



In what ways does social media marketing influence teenage consumers?

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Background

Unlike traditional television or print advertising, social media marketing is often embedded within an algorithmically targeted feed – a collection of contents that is selected from the algorithm of the user's data – with videos or posts that are sensational. In the next two parts, we discuss how social media platforms influence teenage consumers.

Platforms Amplify Influence

Social media platforms amplify influence on consumers through algorithmically targeted feeds that repeatedly expose users to similar content and reinforce perceived credibility through engagement signals. Algorithms track users' behaviors, such as likes and watch times, to prioritize engaging contents (4). Social media marketing can be effective by applying mere exposure effects, which refer to psychological effects where individuals show interest in things that are exposed repeatedly, to consumers (5). In other words, repeated exposure to products causes familiarity to consumers, which eventually leads to perceived trust. Psychology researcher Elizabeth Hopper highlights the effectiveness of the mere exposure effect in shaping consumer preferences, stating that "the more often people have previously been exposed to something, the more they like it." (6) Social proof is when individuals judge credibility based on others' approval (7). Social proof often applies to social media since high engagement causes teens to assume the product is popular and trustworthy (7). Therefore, with the concept of algorithm, mere exposure effects, and social proof, it can be concluded that algorithms amplify perceived credibility.

Why Teens are Vulnerable to Social Media Marketing

Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to social media marketing due to ongoing cognitive development and heightened sensitivity to social influence. Adolescents are developmentally more sensitive to peer approval and identity formation, making them a particularly responsive audience. A study by Casey et al. (2008) on adolescent brain development explains that the regions responsible for decision-making and impulse control are still maturing during adolescence, making teenagers more prone to impulsive and emotionally driven behaviors (4). The study further suggests that this ongoing development limits adolescents' ability to fully evaluate risks, increasing their susceptibility to persuasive marketing (4).

Moreover, a study by Steinberg (2008) on adolescent risk-taking proposes the dual systems model, which suggests that the brain's reward system develops more rapidly than the cognitive control system, leading to increased impulsivity and sensitivity to rewards (8). As a result, adolescents are more likely to prioritize immediate rewards over long-term consequences, making them particularly responsive to engaging and persuasive social media content.

One of the most influential mechanisms of social media marketing is the use of influencers. Research by Su et al. on social media influencers states that parasocial relationships, defined as one-sided psychological connections between audiences and influencers, significantly increase perceived credibility (1). This increased trust then leads to a higher likelihood of consumers purchasing endorsed products.

Even when adolescents recognize persuasive intent in social media content, they remain highly susceptible to its influence. In a study examining adolescents' responses to sponsored influencer videos, van Dam and van Reijmersdal (2019) found that although teenagers can sometimes recognize sponsorship disclosures, this recognition does not necessarily reduce the persuasive impact of the content. (2) Therefore, influencer reliability can enhance purchase intentions, even when advertising intent is acknowledged. (2)

Despite the strong influence of social media marketing, consumers often remain skeptical of online shopping platforms due to perceived risk and lack of reliable information. Consumers often hesitate to trust online shopping platforms, as uncertainty and perceived risk lead many to avoid making purchases. Consumers tend to show distrust especially when platforms lack reliable information, which causes users to view them as low-quality products. (3) This creates a disconnect between the high level of influence social media marketing has on teenagers and the low level of trust associated with online shopping platforms.

Although existing research like Dam and Reijmersdal's confirms that social media marketing affects adolescents' attitudes and behaviors (2), gaps remain in understanding which specific marketing strategies are most influential and how platform design amplifies these effects. Further research is needed to examine the mechanisms like influencer credibility, engagement-based social proof, and advertising literacy. Therefore, this paper explores the relationship between social media marketing strategies and adolescents' purchasing intentions.

Method:

This study uses Pew Research Center teen microdata as the main quantitative source to establish the statistical foundation of adolescent social media use, while Common Sense Media reports are used as secondary contextual sources to interpret the types of marketing formats and digital content teenagers are commonly exposed to.

The Table 1 below, sourced from the Pew Research Center, illustrates the percentage of U.S. teenagers (ages 13-17) who report using specific social media applications or sites over the past decade.

Table 1. Adolescent Social Media Platform Usage (2015-2024)

Year	YouTube	TikTok	Instagram	Snapchat	Facebook	WhatsApp
2015	—	—	52%	41%	71%	—
2022	95%	67%	62%	59%	32%	17%
2023	93%	63%	59%	60%	33%	21%
2024	90%	63%	61%	55%	32%	23%

Note. A dash (—) indicates that the platform was not measured in the survey for that year, not a zero percent usage rate. The 2015 figures were collected during the 2014-15 period. Figures reflect surveys of U.S. teens conducted 2014-2024 (Pew Research Center, 2025).

