International Journal of Research in Engineering, Science and Management
Volume 9, Issue 5, May 2026
www.ijresm.com | E-ISSN: 2581-5792 | RESAIM Publishing | www.resaim.com

Manipulative Personalization in Social Commerce: Examining Consumer Distrust, Brand Switching, and Negative Word-of-Mouth

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***Abstract*: For brand success in the digital age, companies are using more personalized marketing efforts to engage customers more effectively and drive sales. Yet, when consumers experience personalization strategies as manipulative, they may have detrimental effects including brand distrust, switching to alternative brands, and the proliferation of negative word of mouth. The research seeks to examine how perceived manipulative personalization is related to consumer distrust, brand switching behavior, and negative word of mouth. Based on survey research, the research will investigate how consumers respond to various personalization tactics and how their perceptions determine their loyalty and communication. The research will provide actionable recommendations for marketers who want to use ethical personalization practices without eroding consumer trust.**

***Keywords*: Manipulative Personalization, Consumer Distrust, Social Commerce, Brand Switching, Negative Word-of-Mouth, Psychological Reactance, Personalized Advertising.**

1. Introduction

The accelerating pace of digital business and social media websites has revolutionized how brands interact with consumers. Perhaps the most transformative innovation in this area is personalization, which means modifying content, ads, and product suggestions according to user data, behavior, and interests. Though personalization was initially commended for optimizing user experience and optimizing marketing effectiveness, the emergence of perceived manipulative personalization (PMP) has brought forth serious ethical and psychological issues. PMP is a term used for the consumer's feeling that a brand's personalization strategies are fashioned purposefully to control, take advantage of, or manipulate their choices instead of reflecting their true interests (Gray et al., 2018; Mathur et al., 2019). Within the ecosystem of social commerce, where peer influence, reviews, and social interactions strongly influence purchase decisions—such manipulative tactics can have amplified adverse impacts on consumer confidence and brand perception.

Contemporary social commerce platforms such as Instagram, Facebook Marketplace, and TikTok Shop are highly dependent on algorithmic personalization. Such algorithms scan user data to make predictions about preferences but tend to be opaque and persuasive in nature, leading consumers to feel surveilled or manipulated (Susser et al., 2019). As a result, what starts off as a convenience aid can end up causing consumer distrust, which is a lack of trust in a brand's integrity, honesty, or intentions (McKnight et al., 2002). As consumers feel that brands are taking advantage of their personal data for financial gain, they lose trust, which then translates into behavioral metrics like switching brands and negative word of mouth (NWoM) (Darke & Ritchie, 2007). Brand switching is when the customers switch to the competing brands because of dissatisfaction or ethical issues, whereas NWoM is when the consumers share negative views about the brand with others, which can harm its reputation in social commerce settings heavily.

It has been found through previous studies that trust is the foundation of online consumer behavior. Yet the increasing use of dark personalization strategies, manipulative suggestions, emotional targeting, and stealth persuasion has brought scrutiny to the way such strategies induce psychological reactance and distrust (Luguri & Strahilevitz, 2021). Social commerce, where credibility and openness are critical, not only lowers the level of perceived authenticity but also harms the relation-based relationship between consumers and brands when it involves manipulative personalization. As personalization enhances with artificial intelligence and data analysis, comprehension of its manipulative aspect is crucial in upholding ethical marketing strategy and viable consumer relations.

The present study identifies the effects of perceived manipulative personalization on consumer distrust, switching behavior toward a brand, and negative word of mouth in social commerce. The current study also analyzes the mediating role of consumer distrust to clarify how PMP indirectly affects behavioral measures. Through the synthesis of consumer psychology theory, digital marketing ethics, and social commerce theory, this study seeks to offer both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it builds on the scope of personalization's dark side by situating PMP as a significant driver of distrust-based consumer behavior. Practically, the implications of the findings may assist marketers, policymakers, and online platforms in developing personalization strategies that are transparent, ethical, and

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Definitions of Constructs	Similar or Synonymous Constructs
Perceived Manipulative Personalization (PMP): Refers to consumers' perception that personalized content or recommendations are designed to covertly influence or exploit their decisions for the brand's benefit rather than to serve their interests (Gray et al., 2018; Mathur et al., 2019).	Dark Patterns, Persuasive Personalization, Exploitative Targeting, Manipulative Advertising
Consumer Distrust: A psychological state in which consumers lack confidence in the integrity, honesty, or intentions of a brand, perceiving it as deceptive or opportunistic (McKnight et al., 2002).	Lack of Trust, Suspicion, Brand Skepticism, Consumer Cynicism
Brand Switching: The act of changing preference from one brand to another due to dissatisfaction, loss of trust, or negative experience (Keaveney, 1995).	Defection, Customer Churn, Brand Migration, Switching Intentions
Negative Word of Mouth (NWoM): Communication of unfavorable opinions or experiences about a brand to others, typically as a reaction to perceived deception or poor experience (Anderson, 1998).	Negative eWOM, Brand Complaints, Online Dissatisfaction Sharing, Customer Venting

consumer focused. Ultimately, this study emphasizes achieving balance between personalization success and consumer welfare in the fast-changing context of social commerce.

