases as educational levels rise.

However, a study by Rekhi et al. (2019) found that Facebook was the most popular social networking site. They also discovered that age, higher educational attainment, and household monthly income were significantly associated with social media use. Additionally, they found that people with schizophrenia who were younger and had education beyond high school were more likely to use social media (Rekhi et al., 2019). Thus, educational attainment is associated with higher Internet use among these individuals (Trefflich et al., 2015).

Considering the present theoretical framework, six research questions have been formulated and three hypotheses have been generated. These will be processed and analyzed in the results phase. They are listed below:

Research questions

1. How does using social media affect how consumers learn about products or services before making a purchase decision?
2. How does choosing a particular social media platform influence the purchase decision?
3. What key factors influence the purchase decision when researching products or services on social media?
4. How does the information businesses post on social media about their products and services influence purchase decisions?
5. Do social media platforms offer users enough information about products or services to make an informed purchase decision?
6. How does social media allow users to compare products, thus facilitating the purchase decision?

Based on the research framework and the questions posed, the variables and questions that will be addressed throughout the document are defined. These elements are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Variables and questions.

Variable	Question
Social Media Use	Do you use social media to research products or services before making a purchase decision?
Most Used Platform	From the following list, which social media platform do you use the most to get information before making a purchase decision?
Information Reliability	Do you think that the information businesses post on social media about their products and services is trustworthy?
Company information	Do the social media platforms you frequent allow you to compare products before making a purchase decision?
Sufficient Information	Do social media platforms offer enough information to help you make informed purchase decisions?
Products and services	Which social media platform do you use the most to research products or services before making a purchase decision?
Key Factors	What are the key factors you consider when seeking information about a product or service on social media?
Social Network Comparison	Do you compare information provided by different social networks about the same product or service?

Source: Authors' own work.

Hypothesis

H1: There is no association between respondents' gender and the value they place on a company's online presence in a variety of media and information channels.

H2: There is no association between respondents' age and the most consulted social media platform.

H3: There is no association between respondents' educational attainment and their use of social media to research products or services.

In the next sections, we present the materials and methods that were employed, along with the results. Additionally, we offer a detailed discussion and analysis of the findings, comparing the information extracted from the existing literature with the data collected through the self-administered questionnaire. Finally, we draw some conclusions derived from this research and provide a list of the references we used.

Materials and methods

As recommended by Sampieri and Collado (2007), the methodology employed in this study followed a mixed approach, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study. In addition, the research design was exploratory and descriptive with an applied focus, seeking to make a contribution from theoretical elements and the reality of the studied phenomenon. This approach not only makes it possible to harness the inherent advantages of each method but also mitigates their respective shortcomings. The methodology—which is detailed below—focused on the administration of a questionnaire that was designed based on the findings of the literature review.

Questionnaire design

Following a thorough review of relevant literature, key elements were identified, and research questions and hypotheses were formulated to guide the investigation, we designed the data collection instrument. Following the design of the instrument, it proceeded to validation by four experts selected based on specific criteria: they were required to have theoretical and practical knowledge in marketing, be university lecturers familiar with the appropriate language and terminology for formulating questions, and have experience in the productive sector, particularly concerning consumer behavior. During the review of the instrument, they were asked to evaluate the number and relevance of the questions concerning the research objective, ensuring their clarity and coherence for the target population of the questionnaire. The validators were provided with the questionnaire items, a summary of the study's objective, and the identified observable variables. They were requested to evaluate the coherence, cohesion, and relevance of the questions, considering this information, to ensure that study participants could understand and answer them appropriately, contributing relevant data for the research.

Two rounds of review were conducted. In the first round, comments and feedback were received, leading to the optimization of the instrument. Originally, the questionnaire consisted of 15 questions, but after incorporating suggestions from the validators, it was reduced to 8. In the second round, the revised form was sent to the evaluators. In the second round, the revised form was sent to the evaluators, concluding that the questions addressed the intended objective, were observable and measurable, and were also precisely formulated to provide more accurate results.

For the application of this questionnaire, approval was obtained from the ethics committee of the Vice-Rector's Office for Research of the Metropolitan Technological Institute. Additionally, before the application of the questionnaire, consent for information and data processing was declared so that the respondents could make the decision whether to continue with the questions. However, at no time were sensitive data requested, nor were personal data of any of the participants revealed. Also, it is clarified that if the specific resolution of the committee's approval is necessary, given the confidentiality of this documentation at the institutional level, said information may be requested from the main author.

It is important to clarify that due to the institution's data protection and confidentiality policy, the data provided was only used for academic and institutional knowledge purposes and only the data that contribute to research on social media was used, therefore that information on the identification of persons or personal or confidential data was not used, disclosed or published. Additionally, the provisions of Law 1581 of 2012, 'By which general provisions are issued for the protection of personal data' and in accordance with the provisions of Decree 1377 of 2013, have been complied with.

Description of questionnaire content

Such instrument began with an introduction outlining the purpose and nature of the study, as well as details regarding data processing and informed consent. In this way, the study participants were informed at the beginning of the questionnaire that the information provided would be treated confidentially, that the data collected would not be used for any purpose other than the objectives of this study and that the responses and recordings obtained would be used exclusively for academic purposes and would only be disclosed through scientific reports, ensuring the anonymity of the participants. In compliance with Law 1581 of 2012 and its regulatory decrees on the protection of personal data, the participants authorized that their data be collected, stored and used for this study, always safeguarding their privacy. Then, it was divided into two main components. The first component involved gathering personal and demographic information from the participants. This component consisted of a total of six (6) questions (combining both closed- and open-ended questions) designed to capture variables such as age range, gender, associate's or bachelor's degree, and the specific field of study or occupation.

The second component, which focused on the central research topic, included eight (8) questions in total, all of which attempted to address the study's primary objective. These questions combined several question formats: closed-ended questions and multiple-choice questions, as well as Likert scale questions to give a more accurate picture of the participants' as shown in [Table 2](#).

Sampling and data collection

The sampling conducted was of a non-probabilistic convenience type, which involved the selection of accessible cases that agreed to be included, based on specific characteristics of the target population. This choice was justified by the ease of access to information and the proximity of the subjects to the research team. It is crucial to acknowledge that this sampling method limits the research group's ability to control the representativeness of the sample. However, since it focused on a specific population characterized by individuals residing in Colombia, who regularly use social networks and are enrolled in or have completed programs at a technical, technological, professional, or postgraduate level, it was considered that the data collected could offer a reasonable approximation to the Colombian reality, in accordance with the research questions formulated.

For data collection, we employed Google Forms and optimized this process using a particular parameterization scheme. The questionnaire was then distributed across various social media platforms,

Table 2. Variables, questions and scales.

