

THE IMPACT OF INFLUENCER MARKETING ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOR IN THE GEN Z POPULATION

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ABSTRACT - Amidst the growing dominance of social media in shaping consumer culture, influencer marketing has emerged as a powerful mechanism for influencing digitally native audiences. This study critically examines how three key variables—social media usage, influencer engagement, and purchase behavior—interact to shape the consumption decisions of Generation Z consumers. Drawing on a cross-sectional, survey-based design, quantitative data were collected from 150 Gen Z respondents aged 18–26 and analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson’s correlation, and linear regression. Results reveal that while social media usage exerts a moderate influence, influencer engagement—operationalized through trust, credibility, and authenticity—more strongly predicts purchase behavior. Instagram emerged as the most influential platform, with lifestyle-oriented content (e.g., fitness, fashion, and travel) driving the highest engagement. These findings confirm the primacy of psychological and relational factors in influencer effectiveness and underscore the need for marketers to prioritize content resonance over mere platform visibility. The study advances digital marketing scholarship by contextualizing Gen Z consumer behavior within an evolving attention economy and offers actionable insights for brands seeking meaningful engagement with this cohort.

KEYWORDS - Influencer Marketing; Generation Z; Consumer Behavior; Social Media Engagement; Purchase Behavior; Instagram

INTRODUCTION

In the evolving landscape of digital communication, social media has radically transformed the way consumers interact with brands and make purchasing decisions. Traditional marketing approaches have increasingly given way to more personalized, peer-driven strategies—most notably, influencer marketing. This approach involves collaborations between brands and individuals with established online credibility and substantial social media followings, commonly referred to as influencers. Through content-driven storytelling, influencers play a pivotal role in shaping consumer attitudes, preferences, and behaviors. Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and

TikTok have become central to these dynamics, offering a unique blend of visual engagement and social validation.

Among the most responsive audiences to this shift is Generation Z, broadly defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012. As digital natives, Gen Z spends a significant portion of their daily lives on social platforms and is particularly influenced by the perceived authenticity and relatability of the influencers they follow. Unlike previous generations, Gen Z consumers prioritize personal connection, transparency, and interactivity in brand communications, making them more inclined to trust influencers over traditional advertisements or celebrity endorsements.

This study focuses on three interconnected constructs that shape the relationship between influencer marketing and Gen Z consumer behavior: social media usage, influencer engagement, and purchase behavior. Social media usage refers to the frequency and intensity with which Gen Z interacts with digital platforms. Influencer engagement encompasses both the behavioral and psychological dimensions of interacting with influencers—such as liking, commenting, sharing, and forming perceptions of trust, credibility, and authenticity. Purchase behavior reflects the extent to which these interactions influence actual consumer decisions, from product discovery to purchase intent.

By examining these dimensions, the study seeks to contextualize Gen Z’s consumption patterns within the broader rise of influencer-led marketing and to identify the mechanisms through which online engagement translates into tangible consumer actions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The rapid growth of social media has given rise to a substantial body of research exploring the relationship between influencer marketing and consumer behavior. Much of this literature has focused on how social media usage patterns, influencer characteristics, and engagement dynamics influence purchasing decisions, particularly among Generation Z consumers. This section critically reviews existing studies along three thematic dimensions: social media usage, influencer engagement, and purchase behavior.

Social Media Usage and Consumer Exposure

Several studies have highlighted the central role of social media platforms in shaping consumer awareness and product discovery. For instance, Varghese and Agrawal (2021) found that over 91% of Indian users aged 18–25 were active on Instagram and Facebook, with a significant proportion admitting to being influenced by product-related posts. Similarly, Nadanyiova and Sujanska (2023), in a study of Slovak Gen Z consumers, reported that 72% followed at least one influencer, and 48% had made a purchase based on influencer content. These findings suggest that platform exposure alone is sufficient to create product interest, although it may not fully explain actual purchase behavior. Mishra and Ashfaq (2023) explored demographic patterns in usage, reporting that 51.7% of participants used Instagram to discover products, with 28% of women demonstrating impulsive buying behavior compared to 14% of men. This reinforces the idea that platform preference and gender-based usage patterns influence exposure and responsiveness to influencer content.

