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Spending More Money Does Not Always Make More Money: Rethinking the Place of Sponsored Ads in Social Media Marketing

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ABSTRACT

In view of the increasing popularity of social media, brands have turned to social media marketing to drive sales. As a result, sponsored advertising is booming, and businesses continue to invest in sponsored ads to reach target groups and maximize profits. However, the widespread assumption that higher advertising spend guarantees higher returns has proven to be inaccurate. Recent studies establish that incremental spending yields lower engagement and conversion rates over time. This paper argues that sponsored advertising is ineffective as a primary marketing strategy and should be repositioned as a supporting tool. Drawing on existing literature and industry reports, it shows how ad fatigue, user apathy, irritation, and algorithmic bias, among other factors, undermine the success of sponsored ads. Finally, the paper proposes a conceptual test-learn-amplify model in which brands first test content organically, analyze performance, and amplify only high-performing content with paid promotions.

Keywords: Ad Fatigue, Social Media Marketing, Sponsored Ads.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the past two decades, social networking platforms have become a core part of the digital marketplace (Plume & Slade, 2018). As of October 2025, an estimated 5.66 billion people, about 68.7% of the global population, use social media. With users spending an average of 2 hours and 24 minutes on social platforms each day, social media has become a critical space for businesses to meet and engage customers. The rise of social media and related networking platforms resulted in a new form of online marketing known as social media marketing (Kotler, Hollensen, & Opresnik, 2020). Both large corporations and small and midsize enterprises (SMEs) now adopt social media marketing in addition to or in place of traditional brick-and-mortar trade as a strategy to gain visibility, acquire customers, and drive sales (Okolie & Ojomo, 2020).

Social media marketing is considered one of the most effective digital marketing methods in modern business because it offers a low-cost solution for identifying and aggregating customer interests (Constantinides, 2024). The interactive nature of social messaging platforms allows businesses to capture real-time information about customer preferences and purchase habits and integrate the insights into product development and marketing practices. Social media marketing also makes it easy for businesses to target specific audiences (Todor, 2016), build a relationship with them (Pascalau and Urzi & Litceanu, 2021), and measure the effectiveness of their marketing campaigns. Other benefits of social media marketing include more market exposure, increased customer patronage, business partnerships, and improved return on marketing investment (ROI) (Hill & Moran, 2011).

Despite its benefits, however, the ease of accessing customers on social media has proven to be just as much a disadvantage as a strength in social media marketing. Keller and Kotler (2006) note that social media has leveled the playing field for businesses and organisations of all sizes to access the market. Large corporations and traditional companies now create social presence, while countless SMEs, start-ups, and digital-only businesses emerge to maximize the opportunities presented by social media. By removing physical and infrastructural barriers, social media creates a market free for all, which inevitably leads to intense competition for scarce customer attention. As competition intensifies, businesses tend to favour paid advertising over organic content and conventional advertising in order to reach the widest possible social media audience in the shortest time.

Therefore, businesses and marketers commonly raise ad budgets on the assumption that increased spending guarantees higher returns (Aderibigbe, 2020). However, marketing reports and existing literature show consistent diminishing returns on sponsored ad spend (Ha & Litman, 2013; Subramanian, 2015; Taboola, 2025). Evidence suggests that beyond certain thresholds, investment in paid advertising yields smaller returns in engagement and conversion. In essence, simply increasing the ad budget has proven to be inefficient over time. Against this backdrop, this paper reviews the effectiveness of sponsored ads and argues that sponsored advertising should be repositioned from a primary social media marketing strategy to a supporting performance tool. It proposes a balanced, value-driven alternative to the ‘spend more’ technique associated with paid promotion.

2. SPONSORED ADS IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING SPACE

Sponsored ads are paid media integrated into social networks like Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and LinkedIn to encourage an action from viewers. Advertisers use specific search terms and digital behaviours, such as user likes, follows, and engagement, to identify suitable audiences and place ads where such users are most likely to see them (Todor, 2016). Companies pay to have their product or brand strategically positioned before users who may need them the most, using digital formats such as banners, images, carousels, stories, and videos (Chouhan & Karamchadani, 2022; Jarrar, Awobamise & Aderibigbe, 2020).