2. Literature Review: Theoretical Framework and Framing of Hypotheses

The rise of e-commerce and social media sites has dramatically changed the way consumer-brand relationships develop, with personalization at the heart of modern marketing methods. Personalization can be understood as a process of tailoring content, recommendations, or advertising to the personal taste, behaviors, or demographic data of users. Although once considered a tool for enhancing consumer engagement and happiness, the discovery of Perceived Manipulative Personalization has underlined the psychological and ethical boundaries within personalization practices (Gray et al., 2018; Mathur et al., 2019). PMP refers to a consumer's perception that a brand's personalization activity is designed primarily to shape or manipulate decision-making for the brand's purposes rather than the consumer's true interests.

3. Theoretical Underpinnings

This research is grounded in both psychological reactance theory and trust-based consumer behaviour theories. According to psychological reactance theory, individuals feel negative arousal and resistance if their freedom of choice is perceived to be in jeopardy (Brehm, 1966). In digital commerce, this suggests that manipulative personalization leads to reactance because consumers perceive themselves being coerced or exploited and then take part in restorative behaviours. On the other side, trust theory places an emphasis on how consumer trust in the honesty and good intentions of a brand are central in a long-term relationship (McKnight et al., 2002). Personalization perceived as manipulation reduces trust and, consequently, influences subsequent consumer behaviours such as brand switching or negative word of mouth (NWoM).

But more importantly, the social commerce function of sites where peer interaction, reviews, and social influence inform purchase decisions plays a particularly important role. Algorithm-driven personalization, which is efficient but tends to be non-transparent, has at times made consumers feel manipulated or under surveillance (Susser et al., 2019). For example, studies show that less transparency about recommendation systems and targeted advertising increases feelings of manipulation, leading to sceptical postures through consumers with defended behaviours (Luguri & Strahilevitz, 2021).

4. Perceived Manipulative Personalization and Behavioural Outcomes

A. Brand Switching

Empirical results consistently show that manipulative marketing activities hurt consumer loyalty. From a psychological point of view, when consumers perceive that personalization has been meant to be exploited rather than helped, they develop reactance and thereby disconnect themselves from the brand (Campbell, 2007; Friestad & Wright, 1994). In social commerce, where competing brands are at easy reach and peer views play a significant role, such feelings increase brand switching. Consumers shift to rivals perceived to be more authentic, transparent, and credible, which again supports the link between PMP and intentions to switch (Darke & Ritchie, 2007; Habel et al., 2016).

B. Negative Word of Mouth (NWoM)

Perceived manipulative tactics not only shape loyalty but also compel negative communication conducts. NWoM are consumers' efforts to warn or persuade others on the basis of perceived unjust treatment (Anderson, 1998; Grégoire et al., 2010). Digital sites heighten the reach and effect of such communication, so manipulative personalization is especially impactful in social commerce situations. Research identifies that consumers involve themselves in NWoM to rebalance perceived equity and reassert autonomy, again indicating behavioural impacts of PMP (van Doorn et al., 2010; Gelbrich et al., 2022).

C. Consumer Distrust

Trust is the foundation of online consumer relationships. Perceived manipulative personalization elicits signs of opportunism and exploitation, therefore, decreasing consumers' trust in the integrity of the brand (Bleier & Eisenbeiss, 2015; Mathur et al., 2019). Consumer distrust represents both a psychosocial state and a driver of behaviour, in which a certain course of action-a decision to switch or NWoM-is forged. Distrust serves as the mediator of manipulative tactics and consumer responses, translating judgments about unethical acts into specific behavioural consequences (Pavlou & Gefen, 2004; Beldad et al., 2010).

