



From Impulsive Consumption to Sustainable Choice: Social Media Marketing and the SDG 12 Agenda

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between social media driven impulsive consumption and responsible consumption objectives under Sustainable Development Goal 12, with specific reference to India. Secondary and archival data has been used in this study and analyses have been carried out to identify the trends in digital connectivity and material consumption and also to understand sustainability pressures linked to expanding online consumption. The findings show that rising internet penetration in India is accompanied by increasing material resource use, indicating growing consumption intensity. At the same time, major digital platforms have introduced transparency and responsible marketing initiatives, although these remain largely voluntary. The study highlights the resulting gap between rapid digital consumption growth and sustainability objectives and discusses the role of policy and marketing frameworks in guiding digital choice environments toward sustainable consumption. By linking platform-driven marketing practices with macro-level SDG 12 indicators, the study offers a policy-oriented perspective on digital consumption sustainability in emerging economies. The paper concludes that coordinated efforts among regulators, platforms, and marketers are necessary to support responsible digital consumption and long-term environmental sustainability.

Keywords: Social media marketing, Impulsive consumption, Sustainable Development Goal 12, Digital platforms, India's digital economy, Voluntary self-regulation

Introduction

In today's world most of the people assume that everything can be accessed through mobile phones. Social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat etc. have



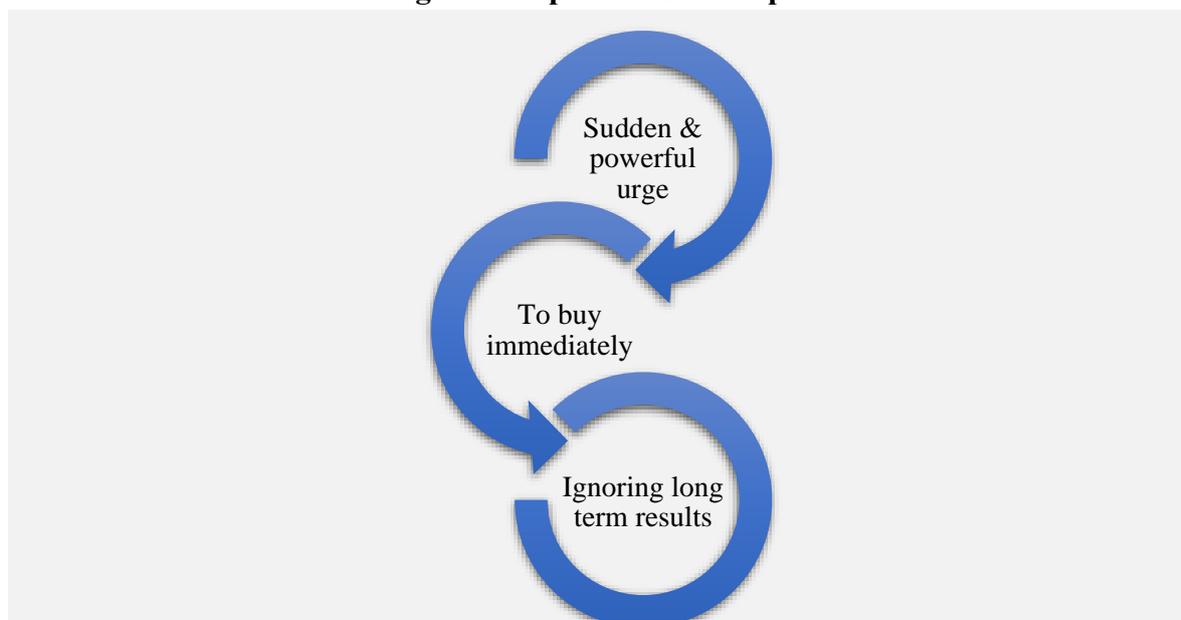
become major sources and primary channels for marketing communication.(Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010)

Companies right from start-ups to multibillion dollar conglomerates use social media platforms for various stages of marketing. Here, algorithmic personalization and influencer marketing increase exposure to persuasive content, creating an online environment that encourages spontaneous and unplanned purchase decisions (Verhagen & Van Dolen, 2011)

Impulsive consumption is defined as the result of sudden and powerful urges that induce consumers to buy immediately without much reflection about the long-term consequences of the purchases. (Rook, 1987)

The following diagram explains the flow of impulsive behaviour starting from the powerful and unstoppable desire to buy the product or avail the service without considering the long-term consequences of the act.

