

Influence of Social Media Marketing and eWOM on Cosmetic and Fashion Brand Preferences among Female Undergraduate Students in Ikot Ekpene, Akwa Ibom State

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Abstract— This study investigates how social media marketing (SMM) and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) influence cosmetic and fashion brand preferences among female undergraduate students in Ikot Ekpene, Nigeria. The study was hinged on the the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory. The study employed a survey research design with a sample of 388 students drawn from Ritman University and Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic. Findings revealed that 70.1% of respondents reported high awareness of cosmetic and fashion brand marketing on social media, while 61.6% were confident in using these platforms to discover such brands. Engagement was moderately strong, with 55.6% actively interacting with brand content and 47.9% indicating continued interest. However, 33.7% were unwilling to maintain ongoing engagement. Factors influencing brand preference included perceived product quality (52.8%), transactional security (55.2%), and convenience (46.4%). Trust in online brands was more divided, with 47.9% expressing trust and 39.2% expressing distrust. Furthermore, brand preference was most influenced by delivery options (63.9%) and online reviews (53.3%). These findings indicate that while SMM and eWOM effectively enhance awareness and engagement, trust remains a critical barrier. The study recommends that brands prioritise trust-building mechanisms, personalised messaging, and platform-specific strategies to better engage digitally active youth consumers in semi-urban contexts.

Keywords: social media marketing; electronic word-of-mouth; brand preference; female undergraduates; cosmetic and fashion brands.

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INTRODUCTION

As the digital space becomes increasingly hyper-connected, the line between social interaction, consumer behaviour, and marketing communication have become increasingly blurred. The rise of social media marketing (SMM) and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has created new paradigms of influence, compelling both local and international cosmetic and fashion brands to rethink how preferences are formed and loyalty is built. Social media marketing (SMM) refers to the strategic use of social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook to promote products, build brand awareness, and engage customers through direct and often personalized interactions (Felix, Rauschnabel, & Hinsch, 2017). Unlike traditional advertising, SMM is interactive and fosters two-way communication, enabling brands to co-create value with consumers. The effectiveness of SMM lies in its capacity to influence consumer attitudes through relatable content, influencer endorsements, viral trends, and user-generated media. In the fashion and beauty industries, where aesthetic appeal and trend sensitivity are paramount, SMM has become a dominant tool for driving engagement and influencing consumer choices (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Ayibam, 2022).

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is defined as any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former consumers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). eWOM includes product reviews, social media comments, influencer recommendations, and user-shared content—all of which can significantly shape consumer attitudes, perceived credibility, and brand trust (Ismagilova et al., 2020). Compared to traditional word-of-mouth, eWOM is more far-reaching, permanent, and accessible, making it a powerful instrument in shaping consumer behaviour, particularly among digital-native youth. In the context of marketing and consumer behaviour, Brand preference, refers to the extent to which a consumer favours a particular brand over competing alternatives, based on perceived value, satisfaction, and emotional connection (Ebrahim, Ghoneim, & Belk, 2016). In cosmetics and fashion, brand preference is often driven by identity expression, social validation, and peer influence—factors that are amplified in online spaces. Among undergraduate females, brand loyalty is frequently influenced not only by product quality or price but also by the symbolic value conveyed through social media imagery and peer endorsement (Kim & Ko, 2012).

Prior research has shown that social media and eWOM play a central role in shaping young consumers' brand perceptions, especially in fashion and beauty sectors. For instance, a study by Alalwan et al. (2017) found that social media engagement significantly influences consumer trust and purchase decisions. Similarly, Khan, Ahmed, and Zafar (2024) demonstrated that eWOM had a stronger impact on cosmetic purchases than traditional advertising among Nigerian youths. In the Nigerian context,

Isah et al. (2023) observed that university students' fashion choices were largely shaped by what they encountered on platforms like Instagram and TikTok, often prioritizing peer reviews and influencer content over corporate advertisements. These studies underscore the growing interplay between digital influence and consumer preference, yet few have explored these dynamics within semi-urban or culturally specific contexts such as Ikot Ekpene.