Variable	Question	Scale
Social Media Use	Do you use social media to research products or services before making a purchase decision?	1=Yes, 2=No, 3=Other
Most Used Platform	From the following list, which social media platform do you use the most to get information before making a purchase decision?	1=Facebook, 2=LinkedIn, 3=YouTube, 4=Twitter, 5=Instagram, 6=Snapchat, 7=Pinterest, 8=Other
Information Reliability	Do you think that the information businesses post on social media about their products and services is trustworthy?	1=Never, 2=Rarely, 3=Sometimes, 4=Almost always, 5=Always
Company information	Do the social media platforms you frequent allow you to compare products before making a purchase decision?	1=Strongly disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neither agree nor disagree, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly agree
Sufficient Information	Do social media platforms offer enough information to help you make informed purchase decisions?	1=Strongly disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neither agree nor disagree, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly agree
Products and services	Which social media platform do you use the most to research products or services before making a purchase decision?	1=Facebook, 2=YouTube, 3=Twitter, 4=Instagram, 5=Snapchat, 6=Pinterest, 7=Google, 8=Google Reviews, 9=Store Websites, 10=Reddit, 10=Supplier Websites, 11= Hangouts.
Key Factors	What are the key factors you consider when seeking information about a product or service on social media?	Select all that apply: 1=Number of followers on the social network 2=The company has other means and information (websites or other social networks) 3=The product or service has many likes or approval 4=The product is to your liking (shape and presentation) 5=Reviewing positive and negative comments 6=The design and presentation of the products 7=The brand is recognized 8=The products are recommended by public figures (actors, YouTubers, models, etc.) 9=Recommendation from others 10=The posts have information on features, benefits, uses, care (among others) of the product
Social Network Comparison	Do you compare information provided by different social networks about the same product or service?	1=Never, 2=Rarely, 3=Sometimes, 4=Almost always, 5=Always

Source: Authors' own work.

including Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp. It was also shared in various public and private higher education institutions and sent by bulk email to contacts in the academic and scientific community. Since the goal was to obtain a sizable sample, the questionnaire was available for completion throughout the first semester of 2023.

In terms of participation, a total of 220 entries were recorded. After a thorough examination to ensure data quality, 6 entries were eliminated, leaving 214 valid responses. With a response rate of 97.27%, this sample was considered highly representative and provided a robust dataset for further analysis.

Data analysis

The data (responses) collected through Google Forms were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 29.0.1.0 (171). The employed approach involved an exploratory statistical analysis using a variety of methodological tools. As part of the analysis, data tables with frequency distributions and percentages were created to provide a robust and comprehensive descriptive analysis. Additionally, cross-tabulations and correlation analysis were conducted to investigate the relationships between the variables under study. These advanced statistical methods enable a more profound comprehension of the interactions between variables, significantly contributing to the research objectives and offering a solid foundation for drawing more informed conclusions.

Analysis of the results

The primary objective of this study is to examine the impact of social media on pre-purchase decision-making, particularly among individuals who already hold a higher education degree and those

currently pursuing studies. Such an analysis will provide a more thorough understanding of not only the role social media platforms play in the pre-purchase stage but also their influence on the decisions made by current and future professionals.

Given this background and considering the data collected from the 214 respondents and processed using IBM SPSS Statistics, as well as the proposed research questions, the results we obtained are presented below.

First component: participants' demographic and personal information

As mentioned earlier, this section of the questionnaire comprised six (6) questions designed to gather key information from participants such as age range, gender, associate's or bachelor's degree, and their specific field of study or occupation. A question about social media usage was also added here, and the results showed that all respondents (100% of them) used these sites. To address all these aspects, we employed a combination of closed- and open-ended questions and subsequently subjected the responses to a descriptive analysis.

Tables 3 and 4 present the results of the descriptive statistical analyses. As observed, women made up the majority of participants (59.8%). This is supported by a mean of 1.40 and a median of 1, indicating a clear female predominance with low variability (standard deviation of 0.491). Regarding age distribution, most respondents (49.1%) were between the ages of 18 and 25 years old, followed by those aged 26 to 36 (31.8%). This suggests a young cohort characterized by a moderate age diversity (standard deviation of 0.772). Lastly, many participants (54.2%) were students Table 5. This is supported by a mean of 1.46 and a median of 1, signifying a significant concentration of the population in the *student* category (standard deviation of 0.499).

Table 6 illustrates the respondents' distribution in terms of field of study or occupation. As can be seen, the most prevalent academic program was administrative management (associate's degree), accounting for 36.9% of the total population (79 respondents), followed by business administration (10.3%, or 22 respondents) and telecommunication network management (associate's degree) (6.1%, or 13 respondents). Programs such as technological administration, accounting, administrative engineering, law, and telecommunication network engineering were also represented in the sample, each with a lower percentage. Although with lower representation, other careers included international negotiation, psychology, zootechnics, and education. These results indicate a trend towards management and technology domains, which may have an impact on participants' use of social media and purchase decisions.

Second component: questions aimed at addressing the study's primary objective

As noted above, this section of the questionnaire consisted of eight (8) questions intended to give insights into the role of social media in consumers' decision-making process. Following a thorough review

Table 3. Frequency analysis (gender, age, and educational attainment).

Statistics		Gender	Age	Educational attainment
N	Valid	214	214	214
	Missing	0	0	0
Mean		1.40	1.70	1.46
Median		1.00	2.00	1.00
Standard dev.		.491	.772	.499

Source: Data processed using IBM SPSS Statistics.

Table 4. Gender, age range, and educational attainment.

Gender			Age range		
	N	%		N	%
Female	128	59.8%	18–25 years old	105	49.1%
Male	86	40.2%	26–36 years old	68	31.8%
			Over 36 years old	41	19.2%

Table 5. Educational attainment.

	<i>N</i>	%
Student	116	54.2%
Graduate	98	45.8%

Source: Data processed using IBM SPSS Statistics.

Table 6. Academic program currently pursuing or graduated from.

Academic program	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Administrative management	79	36.9	36.9	93.5
Business administration	22	10.3	10.3	10.3
Telecommunication network management	13	6.1	6.1	99.5
Technological administration	10	4.7	4.7	16.8
Accounting	9	4.2	4.2	23.4
Administrative engineering	7	3.3	3.3	35.5
Law	5	2.3	2.3	26.2
Telecommunication network engineering	5	2.3	2.3	45.8

Source: Data processed using IBM SPSS Statistics.

Table 7. Use of social media for researching products or services.

SM_Research	<i>N</i>	%
Yes	198	92.5%
No	10	4.7%
Other	6	2.8%

Source: Data processed using IBM SPSS Statistics.

of relevant literature, key elements were identified, and research questions and hypotheses were formulated to guide the investigation. In addition to reviewing the literature and establishing the research framework, this section also includes correlation analyses to address the hypotheses outlined in the document. Cross-tabulation analyses are also presented at the end of this section to further examine the relationships between variables.

In particular, we delved into the most frequently used platforms, the reliability of the information posted by businesses on these sites, their ability to facilitate product comparisons, and whether they provide enough information to help consumers make informed decisions. Besides conducting a comparative analysis between various social media platforms, we were able to identify the dominant one in this context, as well as the primary factors consumers take into account when researching products or services. Below, we present a detailed descriptive statistical analysis for each question within this component.

Do you use social media to research products or services before making a purchase decision?

Table 7 shows the participants' responses to this first question. As observed, 92.5% of them (198 respondents) said that they use social media to inform their decisions on products or services before making a purchase. This suggests that social media platforms serve as a research tool for consumers. Only 4.7% of participants (10 respondents) reported not using social media for this purpose, and 2.8% (6 respondents) indicated that they look for information about products or services on e-commerce platforms such as Amazon, eBay, and Mercado Libre. Others mentioned consulting discussion forums, Google reviews, specific brand websites like Adidas and Falabella, and websites of chain stores. According to this, although social media sites are a common research tool, some consumers may choose to obtain information from other sources. These findings underscore the importance of social media as a vital source of information in the digital age.

From the following list, which social media platform do you use the most to get information before making a purchase decision?

As observed in Table 8, with a frequency of 64% (137 responses), Instagram was reported to be the most consulted platform, followed by Facebook with a frequency of 15.4% (33 responses) and YouTube with a frequency of 13.1% (28 responses). The representation of Pinterest and other sites was found to be far smaller, 1.9% and 5.6%, respectively. These results highlight Instagram's dominance as the main social

Table 8. Most consulted social media platforms.

