

The influence of social media on consumer purchase decisions in Italy: a category-based analysis

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The increasing pervasiveness of social media has reshaped consumer decision-making dynamics (Morrison et al., 2009; Appel et al., 2020), raising important questions regarding the differential influence these platforms have across product categories (Cherubini, 2015; Leung et al., 2015). This paper investigates the extent to which social media influences the purchasing decisions of Italian consumers, adopting a behavioural perspective grounded in consumer decision theory and social influence frameworks. Drawing on data from *Stetoscopio – Il sentire degli Italiani* (2024), which comprises two waves of nationally representative CAWI-based surveys (N = 1,000 each), the study applies both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques — including chi-square tests — to examine the relationship between product typologies and perceived social media influence. Results indicate that 65% of respondents report being influenced by social media in their purchasing decisions, rising to 83% among 25–34-year-olds and 92% among 18–24-year-olds. The most affected categories include clothing and footwear (37%), travel (28%), and consumer electronics (28%). In contrast, primary goods (i.e., groceries and home maintenance) display lower but statistically significant influence. These findings contribute to the literature on digital consumer behaviour by demonstrating the uneven impact of social media across consumption domains. The study argues that excellence in digital marketing requires segment-specific strategies that reflect the symbolic and functional value of different product types.

Keywords: Social media influence; consumer behaviour; purchasing decisions; product categories; Italian consumers

1. Introduction

Understanding the impact of social media on consumer behaviour is a crucial challenge for contemporary marketing research. Traditional consumer decision-making models are based on rational choice theory, which presumes individuals act in their self-interest based on complete information and stable preferences (Simon, 1955). However, decades of behavioural studies have demonstrated that consumer choices are affected by emotional, social, and cognitive factors (Kahneman, 2013; Thaler, 2015; Coate & Hofmann, 2022). Among the strongest external influences in today's market are digital platforms and social media.

Social media serve as tools for interpersonal communication and marketing ecosystems (Morrison et al., 2009; Appel et al., 2020). They influence perceptions, enable peer recommendations, and amplify influencers' messages, often operating through behavioural heuristics and social proof (Cherubini & Pattuglia, 2015; Campbell & Farrell, 2020). This influence is especially significant in Italy, where over 67% of the population actively uses social platforms (AGCOM, 2024).

This study examines how social media affects the purchasing decisions of Italian consumers, adopting a behavioural perspective based on consumer decision theory and social influence frameworks. Drawing on data from the 2024 edition of *Stetoscopio – Il sentire degli Italiani* (Evolving Partners, 2024), an Italian representative CAWI survey (N = 1,000), the paper investigates how various categories of consumption – classified using the Consumption Pyramid model – are shaped by users' exposure to social media.

2. Literature review

2.1 Consumer decision-making and the role of external influences

Consumer behaviour studies have traditionally been influenced by rational choice theories based on neoclassical economics, where decisions are viewed as the result of utility maximisation under perfect information (Simon, 1955; Caputo et al., 2018). Nonetheless, empirical research in behavioural economics and psychology questions these assumptions, highlighting individuals' bounded rationality and the impact of cognitive biases, emotions, and social norms (Kahneman, 2013; Thaler, 2015).

The evolution of the concept of “need” mirrors this paradigm shift. Traditional models—such as Maslow's (1970) hierarchy—portray needs as progressing linearly from physiological to self-actualisation. However, these models have faced criticism for their rigidity and failure to consider socially constructed and context dynamic consumer motivations (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Silvestrelli, 2007). Marketing literature now views needs arising from social interaction and cultural mediation (Bagozzi, 1975; Appel et al., 2020), in particular in digital environments where identity, social comparison, and visibility play crucial roles.

External stimuli have become more and more important as drivers of consumer choices. The consumer decision journey proposed by Court et al. (2009) describes a multi-stage process—from initial exposure to post-purchase evaluation—shaped by communication touchpoints, peer interactions, and perceived trust. Social influence is integral to this journey, particularly through reference groups, brand communities, and social proof (Solomon, 2015; Schau et al., 2009). The roles of informational, utilitarian, and value-expressive influences are well documented (Park & Lessig, 1977), emphasising how peer approval and group belonging can influence preferences and purchasing behaviour.