Analysis of Platform Trends

An analysis of the Pew Research Center’s longitudinal data reveals a distinct shift in the digital environments predominantly occupied by adolescents. As of 2024, YouTube (90%), TikTok (63%), and Snapchat (55%) function as the dominant platforms among U.S. teens. Conversely, legacy platforms such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) have experienced sharp declines in their teenage user bases over the same decade, with Facebook falling from 71% in 2015 to 32% in 2024 and X dropping from 33% to 17%. For the purposes of this study, the dominance of YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat is highly relevant, as these platforms serve as the primary environments where teenage consumers experience repeated, algorithmically curated exposure – the precise conditions under which the only exposure effect and engagement based social proof operate. This establishes a baseline for comparing the marketing-exposure data drawn from Common Sense Media.

Table 2. Near-Constant Social Media Use Among U.S. Teens, by Demographic Group (2024)

The following table reports the percentage of U.S. teenagers (ages 13-17) who demonstrate they visit each platform “almost constantly,” disaggregated by demographic group. This addresses which groups report the highest levels of near-continuous exposure.

Group	TikTok	YouTube	Snapchat	Instagram	Facebook
All U.S. teens	16%	15%	13%	12%	3%
Gender					



Boys	13%	19%	13%	12%	3%
Girls	19%	11%	12%	12%	2%
<i>Race and ethnicity</i>					
White	8%	7%	13%	6%	1%
Black	28%	28%	13%	22%	7%
Hispanic	25%	24%	14%	18%	4%
<i>Age</i>					
13-14	14%	16%	10%	8%	2%
15-17	17%	14%	14%	14%	3%
<i>Household Income</i>					
Less than \$30,000	21%	27%	17%	16%	7%
\$30,000-\$74,999	19%	19%	11%	14%	4%
\$75,000 or more	14%	12%	13%	10%	2%
<i>Community type</i>					
Urban	21%	26%	12%	21%	6%
Suburban	14%	12%	12%	10%	2%
Rural	13%	12%	15%	8%	1%

Note.

White and Black teens include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic; Hispanic teens are of any race. There were not enough Asian respondents to be broken out separately; their responses are included in the general population figures. Those who did not answer are not shown. Data from a survey of U.S. teens conducted Sept. 18–Oct. 10, 2024 (Pew Research Center, 2025).

The demographic breakdown reveals that near-constant exposure is not evenly distributed. Girls report using TikTok almost constantly at higher rates than boys (19% vs. 13%), while the reverse holds for YouTube (19% of boys vs. 11% of girls). The sharpest differences appear by race and ethnicity: 28% of Black and 25% of Hispanic teens report near-constant TikTok use, compared with just 8% of White teens, with parallel gaps on YouTube and Instagram. Near-constant use is also more common among teens in lower-income households and in urban communities. Because near-continuous exposure is the mechanism through which the mere exposure effect and engagement-based social proof operate, these groups may be disproportionately exposed to the persuasive conditions of social media marketing.

Conclusion:

This study set out to examine how social media marketing influences teenage consumers and the extent to which social media shops retain that influence before being perceived as untrustworthy. Drawing on Pew Research Center microdata as a quantitative baseline and Common Sense Media reports as contextual sources, the analysis establishes that adolescents are concentrated on a small number of algorithmically driven platforms — YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat — with a meaningful share reporting near-constant use. These are precisely the environments in which repeated exposure, parasocial influencer relationships, and engagement-based social proof exert their strongest persuasive effects, and adolescents' still-developing cognitive control makes them especially responsive to these mechanisms.

At the same time, the literature reveals a clear tension: while social media marketing is highly effective at shaping adolescent attitudes and purchase intentions, teenage consumers remain skeptical of online shopping platforms when those platforms lack reliable information or signals of credibility. This produces a disconnect between the high influence of social media marketing and the comparatively low baseline of trust extended to online shops. The demographic patterns further suggest that this influence is unevenly distributed, with Black, Hispanic, lower-income, and urban teens reporting the highest levels of near-constant exposure.

Taken together, these findings indicate that the persuasiveness of social media marketing depends less on the volume of exposure alone than on the credibility signals — influencer trust, social proof, and reliable product information — that accompany it. Marketing that pairs high exposure with strong credibility cues is most likely to convert influence into purchasing behavior, whereas platforms that generate exposure without trustworthiness risk being dismissed as low-quality. Future research should test these relationships directly, ideally by measuring adolescents' trust thresholds across specific marketing formats and by incorporating experimental designs that isolate the effect of individual credibility cues. Because this study relies on secondary survey data rather than primary experimental measurement, its conclusions describe associations rather than causal effects — a limitation that a targeted follow-up study could address.

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