Despite the extensive literature on digital marketing's impact, there remains a noticeable gap in understanding how social media marketing and eWOM influence cosmetic and fashion brand preferences specifically among female undergraduate students in Ikot Ekpene, Akwa Ibom State. This demographic is uniquely positioned at the intersection of cultural tradition and digital globalization, yet little empirical attention has been paid to how they negotiate brand choices in such a context. This study seeks to bridge that gap by examining the influence of SMM and eWOM on brand preference among this group. The research will offer localized insights that could guide marketers, educators, and policy makers in designing culturally relevant and ethically grounded marketing strategies.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Cosmetic and fashion brands are capitalising digital evolution by employing social media marketing (SMM) strategies and leveraging electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) to shape brand visibility and consumer loyalty. Despite the growing commercial engagement with this demographic, there remains a growing concern that many young consumers are making brand choices based less on critical evaluation and more on digitally-mediated influence, peer pressure, and curated online content. This has real-world implications, not only in terms of consumer awareness and autonomy but also in how local and international brands engage ethically and effectively with this unique consumer segment.

Over the years, scholars across disciplines have attempted to explore the influence of digital marketing tools on youth consumer behaviour. Studies have examined how social media affects brand awareness, how influencers shape purchasing decisions, and how online reviews build or erode trust in brands. Others have explored how eWOM impacts consumer intention in global and national markets. However, most of these studies are centred on broader populations—such as general youth audiences in major urban cities—or they tend to generalize findings without accounting for the socio-cultural and economic specificities of smaller, yet rapidly developing communities like Ikot Ekpene. As a result, there is limited empirical data that captures the nuanced ways in which female undergraduate students in this region interpret, negotiate, and respond to SMM and eWOM in forming cosmetic and fashion brand preferences.

Therefore, this research aims to examine the ways through which SMM and eWOM influence cosmetic and fashion brand choices. This study seeks to answer the question: To what extent do social media marketing and electronic word-of-mouth influence the cosmetic and fashion brand preferences of female undergraduate students in Ikot Ekpene, and what does this reveal about the nature of digital consumerism in semi-urban Nigeria today?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following questions guide the study:

- i. How aware are female undergraduate students in Ikot Ekpene town of social media marketing efforts by cosmetic and fashion brands?
- ii. To what extent do female undergraduate students in Ikot Ekpene town engage with cosmetic and fashion brands through social media platforms?
- iii. What factors influence female undergraduate students in Ikot Ekpene town to prefer certain cosmetic and fashion brands due to social media marketing and eWOM?
- iv. How do female undergraduate students in Ikot Ekpene town perceive the influence of social media marketing and eWOM on their brand preferences in cosmetics and fashion?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media Marketing (SMM) and eWOM

Social Media Marketing (SMM) refers to the strategic use of platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and others to promote products, engage audiences, and cultivate brand identity. Its interactive nature, spanning sponsored posts, stories, live videos, influencer collaborations, and user-generated content, makes it particularly potent in the realms of fashion and cosmetics, where visual appeal and trend signalling are central. A 2025 study in Nigeria found that SMM significantly enhanced brand visibility and customer engagement within the aerated drinks sector, suggesting strong applicability in consumer-driven markets like beauty and apparel (Akanji, 2025). University students, especially in emerging markets, respond strongly to marketing that is both interactive and visually compelling. Banks et al. (2024) demonstrated that mobile and social-media marketing positively influence Gen Z students' loyalty toward fashion products, highlighting the relevance of digital interaction and brand storytelling in shaping long-term preference (Appel et al., 2020; Jin, Muqaddam & Ryu, 2019).

Nonetheless, the effectiveness of SMM hinges on content quality, authenticity, and cultural resonance. Generic promotional messages often fail to convert engagement into actual purchases, particularly where economic or cultural specificities exist. For instance, Instagram ads increased trend awareness among young Nigerian women but were moderated by factors like price sensitivity, product quality, and brand reputation

(Kapoor et al., 2021; Boateng & Okoe, 2015). This underscores the need for SMM campaigns tailored to local tastes, values, and affordability perceptions.

On the other hand, the electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) encompasses digital content like reviews, comments, recommendations, and user-shared media that influences others' brand perceptions and purchase decisions. Unlike traditional advertising, eWOM is peer-driven and often perceived as credible and relatable (Ismagilova et al., 2020). A recent meta-study emphasized that the credibility of eWOM hinges on perceived product quality, emotional resonance, and the reduction of buying risk—factors that directly affect purchase intent (Erkan & Evans, 2016; Rosario et al., 2020). Further research sheds light on the antecedents of eWOM generation. A 2024 investigation found that individuals' propensity to share eWOM is influenced by personal behaviours (such as social media usage and a desire to evaluate products), while product trust also plays a key role—both factors being predictive of repurchase intention (Lin et al., 2021; Zhang, Lu & Kizildag, 2018).