Influencer Engagement: Trust, Authenticity, and Parasocial Dynamics

Beyond exposure, the quality of interaction with influencers plays a pivotal role in shaping consumer decision-making. Dharma et al. (2024), in a multi-country study, established that influencer traits such as trustworthiness and expertise were more important than popularity in influencing Gen Z's purchase intentions. Singh (2021), through qualitative interviews, emphasized the role of emotional connection and authenticity, noting that consumers responded more favorably to influencers who were perceived as genuine and unscripted. Similarly, Nguyen et al. (2022), using PLS-SEM with a sample of 250 Gen Z consumers, found that credibility ($\beta = 0.287$) and entertainment value ($\beta = 0.249$) were significant predictors of purchase intention. Chakola (2022) echoed these results in an Indian context, reporting that 84.5% of respondents had purchased products recommended by influencers perceived as knowledgeable and confident. Expanding on this, Grigoreva et al. (2021) introduced the importance of user-generated content (UGC) and co-creation. Their large-scale study with 2,810 Gen Z consumers revealed that audience participation generated higher levels of trust and engagement, further strengthening parasocial relationships between influencers and followers.

Purchase Behavior and Decision-Making Mechanisms

Ultimately, the effectiveness of influencer marketing is measured by its ability to drive purchase decisions. Multiple studies confirm this link, though the mechanisms vary. Satpathy et al. (2022) demonstrated that 72% of respondents were influenced by social media content, with authenticity and cultural relevance cited as the most persuasive attributes.

Černikovaitė (2019), through a gender-segmented study, found that fashion and beauty endorsements influenced 43% of women, while electronics content appealed more to men. Bansal and Rao (2024) provided case study evidence by comparing Fashion Nova and Apple's influencer strategies. Their findings concluded that visual appeal (in fashion) and expert credibility (in technology) contributed to positive purchase outcomes, particularly when influencers were well aligned with the brand.

Across these studies, recurring themes emerge: perceived sincerity of influencers, interactivity of platforms, and alignment of content with user identity all contribute to shaping consumer action. However, the extent to which engagement quality outweighs mere exposure in predicting purchase behavior remains an open question, particularly in culturally diverse contexts like India.

Author(s)	Sample & Method	Key Focus	Findings
Nadanyiova & Sujanska (2023)	520 Gen Z, survey (Slovakia)	Platform use, gender, content type	72% follow influencers; stories/videos most engaging
Dharma et al. (2024)	152 Gen Z, multi-country survey	Trustworthiness, expertise	Trust > popularity; credibility shapes purchase intent
Grigoreva et al. (2021)	2,810 Gen Z, survey (Russia)	UGC, co-creation	Participation boosts engagement and trust
Mishra & Ashfaq (2023)	358 young adults, survey (India)	Gender differences, impulsive buying	Women more impulsive; Instagram dominant
Singh (2021)	13 interviews (qualitative)	Emotional connection, word-of-mouth	Trust and unscripted content increase engagement
Černikovaitė (2019)	297 respondents (Lithuania)	Gender-specific endorsements	Fashion appeals to women; electronics to men
Nguyen et al. (2022)	250 Gen Z, SEM model	Credibility, entertainment, expertise	Credibility ($\beta = 0.287$) highest impact
Chakola (2022)	200 Gen Z, survey (India)	Communication clarity, trust	84.5% bought based on influencer suggestions

Satpathy et al. (2022)	50 Indian Gen Z, small-scale survey	Cultural alignment, authenticity	Non-commercial tone = more trust
Bansal & Rao (2024)	Case study (Apple & Fashion Nova)	Influencer-brand fit	Visuals and expertise drive engagement and sales

Research Gap

While existing literature confirms the influence of influencer marketing on Gen Z consumer behavior, several gaps remain. Prior studies often examine either social media usage or influencer characteristics in isolation, with limited attention to how these variables interact to shape purchasing behavior. Moreover, research specific to the Indian context remains relatively underexplored, despite distinct cultural and behavioral dynamics that may influence how Gen Z perceives and responds to influencer content.

Although attributes such as trust, credibility, and authenticity are frequently highlighted in prior research, few studies empirically incorporate these factors within a unified quantitative framework of influencer engagement. Additionally, the platform-specific role of Instagram—despite its dominance among Indian Gen Z consumers—has not been systematically examined within structured behavioral models.