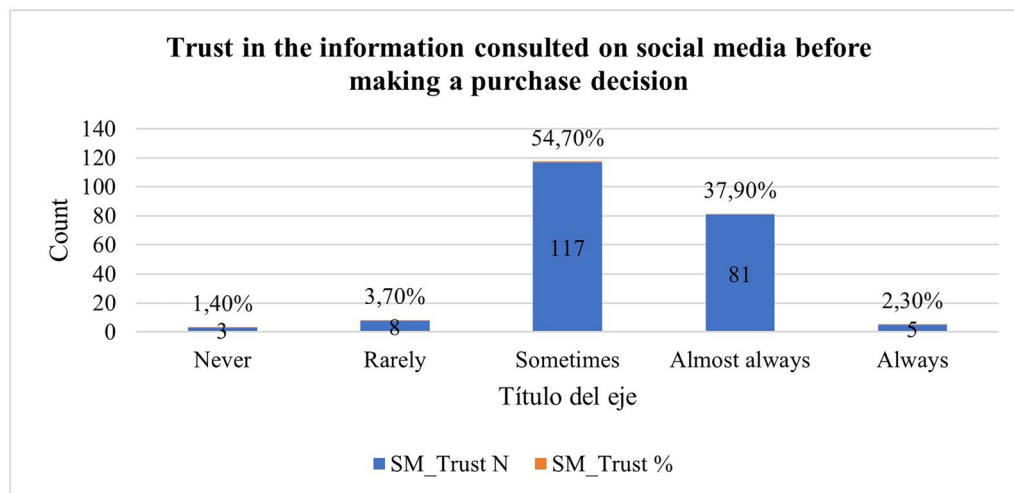
	SM_Most_Consulted	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	Facebook	33	15.4	15.4	15.4
	YouTube	28	13.1	13.1	28.5
	Instagram	137	64.0	64.0	92.5
	Pinterest	4	1.9	1.9	94.4
	Other	12	5.6	5.6	100.0
	Total	214	100.0	100.0	

Source: Data processed using IBM SPSS Statistics.

Table 9. Trust in the information posted on social media.

		SM_Trust	SM_Comparison	SM_Pertinence
N	Valid		214	
	Missing	0		
	Mean	3.36	3.52	3.33
	Median	3.00	4.00	3.00
	Standard dev.	.662	1.015	.933

Source: Data processed using IBM SPSS Statistics.

**Figure 1.** Results obtained for the *trust* variable. Source: Data processed using IBM SPSS Statistics.

media platform for pre-purchase research, which may be explained by its strong visual component and high level of user-content interaction, both of which are important elements in the promotion and perception of products and services.

Do you think that the information businesses post on social media about their products and services is trustworthy?

Table 9 and Figure 1 show how much participants trust in the information that businesses post on social media. Out of the 214 respondents, 117 (54.7%) said that they sometimes find this information trustworthy, 81 (37.9%) almost always, and 5 (2.3%) always. A total of 11 participants expressed mistrust, with 3 of them (1.4%) never trusting in the veracity of such information and 8 (3.7%) rarely trusting in it. Statistically speaking, the mean in terms of trust was 3.36 out of 5, with a median of 3 and a standard deviation of 0.662. This suggests that most participants tend to trust in the information provided on social media, although not unconditionally. Also, the low standard deviation indicates that opinions were mostly uniform in the sample.

Do the social media platforms you frequent allow you to compare products before making a purchase decision?

Figure 2 illustrate the distribution of the participants' responses to the question about how useful social media is for comparing products. As can be seen, of the 214 respondents, 88 chose (41.1%) agree, 32

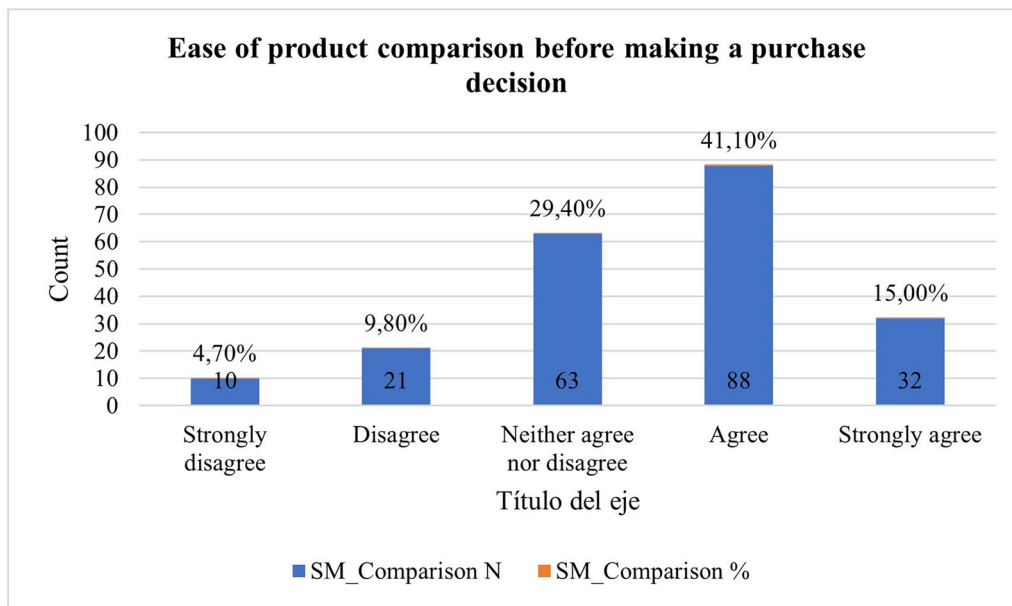


Figure 2. Results obtained for the easy of product comparison variable. *Source:* Data processed using IBM SPSS Statistics.

(15.0%) strongly agree, 63 (29.4%) neither agree nor disagree, 21 (9.8%) disagree, and 10 (4.7%) strongly disagree. This reflects a general positive opinion regarding social media's ability to facilitate product comparisons before making a purchase decision. As indicated by a mean of 3.52 and a median of 4, the majority of the responses appeared to tend toward agreement, even though the standard deviation of 1.015 indicates a diversity of opinions.

Do social media platforms offer enough information to help you make informed purchase decisions?

As observed in [Figure 3](#), the participants' responses to whether social media provides enough information to make informed purchase decisions were distributed as follows: 85 (39.7%) selected agree, 16 (7.5%) strongly agree, 74 (34.6%) neither agree nor disagree, 32 (15.0%) disagree, and 7 (3.3%) strongly disagree. With a mean of 3.33 and a median of 3, the overall tendency was toward agreement, although there was a noticeable variation in the respondents' opinions, as indicated by a standard deviation of 0.933.

6. Which social media platform do you use the most to research products or services before making a purchase decision?

[Table 10](#) shows that, when it comes to researching products or services to make informed purchase decisions, respondents prefer Instagram (187 responses, 87.80%), followed by Facebook (142 responses, 66.70%) and YouTube (90 responses, 42.30%). Although to a lesser degree, Twitter and LinkedIn (30 responses each, 14.10%), Pinterest (29 responses, 13.60%), Snapchat (8 responses, 3.80%), and Google (6 responses, 2.80%) were also mentioned by participants. Other sites include Mercado Libre, Google Reviews, and websites of stores, which highlights the range of sources that consumers employ.