5. Theoretical Framework and Hypothesis Formulation

Based on the reviewed literature, the conceptual framework positions PMP as an antecedent that has immediate effects on brand switching and negative word of mouth, moderated by consumer distrust acting as a mediating process. The model is also underpinned by psychological reactance theory, in which

Table 1
Measurement items used in the study

Construct	Item ID	Item (exact wording)
Perceived manipulative personalization (PMP)	PM1	The social commerce app/website tried to make me buy without me noticing.
	PM2	I bought things I didn't plan to because of the social commerce app/website.
	PM3	I felt tricked by the social commerce app/website's offers.
	PM4	The social commerce app/website used fake or exaggerated reviews to make me buy.
	PM5	The social commerce app/website used fake timers or "limited time" deals to rush me.
Consumer distrust (CD)	CD1	I doubt a brand when it uses my data a lot for ads.
	CD2	Too many personal messages make me feel the brand cares more about itself.
	CD3	I feel uneasy when a brand's messages feel too personal or fake.
	CD4	I worry brands are not honest about using my data to influence me.
	CD5	Some brands use personalization to make me buy things I normally wouldn't.
Negative word-of-mouth (NWoM)	NWOM1	If a brand's ads seem unfair, I talk to friends or family about it.
	NWOM2	I post or comment online if a brand's ads are fake.
	NWOM3	I share my disappointment about tricky ads online or in person.
	NWOM4	I write a bad review if a brand's ads mislead me.
	NWOM5	If I lose trust in a brand, I warn others about it.
Brand switching (BS)	BS1	I think of using other brands if a brand's ads are misleading.
	BS2	I ignore or avoid a brand if its ads make me uncomfortable.
	BS3	If a brand tries to trick me, I look at other brands.
	BS4	I switch to brands that respect my privacy.

Note. PMP = Perceived Manipulative Personalization; CD = Consumer Distrust; NWoM = Negative Word-of-Mouth; BS = Brand Switching.
All items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree).

consumers' defensive responses are considered against the perceived loss of freedom, and trust theory, where ethical behaviour is seen as crucial in maintaining relationships between consumers and brands.

Consequently, four hypotheses were put forward:

- *H1:* Perceived manipulative personalization positively influences brand switching.
- *H2:* Perceived manipulative personalization positively influences negative word of mouth.
- *H3:* Perceived manipulative personalization positively influences consumer distrust.
- *H4:* Consumer distrust mediates the relationship between perceived manipulative personalization and both brand switching and negative word of mouth.
- This model provides a comprehensive overview of how manipulative personalization influences consumers' behaviour. It synthesizes the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural aspects, providing both theoretical and practical knowledge for marketers who want to execute ethical personalization strategies in social commerce environments.

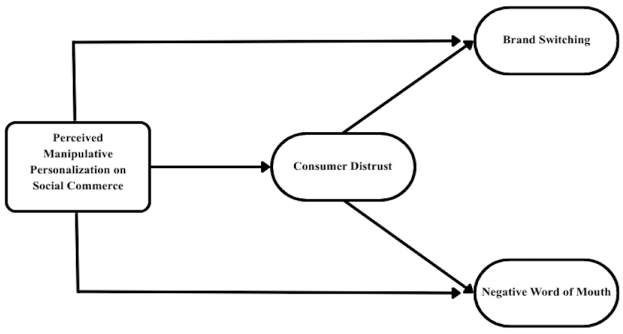

Fig. 1. Conceptual framework of the study

Note. The framework illustrates the proposed relationships between Perceived Manipulative Personalization on Social Commerce, Consumer Distrust, Brand Switching, and Negative Word-of-Mouth. Consumer Distrust is proposed as a mediating variable between Perceived Manipulative Personalization and the behavioral outcomes.

6. Methodology and Findings

A. Research Design and Rationale

In this research, a quantitative cross-sectional survey was employed to explore the impact of Perceived Manipulative Personalization (PMP) on social-commerce sites on Consumer Distrust (CD), Brand Switching intention (BS), and Negative Word-of-Mouth (NWoM). The theoretical framework is based on psychological reactance theory and trust theory. Because of the exploratory nature and small sample size, PLS-SEM (SmartPLS) was employed; PLS-SEM is reliable with small samples, does not demand multivariate normality, and estimates measurement and structural models simultaneously.

B. Survey instrument and design

A standardized questionnaire was created from literature-supported scales and tailored to the social-commerce environment. Answers employed a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree; 5 = Strongly agree). The complete measurement instrument is included below.

C. Sample and Data Collection

Data were collected online via convenience sampling among social-commerce users. Respondents were screened to ensure they used social commerce services in the prior 12 months. The final usable sample consisted of N = 53 respondents. No demographic quotas were imposed; this is an exploratory convenience sample and limits generalisability.

Table 2
Sample summary (N = 53)

Characteristic	Value
Sample size	N = 53
Sampling method	Online convenience sample
Screening	Respondents used social commerce in prior 12 months
Demographics	22 years – 26 years

Note. N = sample size. Data were collected from social-commerce users through online convenience sampling.