Figure 1 Impulsive Consumption



Source: Authors' compilation based on literature

Social media marketing has fundamentally reshaped consumer decision-making by intensifying exposure to personalized advertising, influencer-driven persuasion, and emotion-based engagement mechanisms. While these practices enhance market reach and short-term consumption, they have also contributed to impulsive buying, overconsumption, and growing sustainability concerns.(Zhang & Benyoucef, 2016)

In this context, aligning digital marketing practices with Sustainable Development Goal 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) has emerged as a critical economic and policy challenge. (United Nations Environment Programme, 2020)

In 2015, the United Nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals, a framework of 17 objectives(United Nations, 2015) These goals were designed to address major global challenges and to guide international development efforts up to 2030. These objectives cover



social, economic, and environmental priorities. SDG 12 specifically addresses responsible consumption and production, with emphasis on reducing resource intensity and environmental impact. Therefore, progress under SDG 12 is essential for advancing sustainable development outcomes. (United Nations, 2023)

The digital marketing practices focus on and stimulate impulsive consumption and these practices negatively influence SDG 12 outcomes. Though there are research studies carried out on digital marketing and impulsive consumption, there research is limited in the area of connecting social media marketing with SDG 12 in an explicit manner. (Lim, 2020)

This study aims to contribute to this discourse by analysing how the rapid expansion of social media driven consumption in India aligns with global sustainability trends. By using secondary and archival data, the paper positions impulsive consumption not merely as an individual behavioural issue, but as a systemic outcome of digital market structures that must be addressed through responsible marketing practices and policy interventions.

Scope of the Study

The scope of the study is threefold. First, it focuses on India as a high-growth digital economy characterized by increasing social media penetration, expanding social commerce, and evolving consumption patterns. (Internet and Mobile Association of India; Kantar, 2023)

Second, global trends are used as contextual benchmarks to situate India's trajectory within the broader sustainability framework, rather than as direct statistical comparators. Finally, the study examines the interface between social media marketing practices, impulsive consumption, and SDG 12 outcomes from a macro-level and policy-oriented perspective.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- To examine trends in digital consumption growth in India within the broader context of global consumption patterns.
- To analyse the alignment or divergence between expanding social media-driven consumption and SDG 12 indicators related to responsible consumption.
- To assess the role of platform responsibility and regulatory frameworks in moderating impulsive consumption in digital markets.
- To derive policy and managerial implications for promoting sustainable choice architectures in social media-driven marketing environments.

The following section reviews existing literature on digital impulsive consumption, sustainability concerns, and platform governance to provide context for this study.

2. Literature Review

Social media platforms have transformed marketing communication by enabling interactive, personalized, and real-time consumer engagement. (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010)

The digital media environments characterized by algorithmic personalization and influencer marketing have been shown to stimulate impulsive online purchase behaviour. (Verhagen & Van Dolen, 2011)



Various studies in social commerce literature indicate that factors such as platform design features, recommendation systems, and persuasive content increase unplanned consumption decisions. (Zhang & Benyoucef, 2016). These unplanned consumption decisions can be treated as impulsive buying behaviour.

Meta-analytical evidence further confirms that online shopping environments intensify impulse-oriented buying tendencies compared to traditional retail settings. (Amos et al., 2014). However, a considerable amount of existing research in this area focuses on individual level or customer specific behavioural outcomes. And there is limited emphasis on other aspects such as sustainability implications.