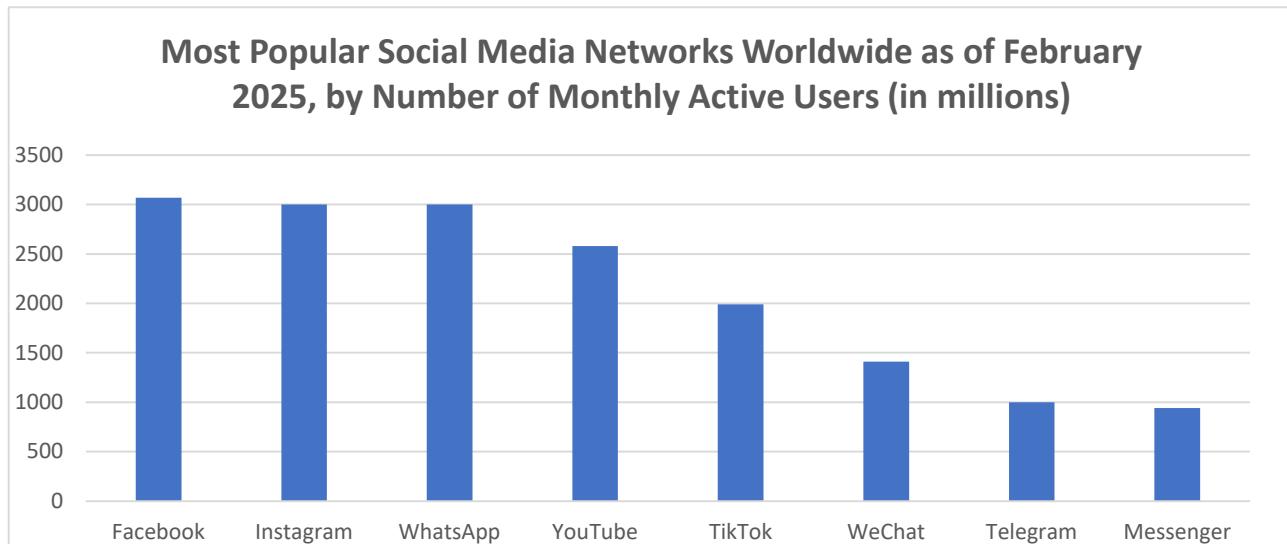


Figure 1. Global Active Social Networks Ranked by Number of Users .

Facebook is the most popular social media channel, going by number of active users. It is also the largest platform for social media marketing growth, with 86% of marketers worldwide using the channel. However, YouTube has been found to have the largest audience for advertising reach. YouTube ads reportedly reach 2.58 billion users monthly, more than Facebook's 2.35 billion. As social media advertising continues to penetrate all age groups and regions of the world, more businesses are getting involved, thereby increasing global ad spend.

How much companies spend on social media advertising annually

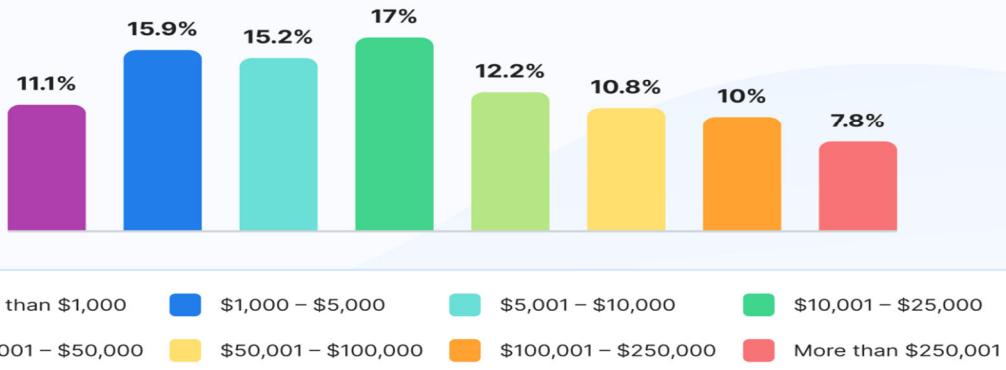


Figure 2. Global Social Media Ad Spend (WebFx, 2025).

As of Q4, 2024, global social media ad spend was reported to be \$244 billion, with projections to reach \$276 billion by the end of 2025. Average monthly ad expenditure ranges from \$850 to \$2,000, depending on company size. Overall, companies spend an average of 11% to 25% of their annual budget on social media advertising, including ad creation, media buying, and ad management (Shanthi & Yasodha, 2024; Subramanian, 2015).

