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SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCER MARKETING AND GEN Z PURCHASE BEHAVIOUR: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

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Abstract

Social media has transformed the way consumers discover, evaluate, and purchase products and services. The rapid growth of platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and other social networking channels has created new opportunities for influencer marketing. Generation Z, generally regarded as a digitally connected consumer group, frequently interacts with social media content and may be influenced by recommendations, reviews, demonstrations, and opinions communicated by social media influencers. This study examines the impact of social media influencer marketing on the purchase behaviour of Generation Z consumers.

The study focuses on influencer credibility, authenticity, expertise, attractiveness, engagement, perceived trust, and purchase intention. A descriptive and analytical research design is proposed. Primary data may be collected from Gen Z consumers through a structured questionnaire, while secondary data may be obtained from peer-reviewed journals, books, industry reports, and academic databases. Statistical tools such as descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, correlation analysis, and multiple regression can be employed. The study is expected to demonstrate that credible and authentic influencer communication can positively influence consumers' purchase intentions and buying behaviour. The findings may provide useful implications for marketers, brands, and social media influencers seeking to develop effective digital marketing strategies targeting Generation Z.

Keywords: Social Media Influencer, Influencer Marketing, Generation Z, Consumer Behaviour, Purchase Intention, Social Media, Digital Marketing, Brand Credibility.

1. Introduction

The rapid development of social media has fundamentally changed the relationship between consumers and brands. Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and other digital networks allow consumers to discover products, compare alternatives, read reviews, watch demonstrations, and interact directly with brands and content creators.

One of the most important developments within social media marketing is influencer marketing. Social media influencers are individuals who have developed an online following and are perceived by their audiences as knowledgeable, entertaining, trustworthy, or relatable in particular areas such as fashion, beauty, technology, travel, food, fitness, and lifestyle.

Influencer marketing enables companies to communicate with consumers through individuals who already have established relationships with their audiences. Unlike traditional advertising, influencer marketing may appear more personal and interactive because recommendations are delivered through social media content.

Generation Z represents an especially important consumer segment for digital marketers. This generation has grown up in an environment characterised by smartphones, social networking, online video, digital commerce, and continuous internet connectivity. Social media is therefore an important source of information and entertainment for many Gen Z consumers.

However, the effectiveness of influencer marketing cannot be assumed. Consumers may respond differently depending on the influencer's credibility, expertise, authenticity, attractiveness, number of followers, level of engagement, and perceived relationship with the audience. Excessive sponsorships or content perceived as artificial may also reduce consumer trust.

Therefore, this study examines the relationship between social media influencer marketing and the purchase behaviour of Generation Z consumers.

2. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework proposes that characteristics of social media influencers influence consumers' perceptions and subsequently affect purchase intention and purchase behaviour.

Independent Variables

Influencer Characteristics

Credibility

Expertise

Authenticity

Attractiveness

Trustworthiness

Engagement

Mediating/Supporting Variable

Consumer Trust

Dependent Variable

Gen Z Purchase Behaviour

Indicators:

Purchase intention

Brand preference

Product consideration

Actual purchase behaviour

Willingness to recommend

Conceptual Relationship

Influencer Characteristics



Consumer Trust



Purchase Intention



Purchase Behaviour

The framework can therefore be represented as:

Influencer Credibility + Authenticity + Expertise + Engagement → Consumer Trust → Purchase Intention → Purchase Behaviour

3. Review of Literature

Freberg et al. (2011) Freberg and colleagues examined social media influencers and found that influencers can be perceived as credible sources of information. Their research highlighted characteristics such as trustworthiness, competence, and interpersonal appeal.

De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders (2017) The researchers examined how the number of followers and product divergence influence perceptions of social media influencers. Their findings demonstrate that influencer characteristics can affect consumer attitudes toward brands.

Lou and Yuan (2019) Lou and Yuan examined influencer marketing and consumer responses. Their research suggested that the informative value of influencer content and influencer credibility can contribute to consumer trust and purchase intentions.

Sokolova and Kefi (2020) The authors examined the relationship between influencer credibility and purchase intention and found that characteristics such as perceived credibility and par asocial interaction can influence consumer purchase intentions.

Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) Their research examined social media use among young female consumers and found that social media personalities can influence purchasing decisions, particularly in fashion and lifestyle-related areas.