Rising global consumption levels have been identified as a key driver of increasing material extraction and environmental pressure. (United Nations Environment Programme, 2020b). Empirical research on material footprint and resource-use intensity demonstrates that growing affluence and consumption patterns contribute significantly to sustainability challenges (Wiedmann et al., 2020)

There is a growing concern about impact on the environment. And in response to these concerns, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals establish SDG 12 as a global framework for promoting responsible consumption and production. Marketing scholarship has begun to recognize sustainable consumption as an essential area of inquiry, emphasizing the role of firms and consumers in advancing responsible market practices. There have been limited studies which explicitly integrate the digital marketing driven impulsive consumption with macro-level SDG 12 indicators.

Recent literature highlights the growing responsibility of digital platforms in shaping online consumption environments and consumer choice architectures (Lim, 2020). Emerging regulatory frameworks such as the European Union's Digital Services Act illustrate efforts to guide responsible digital market conduct.

Despite these developments, empirical research connecting platform-level marketing practices, impulsive digital consumption, and sustainability outcomes remains limited.

In particular, there is a lack of studies linking social media-driven consumption growth with SDG 12-related material consumption indicators in emerging digital economies such as India, which this study seeks to address.

3. Data & Methodology

All data used in this study are derived from publicly available secondary sources. Indicators related to Sustainable Development Goal 12 are obtained from the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals Global Database. Data on digital economy development, internet penetration, and consumption-related indicators are sourced from databases maintained by the World Bank. Information on platform-level initiatives, including responsible marketing practices, transparency measures, and sustainability commitments, is collected from publicly released corporate sustainability and transparency reports.



The study does not rely on proprietary, confidential, or personally identifiable data. All datasets referenced are openly accessible through the respective institutional and corporate websites, ensuring transparency, replicability, and adherence to ethical research standards.

The study adopts a secondary data and archival research methodology. India is selected as the primary unit of analysis due to its rapid expansion in digital connectivity, social media usage, and online consumption. (IBEF, 2024). To contextualize national trends, global aggregates are used as benchmarks rather than direct comparators, enabling an interpretative assessment of India's consumption trajectory within the broader global sustainability framework.

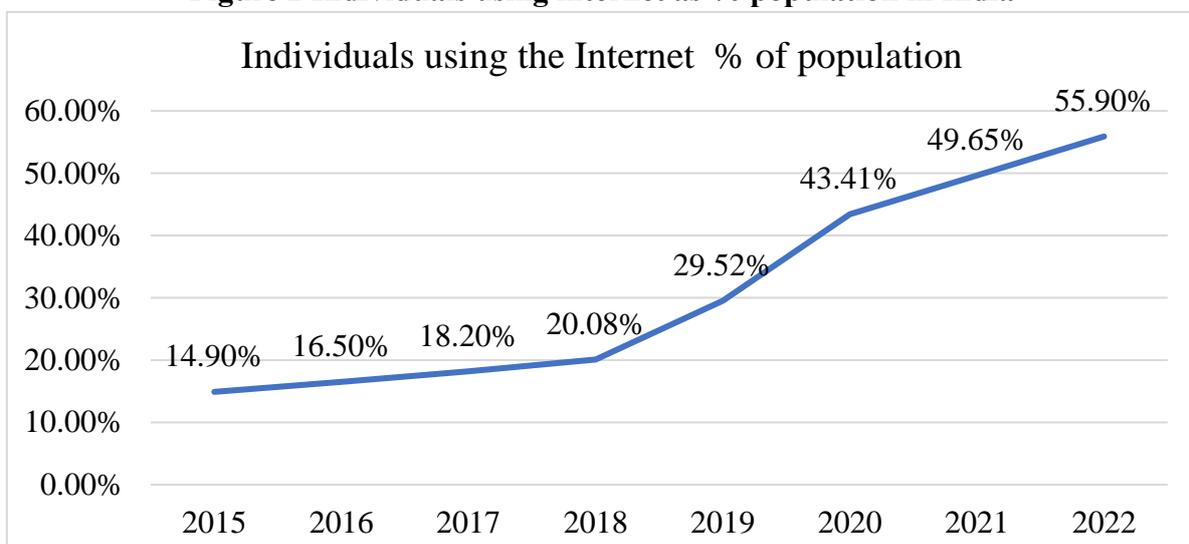
The analysis employs descriptive statistics and trend analysis to examine changes in digital consumption indicators and SDG 12-related measures over the period 2015–2024. Due to differences in data availability across sources, digital connectivity and internet penetration indicators are analysed for the period 2015–2022, while Domestic Material Consumption per capita data are examined for the period 2000–2023.