This study addresses these gaps by investigating how social media usage and influencer engagement, both independently and in combination, predict purchase behavior among Indian Gen Z consumers.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES:

The present study was guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine the social media usage patterns of Generation Z consumers.
2. To explore the level of engagement of Generation Z with social media influencers.
3. To determine the impact of influencer marketing on the purchase behavior of Generation Z.
4. To identify the most influential content categories attracting Generation Z consumers.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

PARTICIPANTS

The target population comprised individuals aged 18 to 26 years, representing Generation Z, who were active social

media users with prior exposure to influencer content. A purposive, convenience sampling method was employed, distributing the survey through digital platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, and other social networks. A total of 150 valid responses were collected for analysis.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to investigate the relationship between social media usage, influencer engagement, and purchase behavior among Indian Gen Z consumers. A structured, survey-based approach enabled the statistical testing of hypothesized relationships while providing a snapshot of consumer behavior at a specific point in time.

DATA COLLECTION TOOLS

Data were gathered using a structured online questionnaire developed via Google Forms. The questionnaire included four sections:

1. **Demographic Information** (e.g., age, gender, education)
2. **Social Media Usage** (e.g., frequency of use, preferred platforms)
3. **Influencer Engagement** (e.g., trust, authenticity, interaction behaviors)
4. **Purchase Behavior** (e.g., influence of influencer content on consumer action)

Most items were measured on a five-point Likert scale, supplemented by multiple-choice questions for categorical preferences.

STATISTICAL TOOLS

Data analysis was performed using Microsoft Excel with the Data Analysis Toolpak. **Descriptive statistics** was used to summarize participant characteristics and behavioral trends. **Pearson's correlation coefficient** was used to examine relationships between key variables. **Regression analysis was done through two simple linear models:**

- **Model 1:** Predicting purchase behavior based on social media usage.
- **Model 2:** Predicting purchase behavior based on influencer engagement.

These analyses enabled the study to test relationships and assess the predictive strength of the independent variables.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Statistics

Data were collected from 150 respondents belonging to Generation Z (aged 18–26), representing a balanced demographic distribution. All participants were active social media users who had prior exposure to influencer content.

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the overall patterns in social media usage, influencer engagement, and purchase behavior. All variables were measured on a 5-point Likert scale. The mean scores indicate moderate social media usage ($M = 2.62$), higher influencer engagement ($M = 3.47$), and moderate purchase behavior influenced by influencers ($M = 3.05$).

Construct	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Median	Maximum
Social Media Usage	2.62	0.80	1.00	2.50	5.00
Influencer Engagement	3.47	0.84	1.00	3.60	5.00
Purchase Behavior	3.05	0.85	1.00	3.10	5.00

The results indicate **moderate levels of influencer engagement and purchase behavior**, while **social media usage levels were relatively lower**, suggesting that frequency of use may not directly reflect marketing responsiveness.

Correlation Analysis

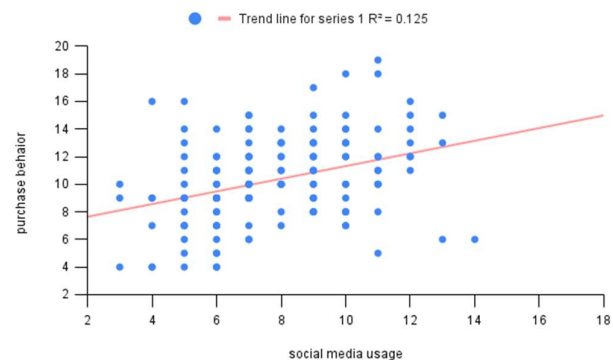
The relationship between social media usage, influencer engagement, and purchase behavior was tested using Pearson's correlation coefficient. The analysis revealed a **moderate positive correlation** between social media usage and purchase behavior, with a correlation coefficient of **0.386** significant at the **0.01 level**. This indicates that as participants' usage of social media increased, so did the likelihood of their making purchases influenced by influencer content.

A **stronger relationship** was observed between influencer engagement and purchase behavior, with a correlation coefficient of **0.589**, also significant at the **0.01 level**. This finding demonstrates that higher engagement with influencers, characterized by frequent interaction and trust in the influencer's authenticity, was more strongly associated with

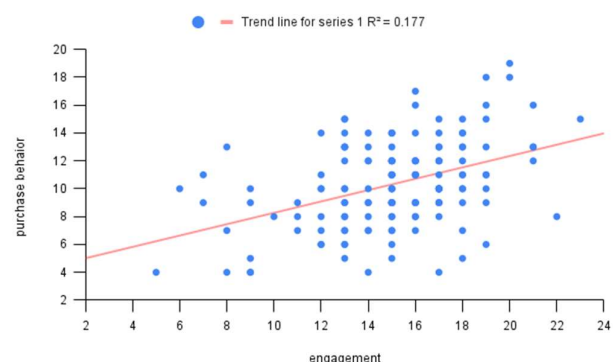
actual purchase behavior than general social media usage alone.