The social aspects of consumption are increasingly supported by digital platforms, where social interaction serves to co-construct meaning and value (Fournier, 1998). Impulse purchases and experiential choices are often boosted by the presence of others, either in person or online

(Mangleburg et al., 2004), highlighting the importance of examining how social signals embedded in digital content influence what consumers see as necessary or desirable.

2.2 Social media as a behavioural influence in contemporary consumer decision-making

Social media constitute a powerful and widespread ecosystem for consumer influence, transforming the decision-making environment into a dynamic space of real-time communication, algorithmic curation, and peer-generated content (Morrison et al., 2009; Appel et al., 2020; Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok have become arenas where identity is performed, lifestyles are curated, and consumption is woven into cultural narratives.

This transformation is supported by behavioural science theories. According to dual-process models of cognition (Kahneman, 2013), social media environments favour System 1 thinking – fast, intuitive, and emotions driven – making users more vulnerable to heuristic-based decisions and affective cues. Content from influencers exploits parasocial interaction and perceived authenticity to build trust and lower resistance to persuasion (Knoll & Matthes, 2017; Leung et al., 2022). Influencer marketing blurs the line between peer recommendation and advertising, acting on both cognitive and emotional levels to reinforce brand narratives and consumption norms.

Moreover, social media function as cultural infrastructures (Coate & Hofmann, 2022), shaping the symbolic value of goods and the scripts through which individuals assess consumption. Goods with experiential, aesthetic, or symbolic attributes, such as travel, fashion, and personal electronics, are especially influenced by this (De Mooij, 2010), while utilitarian goods may be reinterpreted through the lens of identity or lifestyle.

This dynamic is particularly relevant in the Italian context, where social media usage is high: as of September 2024, 67% of Italians engage with social platforms, with over 39 million active users and an average monthly usage exceeding 70 hours (AGCOM, 2024). This saturation positions social media as communication channels and behavioural environments where consumption priorities and values are constructed and negotiated every day.

Considering these developments, this study investigates how social media influence consumer decision-making in Italy, adopting a behavioural perspective rooted in consumer decision theory and social influence frameworks. It contributes to the literature by exploring how digital environments affect the perceived priority of goods, thereby revealing how the categorisation of products into essential, useful, or discretionary is socially and contextually framed.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data collection

The empirical analysis relies on data from *Stetoscopio – Il sentire degli Italiani* (MPS Evolving Partners, 2024), a longstanding research initiative developed by MPS Evolving Marketing Research to monitor Italian consumers' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours. Since its first edition in 2011, *Stetoscopio* has acted as a national observatory to track the changing dynamics of consumption and how broader economic, political, and social factors influence them (Cavallone & Di Marco, 2012; 2013; 2014; 2015). The study takes a behavioural perspective rooted in well-established decision-making theories (e.g., Kahneman, Maslow), aiming to move beyond simplistic consumption models towards understanding how individuals perceive and react to external influences. This theoretical approach guides the design of the questionnaire and the interpretative framework used in the analysis.

The data were gathered through two waves of online surveys employing the CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing) methodology. The surveys used a structured questionnaire, about 15 minutes long, hosted on a secure platform managed by MPS. Each wave involved an Italian representative sample of 1,000 individuals aged 18 to 70, selected from an online panel. Quotas were set based on gender, age group, and geographical area, using official data from the Permanent Census of the Italian population to ensure proportional representation. This sampling approach allows for generalisation to the adult Italian population and enables subgroup analysis based on demographic characteristics.

3.2 Consumption pyramid framework

The analysis employs the Consumption Pyramid model developed by MPS to classify the products examined in the study. This framework organises goods and services into four hierarchical levels based on perceived necessity and consumer behaviour patterns. The model is based on a qualitative assessment of consumption priorities and reflects both functional and symbolic aspects of consumer decision-making. The four levels are defined as follows:

- Level 4, Essential Consumption: Goods and services deemed indispensable for meeting basic needs. These include obligatory expenditures and are considered non-substitutable.
- Level 3, Useful/Functional Consumption: Purchases associated with everyday life and relational needs. They are strongly linked to personal identity and public image.
- Level 2, Postponable Consumption: Items related to self-development and social interaction. These recurring expenses can be deferred or reduced when necessary.
- Level 1, Accessory Consumption: Non-essential goods regarded as luxuries, indulgences, or occasional treats. Often purchased infrequently and not seen as functionally necessary.