In addition, archival analysis of publicly disclosed platform sustainability and transparency reports is undertaken to assess how major social media and e-commerce platforms address responsible marketing and consumption concerns. The methodological approach emphasizes exploratory and policy-relevant insights rather than causal inference, in line with the objectives of the study and the focus of the special issue.

4. Empirical Analysis

This section of the report analyses how the impulsive buying behaviour is influenced by social media in India. The internet penetration in India has increased significantly and during the decade from 2015 to 2022 the percentage of population using the internet has increased more than three times. During 2015 about 15% of India's population had access to internet whereas in 2022 about 55.9% of the population is accessing internet. The following diagram shows the growth of internet usage in India. The World Bank data is available till the year 2022.

Figure 2 Individuals using internet as % population in India





Source: Authors' compilation based on (World Bank, 2022) data

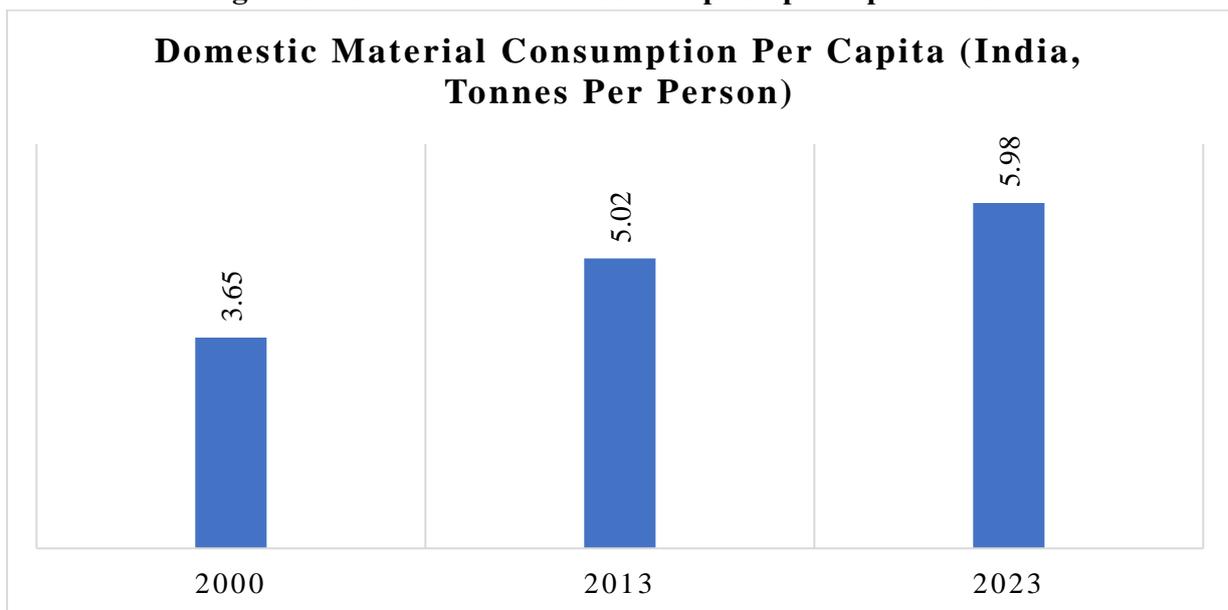
Recent government reports indicate continued growth beyond 2022. During 2025, 55.3% of India's population (about 806 million Indians) is accessing the internet.(IBEF, 2024)

The major reasons for growth in internet penetration are affordable mobile phones and internet, expansion of telecom infrastructure and growth of digital service platforms.(GSMA, 2023)

Domestic Material Consumption (DMC) per capita is a core indicator of resource-use intensity under SDG 12, providing a direct measure of the material pressures that economic and consumption activities place on environmental sustainability.