The short-term effectiveness of sponsored ads encourages overspending and ad clutter, as businesses operate on the assumption that visibility can be bought and that higher spending guarantees faster results. Consequently, sponsored ads continue to dominate social media and overshadow organic content, community building, and other long-term engagement strategies that were once the hallmarks of meaningful brand–audience relationships.

2.1. Diminishing Returns on Ad Spend

The principle of diminishing returns (DR) in paid advertising demonstrates that increasing ad spend without making suitable adjustments in strategy and relevant ad variables, such as ad content, media format, and ad type, will result in lower outputs (Guo & Jiang, 2024). At the initial stage of paid ad campaigns, marketers report a spike in ROI and other key performance indicators (KPIs) as the campaigns reach fresh, high-value prospects. At this stage, the connection between advertising expenditure and returns is characterised by a linear and often predictable upward trend. However, the excitement around high initial returns can lead businesses to invest more in campaigns while leaving the creative aspects and audience targeting static, in the hope that increased media buying alone will drive higher returns. On the contrary, recent studies prove otherwise.

A 2025 survey involving 307 US-based performance marketers found that businesses are experiencing diminishing returns on ad spend. Up to 75% of respondents reported lower returns despite incremental spending. About 80% noted that they observed diminishing returns even before maxing out their budgets, sometimes at less than 50% of total spend. Common factors reported include rising costs of ads, user fatigue, and, most commonly, oversaturation.

About 60% of respondents believed that their ads were ineffective because their target audience had previously seen similar media (Taboola, 2025). In a related study, Parani (2025) found that although paid advertising is highly effective in the short term, it suffers from diminishing marginal returns on ad spend (ROAS).

One widely cited explanation for declining returns despite higher ad investment is that the most responsive segment of the target audience has likely been reached already. Therefore, further media exposure reaches less responsive groups who are unlikely to engage or convert. Similarly, repeatedly exposing the target audience to the same ad media reduces engagement because users develop ad fatigue or fail to notice the ad message, having seen it multiple times. Also, given that an average user may be found on more than one social network, buying ad space across multiple platforms turns out to be a waste of resources because the same audience is targeted on different spaces.

2.2. Public Attitude to Sponsored Ads

Studies have examined the perception of social media users toward sponsored advertisements, with particular attention to attitudes toward the ad message, brands, and networking sites. While sponsored ads have become a part of the daily experience on social networks, users seem to have mixed feelings towards them. Per a 2024 Medallia survey, three out of every five social media users found social media ads too many, while a similar ratio reported that they had discovered new brands via sponsored social media ads. This supports Sutrina's (2025) claims that the relationship between sponsored ads and customer attitude can be complicated.

Yuanxin and Pittana (2011) note that while overall reaction toward social media ads is negative, public attitudes are often determined by factors such as informativeness, entertainment, and interactivity of the ad. This implies a reciprocal relationship in which public attitudes shape, and are in turn shaped by, sponsored ads (Akhtar et al, 2019). Users have been found to exhibit scepticism toward ads but are equally receptive to ads they consider transparent, authentic, and nonintrusive (Sutrina, 2025, p. 985). Users also tend to be generally positive and receptive of ads they trust and perceive to be useful but avoid the same ads when they become excessive. Hence, attitude towards ads depends on the nature, type, volume, and mostly the level of intrusiveness the ads pose to user experience (Eid et al., 2020).

According to Subramanian (2015), ad clutter constitutes a major factor for consumers' negative attitude toward sponsored ads. Ad clutter describes the saturation of promotional media on a given space. Notably, an ad is considered clutter if the viewer considers it irrelevant to the editorial content (Ha, 2017). Regardless of relevance, however, viewers are often goal-oriented when consuming a digital media, and constant disruptions by intervening sponsored ads may lead to frustration (Belanche, Flavián & Pérez-Rueda, 2016). Similarly, studies have sufficiently established that ad clutter holds strong implications for advertisers and marketers (Melessa & Larsen, 2024). For example, users may develop a poor perception of the brand, become irritated by the ads and the channel, which intensifies if the sponsored ads are not skippable.

Loureiro (2018) notes that a common reaction to ad clutter is avoidance, but in cases where complete avoidance from a social network is impractical, users seek ways to limit or bypass ads on the platform. The growing adoption of ad blockers supports this claim. As of Q2 2025, over 912 million people worldwide used ad blockers, marking a significant rise from 763 million internet users in 2024. According to market reports, the ad blocker market is witnessing rapid growth, with a projection to reach \$7.2 billion in 2033 from a current \$2.5 billion in 2025. Originally designed to manage intrusive ads on desktop browsers, ad blockers are now widely used on mobile devices to facilitate a smoother internet experience.