Respondents were asked to rate a set of predefined product categories using a four-point scale, from 1 (accessory) to 4 (essential), indicating the perceived priority of each category. These ratings enabled the classification of each item into one of the four levels and facilitated the analysis of how social media influence varies across different types of consumption.

3.3 Data analysis

To assess how social media influences consumer purchase decisions across various goods categories, the analysis employs a chi-square (χ^2) test of independence. The goal is to determine if there is a statistically significant link between two categorical variables: (1) the classification of each product category into one of the four levels of the Consumption Pyramid (essential, functional, postponable, or accessory), and (2) whether social media are perceived to have affected the respondent's decision to purchase that specific product.

The survey used identical item lists for both variables to ensure comparability. For each product category, respondents indicated the perceived necessity level (based on the pyramid model) and whether their purchase was influenced by content on social media platforms. Besides assessing statistical significance at the conventional $p < .05$ level, the analysis examines individual cells within the contingency tables to identify where the most prominent differences occur. Standardised adjusted residuals detect statistically significant deviations from expected values in each cell, following the guidelines proposed by Sharpe (2015). A residual value exceeding $|2|$ indicates a significant difference between observed and expected frequencies.

The findings are presented using the contingency table generated with IBM SPSS Statistics, where columns display the presence or absence of social media influence (“Yes”/“No”) and rows indicate the corresponding consumption level for each product category. This approach facilitates a clear

understanding of how perceived influence varies by product type and helps test the central hypothesis that social media does not impact all product categories in the same way.

4. Findings

4.1 Overview of social media usage

The 2024 edition of the *Stetoscopio – Il sentire degli Italiani* survey confirms the extensive integration of social media into the daily lives of Italian consumers. Meta-owned platforms dominate the digital landscape, with WhatsApp used by 94% of the population as the main channel for quick and informal communication. Facebook remains present at 76%, while Instagram, which ranks third, shows a slight increase in users. On the other hand, YouTube and X (formerly Twitter) have declined engagement compared to the previous year. These trends underscore the importance of social media as a key source of information and experience within Italian society.

4.2 Perceived influence of social media on purchasing decisions

Overall, 65% of Italian respondents say that their purchasing decisions are influenced – to varying degrees – by content found on social media. The influence is stronger among younger groups, reaching 83% among those aged 25–34 and an even higher 92% in the 18–24 age bracket. The most affected product categories include clothing and footwear (37%), travel and holidays (28%), technology products (28%), and cultural experiences (27%). In contrast, major expenses such as car purchases and home renovations seem to be less affected by social media influence.

4.3 Social Media Influence by Product Category

To explore how the perceived influence of social media varies across different types of goods, a series of chi-square (χ^2) tests of independence were conducted. The aim was to determine whether individuals influenced by social media categorise products in different ways within the four levels of the Consumption Pyramid model. Significant associations were found in several key areas, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Relationship between social media influence and product categorisation. Source: Authors' elaboration based on data from *Stetoscopio – Il sentire degli Italiani* (2024).

Product Category	Pyramid classification	% influenced by social media	% in total sample	χ^2	p-value
<i>Every day and Household Expenses</i>					
Food Shopping	Essential	92.2%	85.1%	15.551	.001
Pet Products	Essential	36.0%	25.9%	10.913	.012
Home Renovation/Maintenance	Useful	53.8%	39.6%	8.290	.040

<i>Technology and Innovation</i>					
Tech Products/IT	Essential	22.0%	15.6%	10.443	.015
New Devices	Essential	25.4%	10.2%	22.285	.000
<i>Leisure and Entertainment</i>					
Recreational activities for children	Essential	28.8%	18.2%	15.002	.002
Events, concerts, sports subscriptions	Essential	8.1%	3.5%	49.024	.000
	Useful	39.8%	20.5%		
<i>Food Services</i>					
Food Delivery	Essential	7.5%	2.3%	21.923	.000
	Useful	26.4%	15.8%		
	Postponable	41.5%	29.3%		
<i>Travel and Mobility</i>					
Vacations/Travel	Useful	37.2%	30.9%	20.222	.000
Weekend Trips	Essential	16.8%	9.3%	26.519	.000
	Useful	38.1%	24.7%		