Ki and Kim (2019) Ki and Kim investigated how social media influencers can influence consumer behaviour. Their study suggested that consumers may respond positively when influencers create meaningful relationships and effectively communicate product-related information.

Research Gap

Although previous studies have examined influencer marketing and consumer responses, there remains scope for further empirical research focusing specifically on Generation Z consumers, particularly in the Indian context. Gen Z consumers have distinctive digital behaviours and may respond differently to influencer credibility, authenticity, and sponsored content. This study attempts to address this gap.

4. Statement of the Problem

Social media influencer marketing has become an important promotional strategy for brands. However, companies face uncertainty regarding the extent to which influencer characteristics actually influence Gen Z consumers' purchase decisions.

Consumers may trust some influencers while perceiving others as overly commercial or inauthentic. The growing number of sponsored posts also raises questions regarding whether influencer marketing continues to have the same persuasive effect.

To what extent does social media influencer marketing influence the purchase behaviour of Generation Z consumers, and which influencer characteristics have the greatest influence on their purchasing decisions?

5. Objectives of the Study

The study aims to:

1. Examine the influence of social media influencers on Gen Z purchase behaviour.
2. Identify the major social media platforms used by Gen Z consumers.
3. Examine the relationship between influencer credibility and purchase intention.
4. Analyse the influence of influencer authenticity on consumer trust.
5. Examine the impact of influencer expertise on purchase decisions.
6. Determine whether influencer engagement influences purchase intention.
7. Examine the relationship between consumer trust and purchase behaviour.
8. Identify the factors that make influencer marketing effective among Gen Z consumers.

6. Research Hypotheses

H₀1

There is no significant relationship between influencer credibility and Gen Z purchase intention.

H₁1

There is a significant positive relationship between influencer credibility and Gen Z purchase intention.

H₀2

Influencer authenticity does not significantly influence consumer trust.

H₁2

Influencer authenticity significantly influences consumer trust.

H₀3

Influencer expertise does not significantly influence purchase intention.

H₁3

Influencer expertise significantly influences purchase intention.

H₀4

Influencer engagement does not significantly influence purchase intention.

H₁4

Influencer engagement significantly influences purchase intention.

H₀5

Consumer trust does not significantly influence Gen Z purchase behaviour.

H₁5

Consumer trust significantly influences Gen Z purchase behaviour.

7. Research Methodology

7.1 Research Design

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design. The descriptive component examines social media usage and influencer-following behaviour, while the analytical component investigates relationships between influencer characteristics, consumer trust, purchase intention, and purchase behaviour.

7.2 Population of the Study

The population consists of Generation Z consumers who actively use social media platforms and are exposed to influencer marketing content.

For this study, Gen Z may be operationally defined as respondents born approximately between 1997 and 2012, with the final eligible age range determined according to the study's fieldwork date and ethical requirements.

7.3 Sample Size

For an empirical study:

Proposed sample size: 400 respondents.

7.4 Sampling Technique

Purposive and convenience sampling may be used to identify Gen Z respondents who actively use social media. A stratified sampling approach based on gender, age group, educational status, or occupation would provide stronger representation where a suitable sampling frame exists.

7.5 Sources of Data

Primary Data-Primary data can be collected through a structured questionnaire administered to Gen Z consumers.

Secondary Data-Secondary information can be obtained from: Peer-reviewed journals

Academic books Research databases marketing reports Industry publications Government and institutional reports

8. Questionnaire Design

A five-point Likert scale may be used: Scale

Response

1 Strongly Disagree

2 Disagree

3 Neutral

4 Agree

5 Strongly Agree

Influencer Credibility

I consider the influencers I follow to be credible sources of product information.

I believe influencers provide reliable information about products.

I trust recommendations from influencers I regularly follow.

Influencer Authenticity

Influencers I follow appear genuine in their content.

I can distinguish between genuine recommendations and paid promotions.

Authentic influencer content increases my interest in a product.

Influencer Expertise

Influencers I follow have good knowledge of the products they promote.

I value influencers who provide detailed product information.

Influencer expertise affects my perception of a product.

Engagement

I interact with influencer content through likes, comments, or shares.

I pay attention to influencers who actively communicate with followers.

High engagement makes influencer recommendations more interesting.

Consumer Trust

I trust influencers who consistently provide honest opinions.

I feel confident considering products recommended by trusted influencers.

I believe trusted influencers can provide useful product information.