Over 53% of internet users reportedly block ads because they find them too many while 40.3% do so to protect their privacy. This inevitably results in revenue losses for businesses. In response, advertisers tend to invest in strategies to bypass ad-blocking software and increase income, but this further drives costs higher.

2.3. Implications of Paid Media for Brands

In addition to generating income, businesses use paid media to establish and promote brand image. However, sponsored ads may harm a company's image when they inspire negative perceptions among viewers. As users increasingly become aware of the use of ads in social media marketing, knowledge of its impacts has equally increased. Pelet and Etis (2022) and Tran (2017) reported that customers become suspicious that an ad might be intended to manipulate them if it requires an action, such as providing an information or visiting a third-party website. Users are typically wary of sponsored advertising, which results in general skepticism and distrust, particularly when they have had a previous negative experience with similar ads. Also, when users do not consider an ad credible, they develop psychological reactance and associate the brand and its subsequent ads with falsehood and deception (Rahmawati, Syawal & Santoso, 2025; Shoenberger, Kim & Sun, 2021).

Critics (Belanche, 2019; Pelet & Ettis, 2022; Tran, 2017) also argue that sponsored ads have temporary impact, regardless of the design and message. No matter how well designed, they deliver short-lived results that fade, sometimes before the end of the campaign. Social media ads may achieve high visibility and dramatic conversions but only for limited time, thereby requiring frequent updates and fresh content to stay relevant. Due to the associated low sustainability value, keeping an ad campaign running demands continuous funding, without guarantee that it will continue to deliver intended results. Consequently, advertising across multiple social networks in an already saturated market costs so much that start-ups and businesses without enough resources are marginalised. The low lifespan of ads also limits the opportunity for businesses to build meaningful relationships with potential buyers who may not convert immediately after viewing the ad but have the intention to at a later stage (Lambrecht & Tucker, 2013).

Moreover, sponsored advertising creates an excessive dependency on social network algorithm. Algorithms are the backbone of all digital activities, including social media marketing. Each social network uses a set of rules based on user behaviour, such as likes, comments, and areas of interest, to determine relevant content to display on their respective feed (Sinclair, 2016; Todor, 2016). Algorithms are essential for targeting specific segments of internet users with the highest value for advertisers. Social networks identify the most promising leads for ad media and target them adequately based on their interests. However, a major downside is that social media algorithms have claimed an unprecedented control over the flow and success of ads (Lambrecht & Tucker, 2021; Sinclair, 2016).

Lambrecht and Tucker (2021) argue that algorithms have discriminatory tendencies that may favour some businesses over others. They note that economic factors influence the distribution and outcome of sponsored ads, and that algorithms may give some businesses more access to high-value segments than their competitors. Social platforms may also increase the difficulty of accessing new segments or increase a company's ad costs based on user interaction with their previous ads. User behaviour, such as hiding ads, marking them as irrelevant, or high bounce rates, can lead a social platform to mark an ad as less valuable. Ensinger (2022) adds that the metrics used by social platforms to determine ad returns can be arbitrary and unpredictable. Moreover, the systems often operate with limited transparency, leaving advertisers and marketers to wonder why certain ads succeed while others underperform (Lambrecht & Tucker, 2021).

The biases and unpredictability of algorithms make social networks unreliable for efficient advertising, yet businesses continue to invest in sponsored social media ads. Liu, Duan, and Liu (2025) note that in a bid to outdo competition and improve their economic capacities, businesses intensify social media advertising. This creates a dependency on sponsored social media ads in neglect of other high-value alternatives within and beyond social media marketing. Since social media ad campaigns are increasingly expensive to run, they carry substantial financial implications for brands, often without assurance of improved returns on ad spend.

3. THE POWER OF ORGANIC CONTENT-DRIVEN ACCELERATION

Adopting sponsored ads as the default driver of a brand's digital growth has proven to be an inefficient and unreliable waste of marketing budget. To optimise marketing efforts, businesses must redirect attention to content-led strategies with long-term value. Content is a highly evasive term to define; however, within the digital marketing sector, the term describes any information or idea presented in an electronic format consumable by others to inform, convince, or amuse. Content marketing refers to the 'strategic marketing approach focused on creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly defined audience — and, ultimately, to drive profitable customer action.'