For food shopping, the proportion of respondents who classified it as an "essential" good increased from 85% in the overall sample to 92% among those influenced by social media ($\chi^2(3, n=1000) = 15.551, p = .001; z = 3.6$). Likewise, 36% of influenced consumers regarded pet products as essential, compared to 26% in the general population ($\chi^2 = 10.913, p = .012; z = 2.9$). Home renovation and maintenance also demonstrated a notable shift, with 54% of influenced respondents rating it as "useful" compared to 40% in the broader sample ($\chi^2 = 8.290, p = .040; z = 2.4$). Technology-related goods also showed different perceptions. Statistically significant associations were observed for both technology/information products ($\chi^2 = 10.443, p = .015$) and new digital devices ($\chi^2 = 22.285, p < .001$). These categories, often linked to identity and lifestyle, were more often rated as "useful" or "postponable" among digitally engaged consumers.

Leisure-related purchases exhibited similar trends. For children's recreational activities, social media influence increased the classification as "useful" from 18% to 29% ($\chi^2 = 15.002, p = .002; z = 2.2$). Entertainment activities (concerts, sports subscriptions) showed the most notable change: the proportion of respondents rating them as "essential" doubled from 4% to 8% ($z = 3.0$), and those considering them "useful" rose from 21% to 40% ($\chi^2 = 49.024, p < .001; z = 5.7$). The effect of social media on perceptions of food delivery services ($\chi^2 = 21.923, p < .001$) spanned multiple levels. Influenced individuals were more likely to classify it as "essential" (8% vs. 2%), "useful" (26% vs. 16%), and "postponable" (42% vs. 29%), indicating a multifaceted reassessment of this service within the consumer hierarchy. Travel and holidays, regarded as discretionary expenses, demonstrated strong links between digital influence and prioritisation. Weekend trips ($\chi^2 = 26.519, p < .001$) and holidays ($\chi^2 = 20.222, p < .001$) were more likely to be perceived as "useful" or even "essential" among social media users, suggesting that digital content may elevate the perceived necessity of leisure travel.

5. Conclusions

This study examined the extent to which social media influences the purchasing decisions of Italian consumers, embedded within consumer decision theory and behavioural economics. By analysing data from the Italian representative *Stetoscopio* study, the research provides empirical evidence of the correlation between perceived product necessity and exposure to social media content. The chi-square tests reveal statistically significant associations between social media influence and how consumers categorise goods within the Consumption Pyramid model.

The findings suggest that consumers who report being influenced by social media are more likely to see certain products as essential or useful compared to those who are not influenced. Notably, food shopping and pet products are more often considered essential, while technology, entertainment, and travel are generally classified as useful. Food delivery stands out with significant classification across essential, useful, and postponable categories, reflecting a multifaceted digital influence. These outcomes imply a broader implication: social media shapes what individuals buy and redefines the perceived function and necessity of different goods. Digital platforms emerge as cultural infrastructures that guide consumption norms and recalibrate priorities. By framing goods in affective or identity-driven narratives, social media amplifies their symbolic value and influences consumers' trade-offs in purchasing decisions.

From a managerial perspective, the results offer some important implications. First, they facilitate more effective targeting by providing insights into how perceived product necessity is mediated by social media exposure. Second, they support the strategic creation of digital content that reinforces product positioning within the consumption hierarchy. Third, they highlight the central role of online influencers in shaping preferences and priorities, validating influencer marketing as a core component of contemporary marketing strategies. Finally, the generational gradient in susceptibility to social media influence suggests that age-sensitive segmentation is crucial for campaign success.

Despite its strengths, this study has certain limitations. The analysis is based on self-reported data, which may be subject to social desirability bias or recall limitations. The cross-sectional design limits causal inferences, and the survey's structure does not account for the influence of specific platforms or content types. Future research could address these limitations by employing longitudinal designs or experimental methods to test causal mechanisms. Furthermore, qualitative approaches might explore consumers' narratives and cognitive frames when assessing products through social media. Finally, investigating the role of different influencer types or platform-specific affordances could provide more detailed insights into how digital environments shape consumption perceptions.

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