Regression Analysis

Further analysis using simple linear regression confirmed these relationships. When examining the predictive power of social media usage on purchase behavior, the results showed that social media usage accounted for approximately **15% of the variance** in purchase decisions ($R^2 = 0.149$), with the relationship being statistically significant ($\beta = 0.386$, $p < 0.01$). This indicates that while social media usage is a contributing factor to purchase behavior, its influence is moderate when considered independently.



In contrast, the regression model testing the impact of influencer engagement on purchase behavior demonstrated that influencer engagement explained **35% of the variance** ($R^2 = 0.347$), with the relationship being both **strong and significant** ($\beta = 0.589$, $p < 0.01$).



These findings clearly establish that influencer engagement exerts substantially greater predictive power over purchase behavior than general social media usage, highlighting the importance of **quality engagement** over mere exposure to platforms.

Categorical questions employed in the questionnaire gave a deeper insight to build upon the statistical analysis:

Preferred social media platforms among GenZ

Instagram was identified as the most frequently used platform, followed by YouTube and Snapchat. This reinforces Instagram's position as a key channel for influencer-driven marketing among Gen Z.

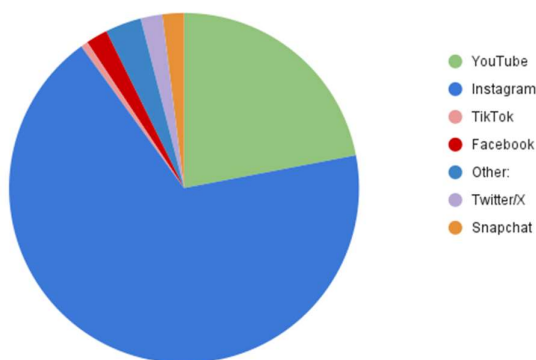


Figure 3: Preferred Social Media Platforms

Distribution of preference of influencer content type

Respondents engaged most with **lifestyle-related content**, especially in fitness, fashion, and travel. These categories were perceived as personally relevant and visually appealing, increasing their influence potential.

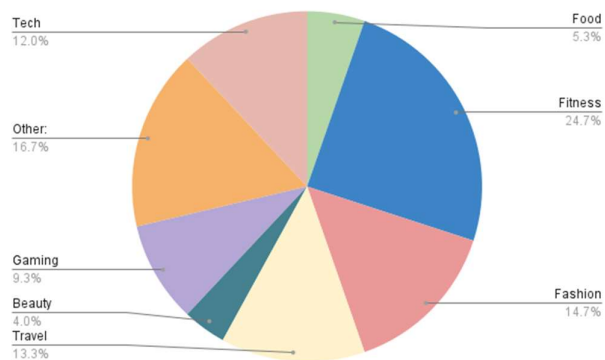


Figure 4 :Most Engaged Content Categories

Factors that drive engagement with influencers

Participants reported frequent interaction with influencer posts—mainly via likes, comments, and shares. Engagement was highest with influencers seen as **authentic and relatable**, highlighting the role of perceived trust.

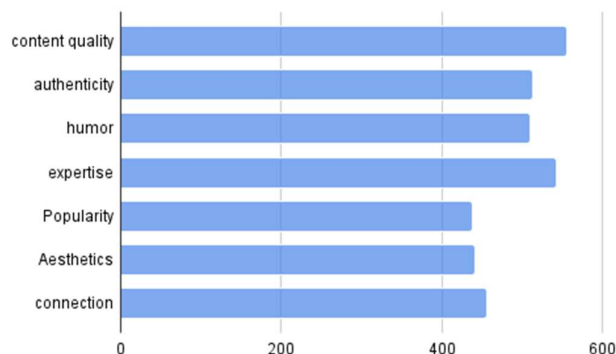


Figure 5: Frequency of Engagement with Influencer Content

Factors influencing purchase behaviors

A substantial number of respondents indicated that influencer content had led them to **consider or complete a purchase**, demonstrating that influencer engagement can translate into real consumer action.