Prior to the rise of content marketing, brands wielded control through marketing strategies like paid advertising that reflected what they assumed customers wanted. Over time, the internet placed power in the hands of users, who now have the liberty to research and compare products before making a choice. The implication is that digital marketing has become less of delivering advertising messages than engaging with individual customers to understand and help them communicate their needs. Although sponsored advertising targets audience segments using aggregated data, it is incapable of building meaningful, long-term relationship with customers. This demonstrates that regardless of ad spend, sponsored advertising cannot sufficiently meet a brand's marketing goals on its own (Darvidou, 2024; Du Plessis, 2017).

3.1.Organic Content + Paid Ads: Adopting a Test-Learn-Amplify Model

Although paid ads are great for short-term performance boosts, they tend to deliver less value over the long term (Darvidou, 2024). On the contrary, organic content has proven to sustain marketing activities for extended periods. Therefore, businesses must prioritise organic content strategies, such as storytelling, quality content, user-generated content (UGC), and effective brand-customer interaction over sponsored ads. However, a balanced strategy that combines both organic content and paid media holds greater value and can produce more meaningful marketing results. Accordingly, the three-stage model proposed below combines the use of organic content and paid media as a practical and efficient framework for achieving marketing goals using.

Stage One: Test

The objective of this stage of the process is to determine which content group has a high chance of success in advancing the brand's marketing goal. At this stage, the marketer follows the following steps to set up a test.

- Define the objective to be achieved by the content.

This may be introducing a product, boosting sales, changing perception, or other related marketing goals.

- Identify the target audience and testing channel.

The target audience is primarily the brand's followers on the chosen social network.

- Identify the content or elements of the content to be tested.

These may include font, placement, or posting time, among other related factors.

- Decide the format of the test.

The marketer may choose a single content for testing or use two or more content groups in an A/B format.

- Identify the content type.

Content type may be chosen based on the goal (educational or informative) or format (textual, image, carousel, illustrations, audio, video, or multimedia) and length, where applicable. Document relevant information carefully at this stage.

- Determine Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

KPIs include engagement rates (likes, comments, shares), click-through rate (CTR), watch time, conversion or sign-up rate. The test may also gauge attitude to the ad or the brand.

- Specify the test duration.
- Launch the content on a chosen social network.

Stage Two: Learn

This stage of the model involves monitoring content performance in real time and documenting data progressively. After the set duration, the marketer analyses collected data against predefined metrics to ascertain content performance and compares, where applicable, to determine which elements of the content performed well or otherwise. The marketer also identifies weaknesses in the content, risks involved, and estimates possible financial costs and outcomes. Brands may choose to change certain elements of the content and do a rerun until there is clear and relevant data to base a decision for the next stage.

Stage Three: Amplify

At this stage, the marketer uses information derived to determine the successful content or elements and intensifies with paid ads. Only content that has achieved a statistically proven organic engagement rate (OER) is accelerated with sponsored ads to gain a wider reach.

The Test-Learn-Amplify model is cost-effective since the advertising budget is tailored toward organic content that has shown evidence of high performance. The model prevents unnecessary ad spend and ensures maximisation of advertising budget. Similarly, it integrates paid media with content for optimal short-term returns and long-term rewards. Thus, organic content stands as a long-term delivery mechanism for building trust, understanding customers and their needs, and proffering solutions, while paid advertising is repositioned as a performance multiplier.

Evidence from the literature supports the feasibility of the proposed model. Kumar (2021) attests to the effectiveness of ad testing in identifying false positives and mitigating risks. The model can also scale marketing campaigns, boost ROI, and provide a more personalised experience for customers (Korotkov, 2011; Kumar, 2021).

4. CONCLUSION

Increasing ad spend without a corresponding adjustment in content and related marketing components results in media saturation, which, ironically, has proven to be an inefficient use of ad budget. Sponsored ads alone cannot guarantee growth, as effective social media marketing requires a balance between paid promotions and value-oriented organic efforts that prioritise customer relationship. Therefore, businesses must avoid mass spending and adopt content-driven approaches using the test-learn-amplify model. Rather than centralising sponsored ads, businesses must test organic content that aligns with the platform naturally and amplify only content that has shown evidence of results. By balancing both organic and paid methods, brands can increase visibility and boost conversions efficiently. That said, an empirical study is needed to validate the effectiveness and applicability of the proposed model, especially for digital start-ups without an existing social media following.

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