Table 4
Construct reliability and convergent validity of measurement model

Construct	Cronbach's α	Composite reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Brand Switching (BS)	0.715	0.804	0.457
Consumer Distrust (CD)	0.766	0.837	0.509
Negative WoM (NWoM)	0.732	0.830	0.553
Perceived Manipulative Personalization (PM/PMP)	0.684	0.795	0.444

Note. CR = Composite Reliability; AVE = Average Variance Extracted. Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and AVE values were used to assess internal consistency and convergent validity of the constructs.

Table 6
Bootstrapped structural path estimates (5,000 resamples)

Path	β (standardized)	t (approx.)	p (bootstrapped)	Interpretation
PMP → Brand Switching (BS)	0.532	3.73	< 0.001	Significant, positive
PMP → Consumer Distrust (CD)	0.530	4.22	< 0.001	Significant, positive
PMP → NWoM	0.414	1.73	0.042	Significant, positive
CD → BS	-0.007	0.04	0.485	Not significant
CD → NWoM	0.116	0.42	0.337	Not significant

Note. β = standardized path coefficient; *t* = t-statistic; *p* = significance value. Significance was assessed using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples in SmartPLS.

D. Pre-analysis Checks (Data Quality and Collinearity)

Data were screened for missing values and careless responding; no cases were excluded for missingness. Multicollinearity was assessed using VIF.

Table 3
Inner model VIF summary

14	VIF (inner model)
CD → BS	1.391
CD → NWoM	1.391
PM → BS	1.391
PM → CD	1.000
PM → NWoM	1.391

Note. VIF = Variance Inflation Factor. All VIF values were below the recommended threshold, indicating no significant multicollinearity issues in the structural model.

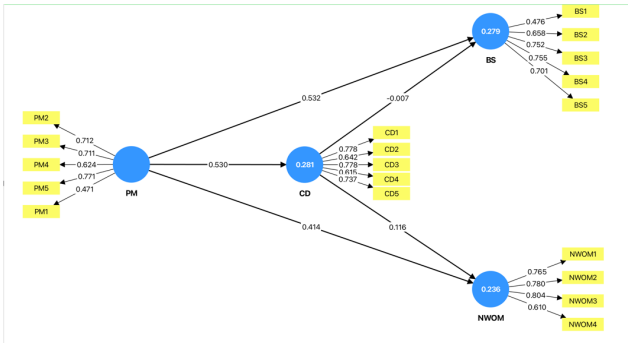

Fig. 2. Model multicollinearity diagnostics (VIFs) from SmartPLS

Note. PM = Perceived Manipulative Personalization; CD = Consumer Distrust; BS = Brand Switching; NWoM = Negative Word-of-Mouth. VIF values below the recommended threshold indicate absence of serious multicollinearity among constructs in the structural model.

Common-method bias was considered. Procedural remedies were used (anonymity, neutral wording); post-hoc Harman/marker checks in SmartPLS did not indicate pervasive common-method variance.

E. Measurement Model (Reliability & Validity)

We assessed internal consistency, convergent validity, and discriminant validity.

We also evaluated discriminant validity using Fornell-Larcker:

Table 5
Discriminant validity (square roots of AVE on diagonal)

	BS	CD	NWoM	PM
BS	**0.676**	0.275	0.312	0.528
CD	0.275	**0.714**	0.336	0.530
NWoM	0.312	0.336	**0.743**	0.476
PM	0.528	0.530	0.476	**0.666**

Note. Diagonal values represent the square roots of AVE for each construct. Off-diagonal values represent inter-construct correlations.

7. Findings

A. Structural Model Estimation

The structural model was estimated in SmartPLS; significance was assessed with bootstrapping (5,000 resamples). Key standardized path coefficients (β), t statistics and p-values are reported below.

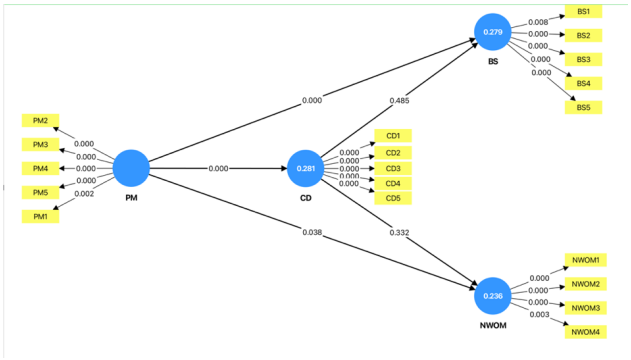

Fig. 3. Structural model path coefficients and significance results obtained from SmartPLS bootstrapping analysis

Note. PM = Perceived Manipulative Personalization; CD = Consumer Distrust; BS = Brand Switching; NWoM = Negative Word-of-Mouth. Values shown on the paths represent standardized path coefficients obtained through bootstrapping analysis in SmartPLS. R^2 values inside the endogenous constructs indicate the variance explained by predictor variables.