Furthermore, after comparing the responses to questions 1 and 6, we observed that although 92.5% of the sample (198 respondents) reported using social media to research products or services before making a purchase decision, their preferences mostly leaned towards Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. Importantly, even with the strong preference for social media, a startling 7.2% of respondents still rely on other media or e-commerce sites to obtain information about products or services, which underscores the relevance of a wide range of information sources in the digital age. This, besides highlighting the dominance of social media in pre-purchase research, also reflects the important role of other sites in the consumer decision-making process.

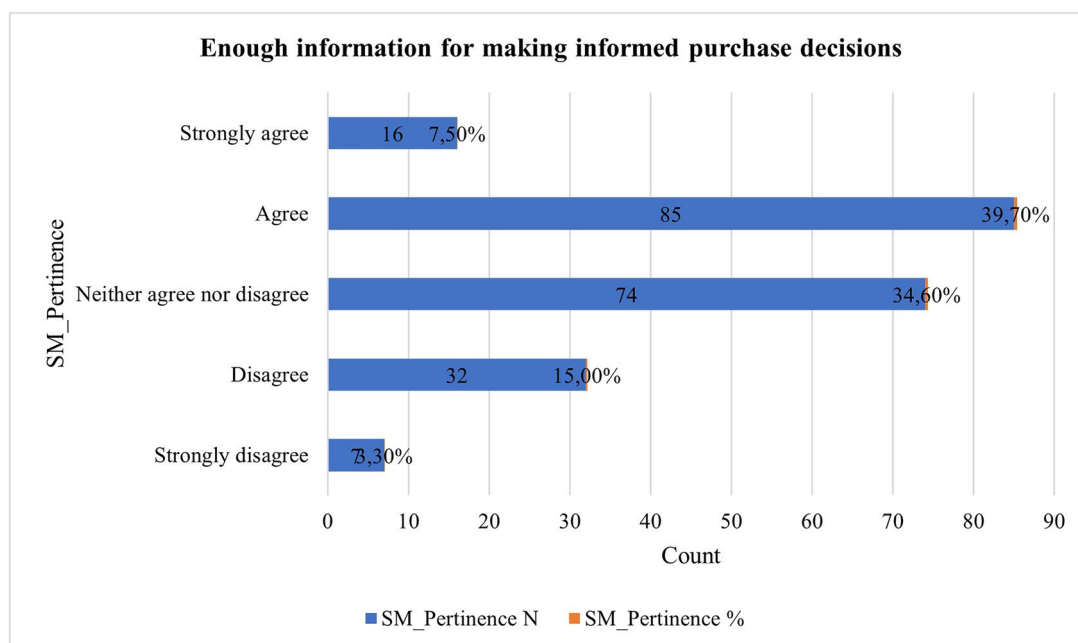


Figure 3. Results obtained for the enough information for making informed purchase decisions variable. *Source:* Data processed using IBM SPSS Statistics.

Table 10. Social media platform do you use the most to research products or services before making a purchase decision.

Social media platform	Responses		Type of media
	N	Percentage	
Instagram	187	35.50%	Social media
Facebook	142	26.90%	
YouTube	90	17.10%	
Twitter	30	5.70%	
LinkedIn	29	5.50%	
Pinterest	29	5.50%	
Snapchat	8	1.50%	
Google	6	1.10%	Other media
Websites of stores	2	0.40%	
Google Reviews	1	0.20%	
Reddit	1	0.20%	
Mercado Libre	1	0.20%	
Hangouts	1	0.20%	
	527	100.00%	

Source: Data processed using IBM SPSS Statistics.

What are the key aspects that you consider when looking for information about a product or service on social media?

For this question, respondents were allowed to select as many aspects as they deemed significant when using social media to research products or services. These aspects included the number of likes or approvals on a product, whether they like its form and presentation, reading positive and negative reviews, the product's design and presentation, the brand's reputation, whether public figures or friends recommend the product, and the availability of detailed information about the characteristics and benefits of the product.

After analyzing the descriptive data, we are able to determine which aspects consumers value the most when looking for information about products or services on social media. As observed in Table 11, 40.2% of the sample (86 respondents) said that they value a company's presence in several media, suggesting a preference for businesses with a high online presence. Conversely, as shown in Table 12, 34.1% of the sample (73 respondents) considered that the popularity or legitimacy of a brand's social media

Table 11. Company's online presence on other media and information channels (websites or other social media platforms).

Validation	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
No option selected	128	59.8	59.8	59.8
Option selected	86	40.2	40.2	100
Total	214	100	100	

Source: Data processed using IBM SPSS Statistics.

Table 12. Number of followers on the social media platform.

Validation	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
No option selected	141	65.9	65.9	65.9
Option selected	73	34.1	34.1	100
Total	214	100	100	

Source: Data processed using IBM SPSS Statistics.

platform may be determined by its follower count. These findings highlight the need to have a varied online presence and the influence of perceived popularity on consumers' purchase decisions. Some respondents also stressed how important it is to like the product (in terms of form and presentation) and read reviews—positive or negative—to help them make informed decisions.

Remarkably, only 1% of the sample selected options like product recommendations by public figures and product design and presentation. This indicates that, when compared to other factors deemed more important, these aspects may have some impact but do not overwhelmingly shape consumers' purchase decisions.

Do you compare information provided by different social media platforms about the same product or service?

Figure 4 illustrates the participants' responses regarding whether they compare information about the same product or service across several social media platforms. As can be seen, 37.9% of the sample (81 respondents) selected sometimes, 29.9% (64 respondents) almost always, 11.7% (25 respondents) always, 13.1% (28 respondents) rarely, and 7.5% (16 respondents) never. From this, it may be inferred that most users compare information about the same product across different social media platforms, though at different frequency levels.

Based on the obtained results and statistical analysis you provided, here are the responses the research questions:

How does using social media affect how consumers learn about products or services before making a purchase decision?

The use of social media significantly impacts how consumers learn about products or services. According to the data, 92.5% of respondents use social media to research products or services before buying, with Instagram being the most consulted platform. This suggests that the visual nature of social media platforms influences consumer learning about products or services.

How does choosing a particular social media platform influence the purchase decision?

Choosing a specific social media platform influences the purchase decision. The preference for Instagram, as the most consulted platform, indicates that a consumer's choice of platform can influence their purchase decision. However, a more detailed analysis would be required to explore how different platforms impact decision-making differently.

What are the key factors that influence the purchase decision when researching products or services on social media?

Several key factors influence the purchase decision when researching on social media, including a company's online presence across various media, the popularity or legitimacy of a brand's social media platform, and the ability to compare products on different platforms.

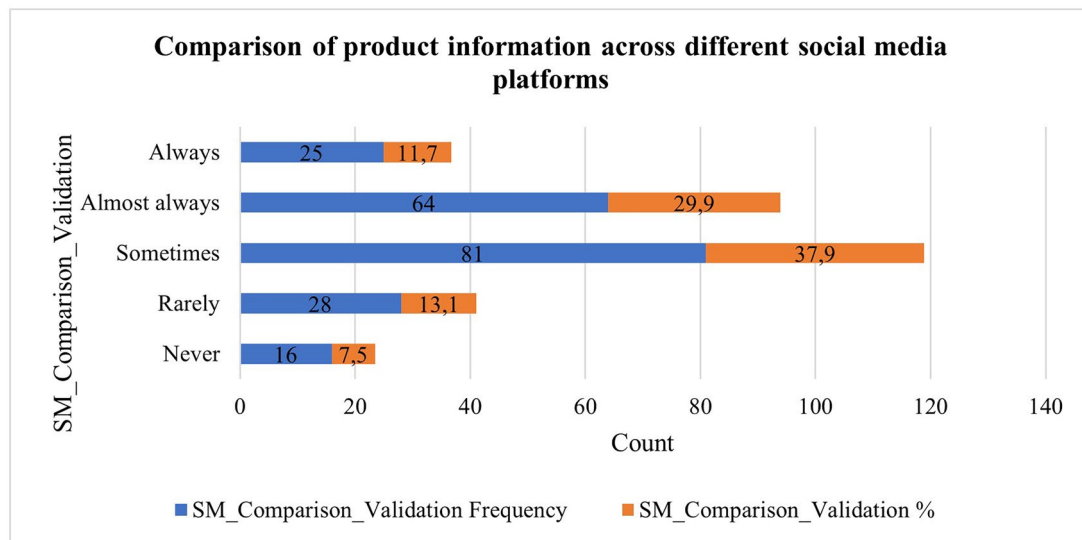


Figure 4. Results obtained for the *comparison of product information across different social media platforms* variable. Source: Data processed using IBM SPSS Statistics.