Simultaneously, brand image and awareness in social networks can be significantly shaped by eWOM activities. A study of Instagram followers discovered that eWOM significantly enhances branding, brand image, and awareness, while exhibiting negligible effects on brand destruction (Balaji, Khong & Chong, 2016). This suggests that positive peer-driven content reinforces brand presence, particularly in peer-dense environments such as university communities.

COBRA CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

The COBRA framework elucidates how consumers interact with brand-related content online through three dimensions: consumption (viewing content), contribution (engaging with content), and creation (generating new brand-related content) (Muntinga, Moorman & Smit, 2011). This tri-dimensional engagement model offers a nuanced lens through which to understand how students in Ikot Ekpene may engage with cosmetic and fashion brands on social media platforms. Consumption includes passive behaviours such as viewing brand posts or influencer content, behaviours that build brand familiarity and awareness. Contribution may involve "liking," commenting, or sharing posts about beauty or fashion brands, thereby reinforcing social validation loops (Schivinski, Christodoulides & Dabrowski, 2016). Creation goes further, where students post their own brand-related content, such as outfit-of-the-day (OOTD) photos or makeup routines, actively shaping brand narratives and influencing others (Gannon & Prothero, 2016; Labrecque et al., 2013).

COBRA's relevance lies in its ability to capture both passive and active dimensions of brand engagement, helping researchers understand which types of social media interactions most strongly impact brand preference. For instance, students who move from mere consumption to creation may exhibit stronger brand affinity and

influence within their peer networks (de Vries, Gensler & Leeflang, 2012). This theoretical framework can help structure analysis of engagement behaviours among female undergraduates in Ikot Ekpene and how they translate into brand preference formation.

Review of Empirical Studies

Empirical research has extensively examined the growing influence of social media marketing (SMM) and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) on consumer behavior, particularly among young and digitally active demographics. This review synthesizes findings from related studies to contextualize the present investigation on cosmetic and fashion brand preferences among female undergraduates. Umoren et al. (2023), in their study titled “The Influence of Social Media on the Globalization of Body-Shaper Advertisements,” explored how global fashion and beauty brands leverage social media for strategic marketing. Through a comparative analysis of traditional versus online advertising, the study found that social media platforms enable dynamic engagement through visuals, testimonials, influencer endorsements, and urgency-inducing phrases. These elements significantly influenced brand perception and consumer interest, particularly among image-conscious audiences. The study highlights how aesthetics and personalized messaging via social media serve as powerful tools in shaping preferences for beauty-related products.

In a more recent study, Umoren (2025) investigated “Organisational Communication via Social Media and Customers’ Perception of Brand Reputation of Commercial Banks in Nigeria.” Though focused on the banking sector, the study provides relevant insights into how digital communication strategies, including social media responsiveness and customer engagement, affect perceived brand value. The study revealed that customers highly exposed to online content perceived their banks as more reputable. By extension, similar digital engagement strategies may be applicable in influencing fashion and cosmetic brand perceptions among university students. Kierian et al. (2021), in their work on “The Influence of WhatsApp Advertisement on the Patronage of Small Business Start-ups in Uyo, Nigeria,” further demonstrated the role of mobile social platforms in driving consumer behaviour. The study, which focused on the post-COVID boom in mobile marketing, identified WhatsApp as a key advertising tool for small-scale businesses. Results showed a direct relationship between WhatsApp-based eWOM and increased patronage, although limited reach and concerns over digital fraud were noted. These findings suggest that even low-cost, peer-driven marketing on platforms like WhatsApp can influence young consumers’ purchasing decisions, particularly in informal fashion and beauty markets.

Akarika, Umoren, and Iwok (2020), while examining “Challenges of Utilising the Key Messages of Coronavirus Campaigns,” found that urban-rural differences in message access via media platforms impacted public perception and behavior. Though in a public health context, the research underscores how digital message exposure is uneven and highlights the importance of platform-specific strategies, which may also apply in targeting female undergraduates in urban areas like Ikot Ekpene. Etumnu et al. (2023) emphasized that social media is not only a communication tool but also a space where identity, lifestyle, and values are negotiated—especially among women. They found that social media platforms offer a participatory avenue for women to engage with issues related to fashion, beauty, and gender representation. This reinforces the idea that female undergraduates, as part of a highly connected and expressive demographic, are particularly responsive to brand messaging that aligns with their identity and peer conversations online.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Uses and Gratifications (U&G) Theory

The Uses and Gratifications (U&G) Theory, originally formulated in the 1940s and formalized by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973), explains why individuals actively select and use specific media to satisfy their personal needs and desires. Contrary to earlier views that saw media consumers as passive recipients, U&G positions individuals as active participants who seek out media channels that fulfill distinct psychological and social gratifications. Over time, this theory has expanded from traditional media to modern digital environments, including social media platforms, where interaction and personalized content are key (Ruggiero, 2000; Sundar & Limperos, 2013).