Purchase Intention

Influencer recommendations can make me interested in purchasing a product.

I am likely to consider products recommended by influencers.

Influencer content can affect my final purchase decision.

9. Variables of the Study

Variable-Indicators

Influencer Credibility-Reliability, trustworthiness, believability

Authenticity-Genuineness, transparency, originality

Expertise-Knowledge, experience, product understanding

Attractiveness-Presentation, personality, appeal

Engagement-Interaction, communication, audience involvement

Consumer Trust-Confidence, reliability, honesty

Purchase Intention-Product consideration, willingness to purchase

Purchase Behaviour-Actual purchase, brand preference, recommendation

10. Tools for the Study

The following statistical tools may be used:

1. Percentage Analysis To analyse demographic characteristics and social media usage.

2. Mean and Standard Deviation-To examine respondents' perceptions of influencer marketing.

3. Cronbach's Alpha-To assess the reliability of questionnaire constructs.

4. Pearson Correlation-To examine relationships between influencer characteristics and purchase intention.

5. Multiple Regression Analysis-To determine the influence of influencer characteristics on purchase intention and behaviour.

6. t-test-To compare two demographic groups where appropriate.

7. ANOVA-To determine whether responses differ significantly across multiple demographic categories.

8. Statistical software: SPSS, R, Stata, or Python.

11. Data Analysis and Interpretation

Important: The numerical values below are illustrative/simulated examples. They must be replaced with actual survey results before submitting the article as an empirical study.

11.1 Descriptive Statistics

Variable-Mean SD

Influencer Credibility

4.02

0.79

Influencer Authenticity

3.91

0.86

Influencer Expertise

3.87

0.83

Influencer Engagement

4.08

0.77

Consumer Trust

3.89

0.85

Purchase Intention

3.94

0.82

Interpretation

The illustrative findings indicate that Gen Z respondents generally have positive perceptions of influencer marketing. Influencer engagement has the highest mean score, suggesting that interactive content may be particularly attractive to younger consumers. Influencer expertise and authenticity also demonstrate positive perceptions.

12. Reliability Analysis

Construct

Cronbach's Alpha

Influencer Credibility

0.88

Authenticity

0.86

Expertise

0.84

Engagement

0.87

Consumer Trust

0.90

Purchase Intention

0.91

Interpretation

The illustrative Cronbach's Alpha values are above the commonly used 0.70 level, suggesting satisfactory internal consistency among the measurement items.

13. Correlation Analysis

Variables

Influencer Marketing

Purchase Intention

Influencer Marketing

1.000

0.674

Purchase Intention

0.674

1.000

Note: $p < 0.01$ **Interpretation**

The illustrative correlation coefficient of 0.674 indicates a moderately strong positive relationship between influencer marketing and purchase intention. This suggests that positive perceptions of influencer marketing may be associated with greater willingness among Gen Z consumers to consider purchasing promoted products.

14. Regression Analysis

The following regression model can be used:

$$PI = \beta_0 + \beta_1(IC) + \beta_2(IA) + \beta_3(IE) + \beta_4(IG) + \varepsilon$$

Where:

PI = Purchase Intention

IC = Influencer Credibility

IA = Influencer Authenticity

IE = Influencer Expertise

IG = Influencer Engagement

 ε = Error term

Illustrative Regression Results

Predictor

Beta

t-value

p-value

Influencer Credibility

0.31

5.72

<0.001

Influencer Authenticity

0.27

4.98

<0.001

Influencer Expertise

0.19

3.56

<0.001

Influencer Engagement

0.22

4.07

<0.001

Illustrative $R^2 = 0.58$

Interpretation

The illustrative results suggest that influencer credibility has the strongest positive relationship with purchase intention, followed by authenticity, engagement, and expertise.

An illustrative R^2 of 0.58 would mean that approximately 58% of the variation in purchase intention is explained by the variables included in the model. This must be replaced by the R^2 calculated from actual survey data.

15. Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis

Illustrative Result

H₁1: Influencer credibility significantly influences purchase intention

Supported

H₁2: Influencer authenticity significantly influences consumer trust

Supported

H₁3: Influencer expertise significantly influences purchase intention

Supported

H₁4: Influencer engagement significantly influences purchase intention

Supported

H₁5: Consumer trust significantly influences purchase behaviour

Supported

Based on the illustrative statistical results.

16. Results and Discussion

The proposed analysis indicates that social media influencer marketing can have an important influence on Gen Z consumer behaviour.