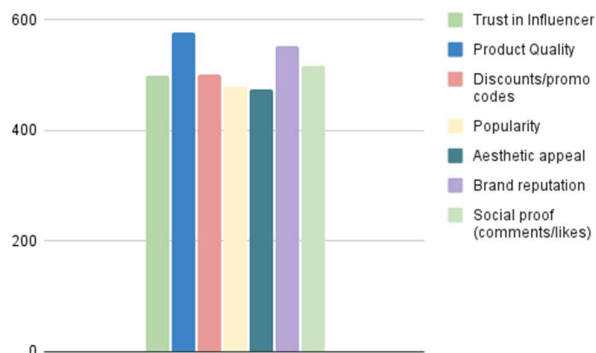


Figure 6: Influence of Influencer Content on Purchase Decisions

Overall, the results confirmed that **influencer engagement** is a **stronger predictor of purchase behavior** than social media usage alone. Instagram emerged as the **primary platform** for influencer-consumer interactions, while **lifestyle content categories**—particularly fitness, fashion, and travel—drove the **highest engagement and purchase influence**. The four charts provided visual confirmation of these trends, illustrating the clear relationship between preferred platforms, content categories, user engagement behaviors, and actual consumer decisions.

These findings suggest that while social media serves as an important entry point for product exposure, it is the **depth of interaction with influencers**, rooted in trust and perceived authenticity, that ultimately motivates purchase decisions among Generation Z consumers.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide important insights into how influencer marketing shapes consumer behavior among Generation Z in the Indian context. Consistent with prior research (e.g., Nadanyiova & Sujanska, 2023; Dharma et al., 2024), the results affirm the growing significance of influencer engagement in influencing purchase decisions among digitally native consumers.

One of the key findings of this study was the dominant role of **Instagram** as the primary platform for influencer interaction and product discovery. This aligns with the work of Mishra and Ashfaq (2023), who similarly identified Instagram as the preferred platform for product exploration among young consumers in India. The prominence of **lifestyle content**—specifically fitness, fashion, and travel—further supports the argument presented by Černikovaitė (2019), who noted the sector-specific appeal of influencer marketing, particularly in visually rich product categories.

More notably, the study found that while **social media usage** itself was positively associated with purchase behavior, it was **influencer engagement**—characterized by perceived **trust, credibility, and authenticity**—that exerted a much stronger predictive influence. This finding echoes the conclusions of studies like Nguyen et al. (2022) and Chakola (2022), both of which emphasized the critical role of influencer credibility in shaping purchase intentions among Gen Z consumers. It also reinforces the argument that **it is not mere exposure to platforms, but meaningful psychological and relational connections with influencers** that drive consumer action (Grigoreva et al., 2021).

Importantly, this study contributes to filling a recognized gap in the literature by quantitatively demonstrating the combined and individual effects of **social media usage** and **influencer engagement** on purchase behavior in the Indian context. While previous studies have examined these variables separately, few have considered them within a single, structured model specific to the behavioral tendencies of Indian Gen Z consumers.

Furthermore, the findings underscore the growing importance of **parasocial relationships** in digital marketing. As influencers increasingly assume roles akin to trusted peers rather than distant celebrities, their influence on consumer decision-making intensifies, especially when their content is perceived as personal, authentic, and relatable.

At a practical level, these findings hold significant implications for marketers. Brands targeting Gen Z consumers in India should shift their focus away from simply maximizing platform visibility and instead invest in fostering influencer

relationships that emphasize credibility, transparency, and authentic storytelling. Influencer-brand collaborations that prioritize long-term engagement over one-time promotions are likely to be more effective in driving sustained consumer loyalty and purchase behavior.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the relationship between social media usage, influencer engagement, and purchase behavior among Generation Z consumers in India. The findings confirm that while social media usage contributes to product discovery, it is **influencer engagement—rooted in trust, credibility, and authenticity—that plays the decisive role** in shaping purchase decisions. Instagram emerged as the dominant platform for influencer-consumer interactions, with lifestyle content driving the highest engagement and influence.

By addressing gaps in prior research, particularly within the Indian context, the study highlights the need for brands to focus not merely on platform exposure, but on **building meaningful relationships between influencers and consumers**. These insights provide a foundation for both academic exploration and practical strategy development in influencer marketing.

Future research should expand on these findings by incorporating larger, more diverse samples and exploring additional psychological and cultural factors that influence Gen Z's engagement with influencer content.

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