In the context of cosmetic and fashion brand preferences, U&G theory is instrumental in understanding why female undergraduate students in Ikot Ekpene engage with social media marketing on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. These platforms offer various gratifications: content gratification by providing access to trending beauty and fashion products; process gratification through seamless browsing and interactive features; and social gratification via community engagement, peer recommendations, and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). The theory suggests that students actively use these platforms not only to discover new brands but also to connect socially and express their identities through brand affiliation.

Applying U&G to this study highlights how social media marketing strategies that address these gratifications can influence brand preference. For example, vibrant, authentic content that aligns with students’ aesthetic and social values is more likely to engage them. Moreover, the interactive and community-based nature of eWOM amplifies social gratification, whereby recommendations and shared experiences

significantly impact purchasing decisions. Hence, U&G provides a robust framework for analysing how and why social media marketing and eWOM shape cosmetic and fashion brand preferences among female undergraduates.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a survey research design, suitable for collecting data from a large population within a short timeframe, allowing the researcher to explore the influence of Facebook Marketplace on the purchase of wears among female undergraduate students in Ikot Ekpene. The target population consisted of 12,981 students from Ritman University (481 students) and Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic (12,500 students), with a calculated sample size of 388 using the Taro Yamane formula. A proportionate sampling technique was used to distribute the sample based on population size, resulting in 155 respondents from Ritman University and 233 from Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic. Data were collected using a researcher-structured questionnaire containing both closed- and open-ended questions, covering demographics and study-specific variables. Face validity was established through expert review by the project supervisor, while reliability was confirmed using the test-retest method, yielding a Cronbach’s Alpha above 0.70, indicating strong internal consistency. The researcher personally administered the questionnaires, ensuring ethical compliance through informed consent and confidentiality. Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were used to analyse the data, with Chi-square tests applied to test hypotheses and determine significant relationships between variables.

Data Analysis and Presentation

Table 1: Awareness of Social Media Marketing by Cosmetic and Fashion Brands among Female Undergraduate Students in Ikot Ekpene

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I am aware of cosmetic and fashion brand marketing efforts on social media.	144 (37.1%)	128 (33.0%)	49 (12.6%)	49 (12.6%)	18 (4.6%)
I know how to use social media platforms to discover cosmetic/fashion brands.	104 (26.8%)	135 (34.8%)	96 (24.7%)	28 (7.2%)	25 (6.4%)
I have seen ads or promotions for cosmetic/fashion brands on social media.	105 (27.1%)	127 (32.7%)	105 (27.1%)	35 (9.0%)	16 (4.1%)

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

Table 1 reveals a high level of awareness among respondents regarding cosmetic and fashion brand marketing on social media. A combined 70.1% either strongly agreed or agreed that they are aware of such marketing efforts, indicating significant exposure. Similarly, 61.6% reported knowing how to use social media to discover brands, reflecting practical awareness. The near parity between agreement and neutrality on exposure to advertisements suggests that while awareness is high, engagement with specific campaigns may vary.

Table 2: Engagement with Cosmetic and Fashion Brands on Social Media

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I actively engage with cosmetic/fashion brand content on social media.	155 (39.9%)	61 (15.7%)	104 (26.8%)	48 (12.4%)	20 (5.2%)
I intend to continue interacting with cosmetic/fashion brands via social media.	80 (20.6%)	106 (27.3%)	71 (18.3%)	103 (26.5%)	28 (7.2%)

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

Table 2 shows that while a substantial 55.6% of respondents actively engage with brand content, the intention to continue such engagement is more divided. Only 47.9% expressed intent to continue interacting with brands, compared to 33.7% who disagreed or strongly disagreed. This may suggest a gap between current engagement and long-term consumer loyalty or satisfaction.