1. Influencer Credibility

Credibility is likely to be one of the strongest determinants of influencer effectiveness. Gen Z consumers may be more willing to consider recommendations from influencers who provide reliable information and demonstrate consistency.

2. Influencer Authenticity

Authenticity is particularly important because consumers are frequently exposed to sponsored content. When promotional content is perceived as genuine and transparent, consumers may develop greater trust in the influencer and the promoted brand.

3. Influencer Expertise

Influencers who possess knowledge about a particular product category can provide useful information to consumers. For example, technology influencers may explain product specifications, while beauty influencers may demonstrate product usage.

4. Influencer Engagement

Interactive communication can strengthen the relationship between influencers and followers. Comments, live sessions, product demonstrations, and responses to followers may increase audience involvement.

5. Consumer Trust

Trust can act as an important mechanism through which influencer marketing affects purchase intention. When consumers trust the influencer, recommendations may be perceived as more informative and persuasive.

6. Gen Z Purchase Behaviour

Gen Z consumers may use social media not only for entertainment but also for product discovery and evaluation. Consequently, influencer-generated content can influence brand awareness, product consideration, purchase intention, and potentially actual buying behaviour.

17. Major Findings

Based on the proposed research framework, the study is expected to find that:

1. Social media is an important source of product information for Gen Z consumers.
2. Influencer credibility positively affects purchase intention.
3. Authentic influencer content can increase consumer trust.
4. Influencer expertise can improve perceptions of promoted products.
5. Audience engagement can strengthen influencer effectiveness.
6. Consumer trust is an important factor in purchase decisions.
7. Influencer recommendations can influence product consideration.
8. Gen Z consumers may respond positively to informative and authentic sponsored content.
9. Excessive promotional content may reduce perceived authenticity.
10. Effective influencer marketing requires a strong relationship between influencers, audiences, and brands.

18. Conclusion

Social media influencer marketing has become an important component of contemporary digital marketing. For Generation Z consumers, social media platforms provide opportunities not only for entertainment and communication but also for discovering and evaluating products.

The study suggests that influencer credibility, authenticity, expertise, and engagement can contribute to consumer trust and purchase intention. Among these factors, credibility and authenticity are particularly important because consumers are increasingly exposed to sponsored content and may distinguish between genuine recommendations and purely commercial promotions.

For marketers, the findings imply that selecting influencers solely on the basis of follower count may not be sufficient. Brands should consider audience relevance, credibility, engagement, expertise, and authenticity when selecting influencers.

Influencers should also maintain transparency regarding paid partnerships and provide meaningful information rather than excessive promotional content. Building long-term trust with followers is likely to be more valuable than short-term promotional activity.

The study therefore concludes that effective influencer marketing among Gen Z depends on credibility, authenticity, meaningful engagement, and consumer trust rather than simply social media popularity.

19. Limitations of the Study

1. The study may be limited by the geographical coverage of respondents.
2. Self-reported responses may contain personal or social-desirability bias.
3. Gen Z consumers have diverse social media habits.
4. Social media platforms and algorithms change rapidly.
5. The influence of individual influencers may differ significantly across product categories.
6. Cross-sectional research may not fully capture long-term changes in consumer behaviour.

20. Suggestions

1. Brands should select influencers based on credibility rather than follower numbers alone.
2. Influencers should maintain transparency about sponsored content.
3. Brands should prioritise influencers whose audience matches their target consumers.
4. Influencers should provide informative and authentic product content.
5. Companies should measure engagement quality rather than only follower counts.
6. Long-term influencer-brand relationships should be encouraged.
7. Brands should monitor consumer feedback and sentiment.
8. Influencer campaigns should use platform-specific content strategies.
9. Marketers should avoid excessive promotional content.
10. Consumer trust should be treated as a central objective of influencer marketing.

21. Future Research

Future researchers can:

1. Compare Gen Z with Millennials.
2. Compare Instagram, YouTube, and other platforms.
3. Examine micro-influencers versus celebrity influencers.
4. Study influencer marketing across different product categories.
5. Examine the impact of influencer disclosure on consumer trust.
6. Study parasocial relationships and purchase behaviour
7. Examine live-stream shopping and influencer commerce.
8. Conduct longitudinal research on influencer marketing effectiveness.
9. Compare Indian Gen Z consumers with consumers in other countries.

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