How does the information that businesses post on social media about their products and services influence purchase decisions?

The information that businesses post on social media about their products and services influences purchase decisions. Most respondents consider the information posted by companies on social media to be reliable, indicating that such information does influence their purchase decisions to some extent.

Do social media platforms offer users enough information about products or services to make an informed purchase decision?

This research question was rejected. While a significant portion of respondents agreed that social media platforms provide enough information to make informed purchase decisions, a notable proportion indicated neither agreement nor disagreement. This suggests that, while social media provides information, it may not always be perceived as sufficient.

How do social media allow users to compare products, thus facilitating the purchase decision?

Social media facilitates product comparison, aiding the purchase decision-making process. Most respondents agreed that social media facilitates product comparison, indicating that it effectively aids in the decision-making process.

Cross-tabulation analysis

In this analysis, specific elements of the questionnaire were utilized to address and respond to the hypotheses presented in the document. The analysis examined the relationship between respondents' gender and their perceived value of a company's online presence across various media and information channels. Additionally, the correlation between respondents' age and their preferred social media platform was investigated. Finally, the relationship between respondents' educational attainment and their utilization of social media for product or service research was explored. The results of these analyses provide a comprehensive understanding of how different aspects of social media influence consumer decision-making.

Correlation between respondents' gender and the value they place on a company's online presence in a variety of media and information channels

Table 13 shows the cross-tabulation of respondents' gender and the importance they place on a company's presence in diverse media. As observed, 61.7% (79) of women and 38.3% (49) of men perceived a diverse online presence as less relevant (value of 0), whereas 57.0% (49) of women and 43.0% (37) of men gave it greater importance (value of 1). Both genders exhibited a similar divide in their preferences, with a slightly higher percentage of women regarding a diverse online presence as less important. Based on these findings, it appears that both genders pretty equally value a diverse online presence when it comes to researching products or services on social media.

According to the results of the Chi-square test, no statistically significant differences were observed between both genders when valuing a diverse online presence. With a Chi-square value of 0.481 and a significance of 0.488, both genders were found to place equal weight on researching products or services via a variety of platforms. This highlights a gender-neutral perspective on the use of social media to make informed purchase decisions (see Table 14).

Considering the previous information, we performed a symmetric analysis, whose results are shown in Table 15. Such analysis revealed a negative correlation between gender and the importance given to a diverse online presence. As can be seen, Pearson's R was -0.233, and the Spearman correlation coefficient was -0.262, both with a significance level below 0.001. According to this, although no significant differences were observed between both genders when it comes to valuing a diverse online presence, women tend to give this aspect a little less importance than men do. Likewise, such a negative correlation suggests that as the importance assigned to a diverse online presence increases, it is more likely that men are the ones placing greater value on it. These results provide a more comprehensive understanding of gender behavior in terms of valuing social media content.

H1: There is no association between respondents' gender and the value they place on a company's online presence in a variety of media and information channels.

Both analyses provide a comprehensive picture of how gender might influence the perception of a company's online presence. While the Chi-square test suggests that there are no significant general differences between genders, the correlation indicates a trend where men value this presence more than

Table 13. Gender vs company's online presence on other media and information channels (websites or other social media platforms).

		Gender		
	Reference	Female	Male	Total
0	Count	79	49	128
	% within Diverse_Online_Presence	61.7%	38.3%	100.0%
	Adjusted residual	.7	-.7	
1	Count	49	37	86
	% within Diverse_Online_Presence	57.0%	43.0%	100.0%
	Adjusted residual	-.7	.7	
Total	Count	128	86	214
	% within Diverse_Online_Presence	59.8%	40.2%	100.0%

Source: Data processed using IBM SPSS Statistics.

Table 14. Chi-square test – Gender vs company's online presence on other media and information channels (websites or other social media platforms).

Description	Value	Df	Asymptotic significance (2-sided)	Exact significance (2-sided)	Exact significance (1-sided)
Pearson's chi-square	.481 ^a	1	.488		
Continuity Correction ^b	.304	1	.581		
Likelihood ratio	.480	1	.488		
Fisher's exact test				.570	.290
Linear-by-linear association	.479	1	.489		
No. of valid cases	214				

^aZero cells (0.0%) have an expected count of less than 5. The minimum expected count is 34.56. ^bComputed only for a 2x2 table. Source: Data processed using IBM SPSS Statistics.

women. This is a classic example of how different statistical approaches can reveal various facets of the data and how crucial it is to consider multiple analysis methods to gain a more complete understanding of any investigated phenomenon.

Correlation between respondents' age and the most consulted social media platform

The results of the cross-tabulation analysis of respondents' age and the most consulted social media platform showed that Instagram was particularly popular among respondents between the ages of 18 and 25, whereas Facebook and YouTube were more uniformly distributed across the different age groups. Respondents over 36 showed an increasing affinity for Pinterest and other social media sites. Despite clear trends in platform preferences depending on the age, the statistical tests revealed no significant differences, suggesting that personal factors other than age may influence social media choices (see Table 16).

Taking into account the significance of the chi-square tests and the distribution of participants' responses, age-based trends in social media preferences were identified, although they were not statistically significant. In fact, significance values of 0.120, 0.071, and 0.211, as observed in Table 17, indicate that these trends are not strong enough to confirm there is a definitive relationship between age and preferred social media.

H2: There is no association between respondents' age and the most consulted social media platform.

Although there are visible trends in the choice of social media platforms based on age, these are not statistically significant. This implies that other personal or contextual factors, aside from age, may have a greater influence on individuals' choices of social media platforms. The differences observed in preferences could be of interest for future research or marketing strategies, but they are not established as causal relationships based on age according to the current data.

Table 15. Symmetric measures.

Description		Value	Asymptotic standard error ^a	Approximate T ^b	Approximate significance
Interval by Interval	Pearson's R	-.233	.070	-3.486	<.001 ^c
Ordinal by ordinal	Spearman correlation	-.262	.071	-3.956	<.001 ^c
No. of valid cases		214			

^aNot assuming the null research questions. ^bUsing the asymptotic standard error assuming the null research questions. ^cBased on normal approximation. Source: Data processed using IBM SPSS Statistics.

Table 16. Age vs the most consulted social media platform.