Table 3: Factors Influencing Brand Preference Due to Social Media Marketing and eWOM

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I trust cosmetic and fashion brands I discover through social media marketing.	87 (22.4%)	99 (25.5%)	50 (12.9%)	87 (22.4%)	65 (16.8%)
I believe cosmetic/fashion products advertised on social media are of high quality.	111 (28.6%)	94 (24.2%)	91 (23.5%)	62 (16.0%)	30 (7.7%)
Buying cosmetic/fashion products on social media is convenient.	83 (21.4%)	97 (25.0%)	86 (22.2%)	65 (16.8%)	57 (14.7%)
I feel secure making transactions for cosmetic/fashion items via social	123 (31.7%)	91 (23.5%)	99 (25.5%)	49 (12.6%)	26 (6.7%)

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Source: Fieldwork, 2025

Table 3 shows that perceived quality (52.8%) and transactional security (55.2%) emerge as prominent factors influencing trust and purchase intent. Trust itself, however, is more divided—only 47.9% agreed they trust such brands, while 39.2% expressed distrust. Convenience is also appreciated by nearly half the respondents, reinforcing the appeal of social commerce, though a significant proportion remains neutral or uncertain.

Table 4: Perception of Influence of Social Media Marketing and eWOM on Brand Preferences

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Prices of products shown in social media ads influence my brand preferences.	96 (24.7%)	80 (20.6%)	97 (25.0%)	80 (20.6%)	35 (9.0%)
The quality of products shown by brands on social media influences my brand preferences.	103 (26.5%)	82 (21.1%)	87 (22.4%)	66 (17.0%)	50 (12.9%)
Reviews and ratings on social media influence my brand choice in cosmetics/fashion.	120 (30.9%)	87 (22.4%)	106 (27.3%)	56 (14.4%)	19 (4.9%)
Delivery options shown in cosmetic/fashion brand posts influence my buying decisions.	159 (41.0%)	89 (22.9%)	60 (15.5%)	42 (10.8%)	38 (9.8%)

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

Table 4 reveals that among the influencing factors, delivery convenience (63.9%) and eWOM indicators like reviews (53.3%) have the strongest impact on brand preferences. While quality and price also play notable roles, the responses are more balanced, indicating that these are necessary but not singularly decisive factors. This highlights the multifaceted nature of online brand influence among female undergraduates.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Research Question 1: How aware are female undergraduate students in Ikot Ekpene town of social media marketing efforts by cosmetic and fashion brands?

There was a high level of awareness among female undergraduate students. Specifically, 70.1% of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that they are aware of cosmetic and fashion brand marketing efforts on social media. Additionally, 61.6%

agreed or strongly agreed that they know how to use social media platforms to discover such brands, while 59.8% have seen related promotions or ads online. This indicates that social media serves as a key exposure point for cosmetic and fashion brand messaging among young women in the study location. The ubiquity of platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok likely contributes to this widespread exposure. The awareness levels observed here align with the findings of Duffett (2017), who concluded that social media significantly increases brand visibility among youths.

The awareness levels observed here align with the findings of Duffett (2017), who concluded that social media significantly increases brand visibility among youths. This finding is supported by that of Umoren et al. (2023) that global fashion and beauty brands use visuals, testimonials, and urgency-inducing messages to appeal to image-conscious audiences, thereby boosting awareness and brand perception. Their emphasis on personalised messaging and influencer engagement supports the current findings, indicating that such strategies are particularly effective among university students in fashion and beauty markets. From a theoretical standpoint, this aligns with the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory, which posits that users actively seek media content that satisfies specific needs. In this case, the need for information and trend awareness drives female students to engage with branded content, thus increasing their awareness of marketing efforts.

Research Question 2: To what extent do female undergraduate students in Ikot Ekpene town engage with cosmetic and fashion brands through social media platforms?

Over fifty-five percent (55.6%) of respondents actively engage with cosmetic and fashion brand content on social media, while 47.9% intend to continue doing so. However, a notable 33.7% expressed that they disagree or strongly disagree with continuing such engagement. This suggests that while current engagement is moderately strong, it does not necessarily translate into sustained loyalty or long-term interaction. Temporary engagement may be influenced by trends, promotional campaigns, or peer pressure rather than genuine brand attachment.

The result supports Ashley and Tuten (2015), who noted that user engagement with brands on social media often fluctuates based on perceived relevance and entertainment value of the content. In addition, Etumnu et al. (2023) observed that social media platforms serve as spaces where identity, lifestyle, and values are constantly negotiated—especially among women. This supports the view that engagement with fashion and cosmetic content may be part of a broader process of identity exploration and self-expression. The U&G theory further explains this behaviour as individuals engaging with media that provides social interaction and

identity reinforcement, both of which are significant motivators for young adults exploring cosmetics and fashion trends.