B. Results Summary (statistical)

- PMP → BS: β = 0.532, t ≈ 3.73, p < 0.001. Strong, positive — perceiving personalization as manipulative increases switching intentions.
- PMP → CD: β = 0.530, t ≈ 4.22, p < 0.001. Strong, positive — PMP raises distrust.
- PMP → NWoM: β = 0.414, t ≈ 1.73, p = 0.042.

Significant positive effect on negative word-of-mouth intention.

- CD → BS: β = −0.007, not significant.
- CD → NWoM: β = 0.116, not significant.

Table 7
R^2 for endogenous constructs

Endogenous construct	R^2
Consumer Distrust (CD)	0.281
Brand Switching (BS)	0.279
Negative WoM (NWoM)	0.236

Note. R^2 values indicate the proportion of variance explained in each endogenous construct by the predictor variables in the structural model.

C. Mediation testing

Mediation was tested via bootstrapped indirect effects. Because the structural paths CD → BS and CD → NWoM were not significant, the indirect effects (PMP → CD → BS/NWoM) were not supported. Thus, consumer distrust emerges as an outcome of PMP but not as a mediator in this sample.

Table 8
Indirect effects (PMP → CD → Outcomes)

Indirect path	Indirect effect (β)	p	Conclusion
PMP → CD → BS	not significant	> .05	No mediation
PMP → CD → NWoM	not significant	> .05	No mediation

Note. PMP = Perceived Manipulative Personalization; CD = Consumer Distrust; BS = Brand Switching; NWoM = Negative Word-of-Mouth. Mediation effects were tested using bootstrapped indirect effect analysis in SmartPLS.

PMP is a strong predictor of immediate behavioural intentions (switching and NWoM) and distrust. Distrust didn't mediate those behavioural routes in this sample set — possible explanations are restricted power (N = 53), timing incongruence (distrust might influence behaviour subsequently), or missing moderators (brand attachment, alternatives available). Measurement improvement (enhance items or sample size) will make subsequent inference stronger.

This study is adding to consumer psychology and digital marketing literature on three accounts:

1. *Reports the "dark side" of personalization.* It conceptualizes Perceived Manipulative Personalization (PMP) and empirically establishes a connection between PMP and direct behavioural backlash (brand switching and NWoM), taking personalization research beyond its positives to encompass ethical costs.
2. *Elucidates the effect of distrust.* PMP significantly forecasts consumer distrust (β ≈ 0.53). Distrust did not mediate between PMP→behavioural outcomes in this sample; this might indicate distrust is a latent state that takes time or further stimuli to transfer to behaviour. This discovery encourages longitudinal or moderator-based theory development.
3. *Combines reactance and trust models.* The dual channel (Direct PMP→Behaviour and PMP → Distrust) indicates manipulative personalization can activate quick action and erosion of attitudes at the same time, a nice theoretical nuance.

8. Implications

A. Managerial Implications

- Audit personalization for manipulative signals (pretend timers, hyperbolic reviews, coercive language). These signals increase switching and NWoM directly.
- Enhance explainability and control. Give clear justifications for recommendations and simple opt-out/tune controls to decrease perceived manipulation.
- Quantify attitudinal harms in tests. Don't use clicks alone; include scales of perceived manipulation and trust in A/B tests.
- Split personalization intensity. Apply conservative personalization to privacy-sensitive groups or new users.

B. Policy and Platform Implications

- Platforms need to establish design requirements to deter dark patterns; regulators could insist on provenance and cancellable personalization (clear explanations and one-click opt-outs).

C. Societal Implications

- Unchecked manipulative personalization erodes trust in digital marketplaces and increases negative online discourse. Ethical personalization is essential for consumer welfare and long-term market trust.

9. Limitations and Future Research

- Small convenience sample (N = 53) limits generalisability; replication with larger, representative samples is needed.
- Measurement refinement: PM and BS AVE < 0.50 — consider rewording or adding items.
- Longitudinal and behavioural measures: track actual switching or publicly observable NWoM (posts/reviews).
- Experiments and moderators: examine privacy literacy, previous brand allegiance, or perceived personalization gain as mediators; conduct controlled experiments that treat transparency.

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