Social media platform		Age			Total
		18–25 years old	26–36 years old	Over 36 years old	
Facebook	Count	17	11	5	33
	% within SM_Most_Consulted	51.5%	33.3%	15.2%	100.0%
	Adjusted residual	.3	.2	-.6	
YouTube	Count	13	7	8	28
	% within SM_Most_Consulted	46.4%	25.0%	28.6%	100.0%
	Adjusted residual	-.3	-.8	1.4	
Instagram	Count	73	42	22	137
	% within SM_Most_Consulted	53.3%	30.7%	16.1%	100.0%
	Adjusted residual	1.6	-.5	-1.5	
Pinterest	Count	0	2	2	4
	% within SM_Most_Consulted	0.0%	50.0%	50.0%	100.0%
	Adjusted residual	-2.0	.8	1.6	
Other	Count	2	6	4	12
	% within SM_Most_Consulted	16.7%	50.0%	33.3%	100.0%
	Adjusted residual	-2.3	1.4	1.3	
Total	Count	105	68	41	214
	% within SM_Most_Consulted	49.1%	31.8%	19.2%	100.0%

Source: Data processed using IBM SPSS Statistics.

Correlation between respondents' educational attainment and their use of social media to research products or services

The correlation between educational attainment and the use of social media to research products or services suggests that both professionals and students use these platforms in a similar way. Although a slightly higher percentage of students (55.1%) reported using them, the difference with graduates (44.9%) was not found to be statistically significant, as indicated by the chi-square values (3.598) and their significance (0.165). This implies that the propensity to use social media to research potential purchases is independent of consumers' educational attainment, proving to be a common practice among both students and professionals (see [Tables 18 and 19](#)).

Based on the symmetric measures presented in [Table 20](#)—a Pearson's R of 0.096 and a Spearman correlation coefficient of 0.064, along with their approximate significances (0.163 and 0.352, respectively)—a weak or not significant correlation was observed between educational attainment and the use of social media to research products or services. This finding supports the idea that using social media to research products or services is a typical practice that does not significantly differ depending on individuals' educational background.

H3: There is no association between respondents' educational attainment and their use of social media to research products or services.

The analysis confirms that using social media to research products or services is a typical behavior observed among both students and professionals, irrespective of their educational attainment. This lack of significant difference suggests that factors other than educational background might be influencing this behavior, and that social media serves as a universally accessible research tool for consumers of various educational levels.

Table 17. Chi-square test – age vs social media.

	Value	Df	Asymptotic significance (2-sided)
Pearson's chi-square	12.766 ^a	8	.120
Likelihood ratio	14.431	8	.071
Linear-by-linear association	1.565	1	.211
No. of valid cases	214		

^aFive cells (33.3%) have an expected count of less than 5. The minimum expected count is .77. *Source:* Data processed using IBM SPSS Statistics.

Table 18. Educational attainment vs use of social media to research products or services.

		Educational attainment		
Description		Student	Graduate	Total
Yes	Count	109	89	198
	% within SM_Research	55.1%	44.9%	100.0%
	Adjusted residual	.9	-.9	
No	Count	6	4	10
	% within SM_Research	60.0%	40.0%	100.0%
	Adjusted residual	.4	-.4	
Other	Count	1	5	6
	% within SM_Research	16.7%	83.3%	100.0%
	Adjusted residual	-1.9	1.9	
Total	Count	116	98	214
	% within SM_Research	54.2%	45.8%	100.0%

Source: Data processed using IBM SPSS Statistics.

Table 19. Chi-square test – Educational attainment vs use of social media to research products or services.

	Value	Df	Asymptotic significance (2-sided)
Pearson's chi-square	3.598 ^a	2	.165
Likelihood ratio	3.822	2	.148
Linear-by-linear association	1.947	1	.163
No. of valid cases	214		

^aThree cells (50.0%) have an expected count of less than 5. The minimum expected count is 2.75. *Source:* Data processed using IBM SPSS Statistics.

Table 20. Symmetric measures.

Description		Value	Asymptotic standard error ^a	Approximate T ^b	Approximate significance
Interval by interval	Pearson's R	.096	.064	1.398	.163 ^c
Ordinal by ordinal	Spearman correlation	.064	.068	.933	.352 ^c
No. of valid cases		214			

^aNot assuming the null research questions. ^bUsing the asymptotic standard error assuming the null research questions. ^cBased on normal approximation. Source: Data processed using IBM SPSS Statistics.

Discussion

The analysis of the data obtained from the administered questionnaire supports the six research questions in this study. As indicated by the demographic characteristics of the participants, the majority of them were young women, primarily students in fields related to management and technology. These demographics provided a crucial background for comprehending how these participants use social media in their decision-making process (Mensah et al., 2023). For instance, preference for particular academic programs, like administrative management, suggests a potential relationship between educational attainment and purchasing preferences, which is consistent with findings reported by Zhang et al. (2023).

In terms of social media usage, Instagram was found to be the most consulted platform, highlighting the importance of visual marketing strategies. While most people trust the information that businesses post on social media (Sharma et al., 2023), a part of the population in this study expressed mistrust, which underscores the need for authenticity in corporate communications, as also echoed by Techinakarawin and Sun (2023). Likewise, the positive perception of social media's ability to facilitate product comparisons emphasizes the important role they play in consumer decision-making, a notion also asserted by L. Sun et al. (2023).

Based on the collected data, a significant percentage of participants (47.2%) agreed or strongly agreed that social media offers enough information to help them make informed purchase decisions. Particularly, Instagram was found to be the most popular platform for obtaining information about products or services before making a purchase, followed by Facebook and YouTube (Vila-Boix et al., 2024). Indeed, this preference for visual platforms underscores the importance of visual strategies in digital marketing (Olfat et al., 2024). Moreover, although the information that businesses post on social media is generally seen as trustworthy, 18.3% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement, which emphasizes the need for authenticity in corporate communications.

Regarding the key factors that consumers take into account when researching products or services on social media, participants were found to place a high value on the number of followers and a company's diverse information channels. Also, consumers' purchase decisions were found to be influenced by aspects such as companies' online presence and their perceived popularity on social media. Even though other factors like recommendations from public figures and product design may exert some impact, they were not found to have a decisive influence in consumers' purchase decisions when compared to a company's presence across various media and its follower count (Moreira et al., 2023; Olfat et al., 2024).

The results of the cross-tabulation analysis revealed no statistically significant differences in the value placed on a diverse online presence between men and women. However, we identified a subtle trend, indicating that women could give this aspect a little less weight than men do. Additionally, no statistically significant differences were observed between age and social media preferences, suggesting that platform preferences may be more influenced by personal factors than by age. Lastly, the use of social media to research products or services was found to be a common practice both among students and professionals, with no significant differences between these two groups.

Regarding the reliability and validity of the obtained results, the relevance of the participants' responses concerning the use of social media in consumers' decision-making process is highlighted. The results showed a high and reliable internal consistency of the questions used, supported by a Cronbach's alpha coefficient exceeding 0.7 in all questions related to the role of social media in the decision-making process. This indicates that the questions used to measure consumers' perception and behavior are consistent and reliable.

Furthermore, chi-square analysis revealed some interesting trends regarding demographic variables and consumer behavior in the context of social media use. Although no significant associations were

found between gender and the evaluation of companies' online presence on various media platforms, nor between educational level and the use of social media to research products or services, clear trends in social media platform preference were observed according to respondents' age. However, these trends did not reach statistical significance.

On the other hand, the emerging landscape of social media platforms has sparked significant interest in their potential impact on consumer behavior. Understanding the nuanced dynamics of these platforms and their potential influence on consumer behavior can offer valuable insights into future trends. Firstly, research by Hajli (2019) and Moslehpour et al. (2020) underscores the importance of surface credibility in shaping initial consumer impressions, directly impacting user satisfaction and purchase intention. This concept revolves around users' trust in a platform and its ability to enhance their confidence through various strategies, such as navigability and visual appeal. Moreover, the pre-purchase stage, significantly influenced by social media, is crucial in shaping subsequent consumer activities, including post-purchase evaluation and decision-making.