India's DMC per capita in tonnes for a 23-year period (from 2000 to 2023) is presented in the next diagram. It was 3.65 tonnes in the year 2000 and grew to 5.02 tonnes in the year 2013, indicating a 38% growth. From 2013 to 2023 it has grown about 19%. Overall, during 2000 to 2023 the DMC has grown to a level of approximately 64%. (*Domestic Material Consumption per Capita, 2023*)

Figure 3 Domestic Material Consumption per capita - India



Source: Authors' compilation based on World Bank (2023)

DMC per capita is a major indicator of overall material resource use per person in an economy at a given point of time. For the Indian economy, the trend is showing a steady upward trajectory. The increased material usage signals increased consumption intensity and this in turn has created a sustainability pressure relevant to SDG 12. This trend also forms the macro-level backdrop for impulsive digital consumption growth discussed earlier.

The world per capita material consumption during the year 2000 was 9.06 tonnes and it has become 11.63 tonnes in the year 2023. The growth percentage is about 28%. This clearly indicates that the growth in the domestic material consumption of India is much higher than that of the world values. (*Domestic Material Consumption per Capita, 2023*)



It can be understood that India's material consumption per capita grew faster than the global average. This divergence in growth rates indicates a stronger sustainability pressure in India. This also suggests that emerging digital economies such as India face a sharper consumption growth. This analysis reinforces the relevance and the importance of SDG 12-aligned responsible consumption strategies.

From the above two analyses it can be observed that rise in consumption intensity alongside expanding digital exposure makes the role of social media platforms in shaping consumer behaviour becomes increasingly significant.

As digital platforms such as Meta (parent company of Facebook and Instagram), YouTube and Amazon constitute key channels through which consumption impulses are stimulated, the responsibilities of these digital platforms in aligning marketing practices with sustainability objectives needs to be analysed as well. In this context, platform-level initiatives aimed at transparency and responsible marketing represent early responses to the sustainability challenges are analysed as follows;

Table 1 Responsible Marketing and Sustainability Initiatives by Major Digital Platforms

Platform	Reported Initiative	Focus Area	Relevance to SDG 12
Meta (Facebook & Instagram)	Ad transparency tools, user ad controls, sponsored content labelling	Informed consumer choice	Responsible consumption
YouTube (Google)	Misleading ad restrictions, disclosure policies	Content responsibility	Consumer protection
Amazon	Climate Pledge Friendly labels, sustainable product filters	Responsible production	Sustainable consumption

Source: Authors' compilation based on publicly available platform transparency and sustainability reports from Meta, YouTube/Google, and Amazon.

Accordingly, above table summarizes about the reported responsible marketing initiatives adopted by major digital platforms. These initiatives have a stronger influence consumption choice.

It can be observed that the major digital platforms acknowledge growing responsibility in shaping consumer choice. And these platforms report about the initiatives focused on advertising transparency and user control. However, the existing measures remain largely voluntary and self-regulated. And it is clearly visible that there is limited evidence of binding



accountability for sustainability outcomes. This has created a policy space for guiding digital marketing toward responsible consumption.

The major findings of the analysis are given as follows;

- There is a positive growth in digital market and material consumption in India.
- Many studies have proven that growth in consumption has always created pressure in sustainability objectives.
- Digital platforms one of the major contributors of creating stimulation for consumption are responding through transparency initiatives. Still these initiatives are in nascent stage and are insufficient to ensure alignment with SDG 12.