Research Question 3: What factors influence female undergraduate students in Ikot Ekpene town to prefer certain cosmetic and fashion brands due to social media marketing and eWOM?

The most influential factors include perceived product quality (52.8%), transactional security (55.2%), and convenience (46.4%). However, trust in brands discovered through social media was more divided: 47.9% trusted such brands, while 39.2% expressed distrust. This illustrates that while social media marketing and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) can positively influence perceptions of quality and ease of access, they are less successful in building trust. Students may remain sceptical of brands they encounter online due to concerns about authenticity or product misrepresentation. These findings resonate with Cheung et al. (2012), who found that eWOM significantly affects consumer decisions but is moderated by the credibility of the source. Similarly, Kierian et al. (2021) demonstrated that WhatsApp-based eWOM increased patronage among youth consumers, but digital fraud and limited trust were concerns. This supports the current observation that while students value convenience and access, trust barriers still persist. The U&G theory here suggests that the gratification of convenience and efficiency is met through social media commerce, explaining why students perceive buying online as useful despite lingering concerns over trust.

Research Question 4: How do female undergraduate students in Ikot Ekpene town perceive the influence of social media marketing and eWOM on their brand preferences in cosmetics and fashion?

Undergraduate students' brand preferences are shaped most significantly by delivery options (63.9%) and online reviews/ratings (53.3%). Product quality (47.6%) and price (45.3%) also influence preferences but to a slightly lesser degree. This highlights the growing importance of social proof (e.g. user reviews and ratings) and logistical convenience in shaping purchase decisions. Students appear to value what others say about the brand and whether they can easily receive the product—more so than the brand's promotional claims. This perception aligns with studies such as Ismagilova et al. (2020), which demonstrate that peer reviews and brand interactions via social media are increasingly trusted over traditional advertisements. Furthermore, Umoren (2025), though focused on the banking sector, found that customers who engaged more with social media communication perceived the brand as more reputable—suggesting similar dynamics in cosmetics and fashion. This supports the notion that consistent digital communication fosters a sense of reliability and brand

preference. Akarika, Umoren, and Iwok (2020) also highlighted how access to media platforms affects message impact—relevant here in understanding that effective brand preference formation requires targeted, platform-specific strategies suited to urban audiences like those in Ikot Ekpene. According to the U&G theory, the gratification of decision support (i.e., using others' opinions to guide personal choices) plays a pivotal role in shaping consumer behaviour.

CONCLUSION

In an era where digital connectivity shapes virtually every facet of consumer behaviour, social media has emerged not merely as a promotional platform but as a powerful influence on identity, lifestyle, and brand loyalty particularly among young women. Among female undergraduate students in Ikot Ekpene, social media marketing and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) are no longer peripheral to consumer choice; they are central mechanisms through which brand awareness, engagement, trust, and preference are constructed. This study has provided clear empirical evidence that awareness of cosmetic and fashion brand marketing efforts via social media is exceptionally high, with over 70% of respondents confirming active exposure. Yet, while many engage with branded content (55.6%), intentions for continued engagement reveal a more cautious or conditional loyalty. Critical factors influencing brand preference—such as perceived product quality, transaction security, and the credibility of online reviews—underscore the nuanced ways digital media inform purchasing decisions. Interestingly, peer-driven content like reviews and delivery assurances proved more influential than traditional indicators like pricing or generic adverts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study therefore recommends that:

- i. Cosmetic and fashion brands should intensify personalised and visually engaging social media campaigns to maintain the high levels of awareness observed among female undergraduate students. This includes leveraging influencers, testimonials, and trend-based content tailored to youthful, image-conscious audiences.
- ii. Interactive, identity-relevant, and trend-driven content should be developed to sustain and deepen user engagement. Brands must go beyond initial attraction and foster ongoing relationships through consistent and relatable storytelling.
- iii. Trust-building mechanisms, such as transparent customer reviews, verified user-generated content, and secure payment systems, should be implemented, as convenience alone does not guarantee consumer confidence in social media marketing and e-commerce transactions.

- iv. Brands should focus on strengthening social proof and logistical convenience, such as showcasing positive reviews, offering responsive customer service, and providing flexible delivery options, to influence and reinforce brand preference.

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