Additionally, Dankwa (2021) suggests a shift towards consumers favoring ads that provide detailed information and novelty over emotionally appealing advertisements. The significance of browsing innovative products and information sharing in influencing purchase intention is highlighted by Kijek et al. (2020), further underlining the evolving landscape of consumer decision-making. Furthermore, the role of social ties and entertainment in influencing purchase intention, as demonstrated by Moslehpour et al. (2020) and L. Sun et al. (2023), respectively, underscores the multifaceted nature of consumer behavior on social media platforms. Leveraging influencers and personalized content, as noted by Holliman and Rowley (2014) and Liu et al. (2023), respectively, presents opportunities for brands to establish direct connections with consumers, enhancing their purchasing decisions.

Considering the significance of trust in online markets, as highlighted by Le et al. (2022), and the impact of educational background on purchase decisions, as suggested by Oude Ophuis and Steenkamp (1987) and Khan and Chawla (2014), it becomes evident that social media's influence extends across various facets of consumer behavior. This prompts the formulation of research questions aimed at understanding how social media influences consumers' product research, choice of platforms, and ultimately, purchase decisions. Taking the above into account, Table 21 presents a comparative analysis among the social media platforms TikTok, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook in terms of user quantity, content type, and buying and selling options.

The social media platforms TikTok, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook reveals a diversity of features reflecting their unique focus in the digital market. While TikTok stands out for its dynamic and entertaining visual content, Instagram offers a visually rich experience and integrated purchasing options. WhatsApp, initially a messaging platform, is evolving towards e-commerce, while Facebook remains a versatile platform spanning from traditional posts to buy and sell groups. These differences underscore the importance of understanding consumer preferences and tailoring marketing strategies based on specific platforms to maximize impact on consumer behavior and purchasing decisions.

Finally, the use of multimedia content before making purchases is essential for people in general in the digital age. Social networks and other online platforms play a crucial role in purchasing decisions, as they allow access to a wide range of information about products and services (Aisyah, 2023). People spend a significant amount of time online, exploring multimedia content such as photos, videos, and reviews on various platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter. This behavior greatly influences their purchasing decisions, supported by studies highlighting the influence of social media and online content on consumer behavior (M. Ali et al., 2023; Bargoni et al., 2023; Goldring & Azab, 2021; Kelm & Ibrahim, 2023; Savitri et al., 2022; Pop et al., 2022).

Theoretical contributions to the field's development

This document's theoretical contribution to the field is centered on six main elements. First, it questions the effectiveness of traditionally emotional advertising over information-rich and novel advertisements, which are preferred by consumers over emotional ones. Second, the influence of education on purchasing decisions marks a significant advance in understanding current consumer behavior. The finding that educated consumers prioritize ethical criteria and are capable of processing product information challenges the existing comprehension of consumer decision-making processes. Third, the study highlights the

Table 21. Comparison among the different social media platforms.

Characteristics	TikTok	Instagram	WhatsApp	Facebook
Number of Users	High	Very High	Extremely High	Extremely High
Type of Content	Short videos, dance trends, entertainment	Photos, videos, stories, visually appealing content	Text messages, voice and video calls, multimedia file sharing	Text posts, photos, videos, links, events, groups
Buying and Selling Options	Native advertising, links to external websites, affiliate links	In-app purchases, online shops, advertising, affiliate links	Not essentially an e-commerce platform, but payment and purchasing features are being added	Marketplace, advertising, affiliate links, buy and sell groups

Source: Own work based on literature review.

importance of social ties in digital-era purchasing intentions, indicating that the strength of these ties can significantly influence perception and purchasing decisions. Fourth, an observed growing integration between e-commerce and social media suggests a shift towards a more integrated role of these platforms in the consumer buying experience. Fifth, the impact of social media's omnichannel trend establishes that social media influences all stages of the consumer purchasing decision, countering the notion that social media effects are limited to certain phases of the buying process. Finally, the sixth point addresses consumers' marked preferences for visual and digital content on platforms like Instagram for pre-purchase research, emphasizing the importance of visual strategies in digital marketing.

To conclude, [Table 22](#) shows the comparison of elements found in the literature regarding cultural and economic aspects, as well as the use and influence of social media on purchase decision-making, which can vary significantly depending on culture and economics. This highlights the opportunities for companies to adapt their social media marketing strategies to the specific characteristics of each audience to achieve their brand positioning and customer loyalty goals.

This study confirms the relevance of using social media in pre-purchase decision-making, especially among individuals with higher education or in the process of studying. These findings support the idea that social media plays a fundamental role in forming superficial credibility, influencing users' trust in a platform and their self-confidence through strategies such as creating external and internal stimuli (Zhu, 2020). Likewise, our results support the importance of company-generated information on social media for strengthening relationships with consumers (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2015), as well as the crucial role of influencers in creating persuasive content that facilitates purchase decisions (Liu et al., 2023).

The findings regarding the trustworthiness of information posted on social media align with Priester and Petty (2003), who emphasized the influence of spokesperson trustworthiness on message elaboration and advertising effectiveness. Similarly, the impact of social media platforms on purchase decisions relates to the results obtained by Venkatesh et al. (2012), who extended the unified theory of acceptance and use of technology to understand consumer acceptance and use of information technology. Furthermore, this study sheds light on the key factors influencing purchase decisions on social media. While previous research has highlighted the role of company-generated content in strengthening consumer relationships (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2015), this study provides specific examples, such as the use of influencers on social media, which align with the findings of Liu et al. (2023) regarding the role of influencers in creating persuasive content that facilitates purchasing decisions.

Lastly, the findings regarding consumers' preferences for specific social media platforms and their influence on purchasing decisions align with broader theoretical debates in consumer behavior. The preference for Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube for researching products or services indicates the significance of these platforms in consumers' decision-making process, which is in line with existing literature highlighting the impact of social media on consumer behavior (Ali & Naushad, 2023).

Thus, this study contributes to existing literature by confirming that social media has a significant impact on pre-purchase decision-making. By directly linking the findings to the theoretical framework and relevant literature, the understanding of how factors such as superficial credibility, company-generated content, and influencer influence affect purchase decisions in a social media context has been strengthened. It is important to mention a key limitation, which is the sample focused on individuals with higher education or in the process of studying, limiting the generalizability of the findings to the general population. Additionally, the self-reported nature of the data could introduce biases in the responses.

Table 22. Economic and cultural elements comparison.

Aspect	Study in colombia	Collectivist cultures	Individualist cultures	Emerging economies
Popular Platforms	Instagram, YouTube, Facebook	Facebook, Line, WeChat	Instagram, YouTube, Twitter	Facebook, WhatsApp
Social Influence	High, with a focus on reviews and comments	Extremely high, with emphasis on community	High, with a focus on authenticity and individual opinions	High, with a focus on groups and local communities
Trust In Information	High	Variable, depends on the source within the community	High, especially in sources considered authentic	Variable, with a tendency to trust local or known sources
Product Comparison	Active, through multiple platforms	Less common, trust in community-approved options	Very active, with a focus on quality and value	Less active, may be limited by technology access
Influencer Effectiveness	Moderate	High, if aligned with cultural values	High, if perceived as authentic and transparent	Moderate, influenced by local relevance and knowledge
Marketing Strategies	Authentic and quality content	Personalization according to cultural preferences	Personalization and authenticity in content	Adaptation to technological accessibility and local preferences

Source: Own work based on literature review and analysis of the results.