The following section discusses these findings in relation to sustainability and policy implications

5. Discussion

The major findings of the empirical analysis align with existing research on impulse-oriented digital consumption while extending the discussion to macro-level sustainability indicators. (Verhagen & Van Dolen, 2011)

They indicate that impulsive consumption is not only an individual behavioural issue but is also influenced by digital market structures. Such consumption patterns contribute to environmental pressure and can also hinder the achievement of sustainable development goals. For a rapidly developing economy such as India, balancing economic growth with sustainable resource use remains a key policy challenge (United Nations Environment Programme, 2020) In this context, SDG 12 offers an important framework for moderating environmental pressures. As digital platforms increasingly mediate consumption choices in India, embedding SDG 12 principles into marketing practices becomes particularly relevant.

6. Policy Implications

While digital platforms have introduced voluntary transparency measures, the absence of binding sustainability accountability highlights the need for policy guidance. Given the scale of social media-driven consumption, relying solely on platform self-regulation may be insufficient to achieve SDG 12 objectives especially for a rapidly developing country such as India. (OECD, 2023)

Standardized disclosure of sponsored content can reduce manipulative persuasion and support informed consumer choice for the users of digital platforms. Regulatory oversight of algorithmic nudging and manipulative interface design can help to moderate impulse-oriented consumption environments. (CMA, UK, 2022)

Policies addressing dark patterns in digital marketing can support fair and responsible consumption practices carried out by digital platforms. Policy incentives for sustainability labelling in online marketplaces can enhance consumer awareness of responsible products and facilitate customers in choosing responsible products. Along with this, integrating platform



disclosures with national SDG monitoring frameworks can also be carried out. (European Commission, 2020)

Emerging governance frameworks such as the EU Digital Services Act can be used as a reference point for regulating digital marketing ecosystems in India. Adapting such models to India's digital economy context can support nationally aligned SDG 12 implementation.

Joint efforts by key stakeholders such as regulators, platforms, and marketers are necessary to enable a transition from impulsive to sustainable digital consumption. This can help reduce environmental pressures and position India better towards achieving its SDG goals.

7. Limitations & Future Research

This section outlines the limitations of the study. First, the analysis is based on secondary and archival data and therefore cannot fully capture individual behavioural and psychological factors behind impulsive consumption. The study therefore focuses mostly on macro-level trends and policy-oriented observations rather than detailed causal relationships.

Next, global data are used to provide context for India's consumption trends. Variations in data coverage and reporting standards across countries may also influence cross-country interpretation. Hence, the study avoids direct statistical comparisons and concentrates on identifying general patterns and differences.

Third, platform sustainability and transparency reports represent self-disclosed information and may not fully reflect the effectiveness of responsible marketing initiatives in practice. These disclosures are treated as indicative archival evidence rather than verified performance measures.

Finally, the exploratory nature of the analysis limits the scope for establishing causal links between social media marketing practices and sustainable consumption outcomes. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating primary data, experimental designs, or longitudinal micro-level datasets.

Some of the future areas of research can be the study of individual-level behavioural responses to social media marketing stimuli, especially in relation to sustainable products. Along with this, comparative studies of policy frameworks between the European Union and India can highlight gaps in Indian regulations and identify areas of improvement in India's policy frameworks. Finally, studies that focus on measuring the impact of transparency rules or ad disclosures in digital media platforms are also needed.

8. Conclusion

This paper is an attempt to study and analyse the relationship between social media driven impulsive consumption and responsible consumption objectives under SDG 12 with specific reference to India's emerging digital economy.

The empirical analysis has revealed that with respect to India, there has been a simultaneous growth in digital connectivity and material consumption intensity. This is clearly indicating the rising consumption pressures alongside expanding digital market exposure.



The results of the analysis display an increasing gap between digital consumption growth and sustainability objectives, making SDG 12 especially relevant for rapidly developing economies such as India. The study also finds that major digital platforms such as Meta, YouTube, and Google have introduced transparency and responsible marketing practices, although these practices remain largely voluntary and self-regulated. This indicates a need for explicit marketing frameworks and policy support to guide digital consumption toward more sustainable choices. By connecting social media marketing with SDG 12 consumption indicators, the study adds to ongoing research on sustainable digital consumption.

Overall, aligning digital marketing practices with responsible consumption principles represents an essential step toward balancing economic growth with environmental sustainability in India's digital future.

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