On the other hand, the study could contribute to the framework of the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) by incorporating social media as a significant factor influencing consumers' attitudes and subjective norms towards purchasing decisions (Ajzen, 1991; Sultan et al., 2020). Specifically, the theory could be expanded to include a new construct related to the impact of social media content on consumers' perception of product desirability and social approval (Qi & Ploeger, 2021), which in turn influences their purchase intentions. Additionally, the results of this study indicate that the Technology Acceptance Model (Almulla, 2021) could be extended to consider the influence of social media on consumers' perception of the usefulness and ease of use of products or services. This extension could include a new pathway explaining how exposure to product information on social media enhances consumers' perception of the product's usefulness (Yahia & Ahmed, 2016) and convenience, thereby increasing their likelihood of adopting it.

However, these limitations could be addressed in future research, where several directions are suggested. It would be beneficial to expand the sample to include a wider variety of participants and examine how factors such as age, gender, and education level influence purchase decisions on social media. Additionally, it would be interesting to explore how cultural differences affect the perception of superficial credibility and the influence of social media on purchase decisions.

Conclusions and recommendations

This study investigated the impact of social media on purchase decisions among both current and future professionals. Using a hybrid methodology that combined qualitative and quantitative methods, we found that 92.5% of the study population use social media as their primary source of information before making a purchase decision, with the three most popular platforms being Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook. This study also shows how social media has evolved into a crucial tool for making decisions about what to buy and how it affects consumers' choice of products and services. This was constantly observed across both genders and age groups, demonstrating its pervasive and universal influence. Additionally, attention is drawn to the relevance of reviews and comments on these sites, which play a key role in shaping user opinions and purchase decisions.

In light of these findings, companies have a unique opportunity to maximize their digital marketing strategies. In addition to improving communication with customers, concentrating on producing interesting and pertinent material for social media platforms would allow them to better understand their preferences and behaviors. As a result, businesses would be better able to adapt their products and services to better suit the demands and expectations of the current market.

Moreover, our analysis revealed the importance of maintaining a varied online presence and customizing marketing strategies to the specific characteristics of each social media platform, which is crucial to optimize their influence in consumer decision-making. In this regard, we emphasize the following six key aspects:

1. Social media's influence depending on consumers' demographic characteristics: The differences we observed in the use and influence of social media platforms among various age groups and both genders reveal the need for more personalized and segmented marketing strategies.
2. Impact of influencers and trends: We observed a decline in the impact of influencers on consumer decision-making, as many respondents reported that these individuals have little to no bearing on their purchase decisions. Despite this, we find it essential to continue monitoring their influence because using these public figures for brand positioning is still a common way for businesses to gain more recognition and legitimacy. This issue raises the prospect of a change in how consumers view influencer marketing, which makes it necessary to adjust marketing strategies to new trends and shifting consumer behaviors.
3. Integrating social media with e-commerce: Our findings suggest that social media and e-commerce are becoming more integrated, which may give companies who use both platforms in their sales efforts a competitive advantage.
4. Impact on brand loyalty: In addition to its influence on initial purchase decisions, social media plays a pivotal role in shaping long-term brand loyalty. To accomplish this, building online communities and maintaining continuous interaction with customers is key.
5. Challenges with privacy and trust: As social media is increasingly being used as a marketing tool, there have been concerns about data privacy and consumer trust. To navigate these challenges, brands need to be transparent and ethical in handling social media data.
6. This study emphasized how social media is becoming increasingly important in marketing and consumer decision-making, offering insightful information to businesses trying to adapt and prosper in the ever-changing digital landscape of today.

Regarding on the implications of the results presented, particularly in contrast to the existing literature, several key points emerge. First and foremost, majority of respondents (92.5%) reported using social media to research products or services before making a purchase decision. This underscores the pervasive influence of social media platforms as essential tools for consumer decision-making, aligning with the literature's emphasis on the increasing importance of digital channels in shaping consumer behavior. Also, based on the results obtained, it is possible to suggest as practical implications that companies could enhance their strategies by leveraging the specific features of each platform (for example, the visual appeal of Instagram) based on data indicating platform preferences. Additionally, companies could integrate these suggestions within current market trends and digital marketing strategies, detailing the adjustments they need to make to their social media marketing according to the demographic preferences identified in the study.

Secondly, the preference for specific social media platforms, notably Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, for pre-purchase research highlights the significance of platform-specific characteristics in influencing consumer behavior. Instagram's dominance, attributed to its visual-centric nature and high user engagement, suggests that factors such as content format and interaction dynamics play a crucial role in facilitating product discovery and evaluation. This finding adds granularity to the literature by emphasizing the nuanced relationship between platform features and consumer engagement. Furthermore, the level of trust placed in information posted by businesses on social media, with over half of the respondents indicating varying degrees of trust, raises important considerations regarding the credibility and authenticity of online content. While social media offers a wealth of information for consumers, the issue of trustworthiness remains a concern, echoing discussions in the literature about the need for transparency and accountability in digital marketing practices.

Additionally, the positive perception of social media's role in facilitating product comparisons and providing sufficient information for informed purchase decisions underscores the platforms' utility as comprehensive shopping companions. However, the presence of dissenting voices and the variability in opinions highlight the complexity of consumer trust and information evaluation in the digital landscape, suggesting avenues for future research to explore factors influencing consumer skepticism and discernment. The examination of demographic factors such as gender, age, and educational attainment in relation to social media usage patterns offers valuable insights into the heterogeneity of consumer behavior. While no significant differences were found based on gender or educational background,

age-related trends in platform preferences suggest evolving consumption habits across demographic segments.

Throughout the study, it is evident that the use of social media significantly impacts consumers' purchasing decision-making process. The findings suggest that consumers use platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube to research products or services before making a purchase decision. Furthermore, trust in information posted by companies on social media influences purchase decisions, as does the ability to compare products across different platforms. These results have important implications for consumer behavior theory and digital marketing. Some theories, such as trust-based consumer behavior theory and social media influence theory in purchase decisions, could be refined and expanded in light of these findings. For example, social media influence theory could be enriched by considering the role of different social platforms in purchase decision-making.

In relation to the practical implications of the results presented, suggest that social media plays a significant role in consumers' decision-making process, especially in pre-purchase research. The high proportion of respondents using social media platforms to gather information about products or services reflects the importance of these platforms as research tools. This suggests that businesses can leverage social media as effective channels to reach their target audience and provide relevant content that influences purchasing decisions. Furthermore, the overall trust in the information provided by businesses on social media highlights the importance of maintaining an authentic and transparent presence on these platforms to establish positive relationships with consumers.

As practical limitations, the sample may not be fully representative of the general population, which could affect the generalization of the results. Additionally, the study primarily focused on the most popular social media platforms, overlooking other emerging platforms that could have a significant impact on consumer behavior. Future research could address these limitations by using more diversified samples and exploring a wider range of social media platforms, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how social media influences consumer purchasing decisions.

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Authors' contributions

Authors contribution in the paper has been specified as follows: Conceptualization, JAMU and LAMR; Literature Review, JAMU; Methodology, VGP and JAMU.; software, VGP and JAMU; Data Analysis, JAMU and LAMR; Draft Written and Conclusion, VGP and JAMU.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study by diligently accepting the form verbally. Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study by diligently accepting the form verbally. In addition, the initial section of the study included the declaration of the data processing policy and the written declaration regarding the informed consent of each participant where they declare that they participated voluntarily in the study and recognize each component of it. If verification of this consent is required, it may be requested from the main and corresponding author of this study.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Data availability statement

The data presented in this study will be available upon request from the corresponding author.

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