

Building Brands through Trust: The Role of Influencers in Consumer Decision-Making

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Abstract—*This study seeks to determine the effects of influencer marketing on consumer attitudes, intentions to purchase, and brand loyalty through the lens of a young, digitally reliant population. A questionnaire was used for a quantitative study with 115 subjects to assess the ability of social media influencers to impact consumer attitudes and purchase intentions.*

Findings conclude that the level of interest in influencers among the respondents is overwhelmingly statistically significant; most actively follow social media influencers and acknowledge their impact. The main categories of products involve fashion, beauty, exercise, food, etc. Additionally, within the limited quantitative sample, 65% have purchased items after exposure to an influencer advertisement.

Respondents feel that social media influencer marketing is more impactful than traditional TV or magazine advertising. The results reveal that the perceived effectiveness of an influencer marketing campaign relies mainly on whether the audience feels the message is genuine, the quality of the effort put forth, and whether the influencer is legitimately connected or affiliated with the product/company.

In addition to the benefits assessed for influencer marketing, negatives include distrust of the assessments themselves, concerns about overselling, and the perception that everything is overly commercialized. Some believe lip service is given when products should merely be shared to offer advice, not promoted excessively.

Ultimately, brands can capitalize on effective influencer marketing to increase equity for their branding if they aim to champion trust, emotional brand equity, and calls to action. This study recommends that brands use proper, transparent sponsorship disclosures and that influencers be trained to maintain authenticity. Brands should embrace strategic, responsible partnerships with these persons of influence and learn how to achieve transparent sponsorship disclosure.

Ultimately, the findings provide a new way of understanding consumers in response to digital tides and explain why influencers have become the primary fluid link between consumers and companies' branding efforts (Delbaere, Michael, and Phillips, 2020).

Keywords: Influencer Marketing, Consumer Purchase Behavior, Brand Trust, Social Media Influencers, Digital Advertising Strategies

Introduction

The issue of influencer marketing is a major evolution in the digital marketing realm, which makes for a compelling topic to evaluate when assessing shifts in consumer behaviour and branding perceptions. Influencer marketing is one of the most potent forms of mass communication in the present day, especially with social media trends (Vrontis et al., 2021). It indicates a massive evolution in the way consumers and brands interact, now established through the use of authenticity merged with sales promotion. For instance, in the early digital marketing years, the focus was more on traditional celebrity endorsement or corporate sponsorships/business commercials. Yet recently—within the decade—brands have turned to social media influencers—individuals who amassed followings across different platforms through everyday behaviour—to promote their products and services instead. From 2012 onward, many campaigns run predominantly on the new social sites Instagram and YouTube solidified this evolution.

The predictions and trends for influencers over the last year showed that influencer marketing would only become more popular, but on a slightly more advanced level (Vrontis et al., 2021). For example, efforts to maintain longer collaborations with micro-influencers, more specific targeting, and a focus on content that isn't sales-generated convey that brands have strategic opportunities to make a difference for longevity. But which campaigns supported these findings? Tinder India's #SwagSeSolo campaign to ensure a niche Indian audience remembers them moving forward after attempting internationalized popularity, Mamearth's efforts with skincare, health, and wellness micro-influencers to integrate necessary skincare into viewers' lives to show Mamearth's pivot from just a product to something natural and integrated into the daily routine.

Branding is impacted by influencer marketing and subsequently influences consumer decision-making.

Influencer marketing is the understanding of consumer-brand relationships as they exist in today's digitally-driven world. An influencer is someone who possesses the ability to affect a consumer's behaviours and buying patterns. They are often seen on platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter and behave as a better alternative to traditional advertising such as print, which has less persuasive power. Marketing is the facilitation of the sale of a good or service through the creation and communication of information and offerings—either value—established by the seller and the intended buyer (Gronroos, 2006). The marketing process must always assess the position of consumers because they are ultimate buyers, and without the potential for a purchase as an endpoint, all efforts fail. Yet consumers also have inevitable qualities that influence their final selections beyond their intrinsic belief systems; educated selections are made based upon the social pressures exerted by an influencer's output. Brands are the name, term, sign, symbol, or combination of these, which identifies the goods or services of one seller while differentiating them from others; a good or service has an identity—an identity marketed and understood by cultural and emotional connections—intended to create brand loyalty and long-term awareness of existence. Therefore, decision-making is a psychological phenomenon of consumer interaction with goods and services that requires compilation of all information received—brand-based assertions and efforts—and requires one to come to a conclusion about what will work best for them, which they then apply to action (Hansen, 2005). This research post will reveal how branding is affected by influencer marketing and subsequently influences consumer decision-making.

Literature Review

Influencer marketing is increasing. In recent years, it has become a more dominant practice due to shifts in consumer behaviours relating to COVID quarantine measures, increased access to short-form video and digital interactions, and rising demands for brand transparency and authenticity. As such, as more people encounter digital interactions with influencer content, current studies seek to explore the psychological and behavioural effects of such content in this post-COVID world. *The Influence of Influencer Marketing on Consumer Purchasing Decisions* by Feby Septiani (2025). This article examines how the evolution of consumer behaviours is affected by this form of marketing across social media channels like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok.

Educating oneself about Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing is a targeted collaborative partnership between a brand and a personality or influencer who has managed to cultivate a loyal following digitally. Compared to "traditional celebrities," influencers establish ongoing authentic relationships to build trust with their fan base; thus, they develop emotional connections with their followers, which reduce psychological reactance to brand-sent messages (*The Role of Influencers in the Consumer Decision-Making Process* by Zak & Hasprova, 2020).

The Role of Authenticity and Micro-Influencers

Recently, the focus on authenticity has taken on an increasingly important role with influencer marketing (*More Than Meets the Eye: The Functional Components Underlying Influencer Marketing* – Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Campbell & Farrell (2020) cite prior studies showing that consumers are more aware of marketing tactics and less susceptible to overt advertising. Thus, consumers seek relatable content they perceive to be honest. For example, factors such as trust/purchase intention have been found to be greater with micro-influencers than macro-influencers/cross-promoters/celebrities. Micro-influencers, who have fewer followers than average but boast a significantly engaged following, connectedness, and perceived honest use/gain from products, render them the most likely "beneficial agent" to purposely drive purchase intention.

Emotional Stimulation and Parasocial Relationships

The article "*Instagram Made Me Buy It*" by Djafarova and Bowes (2021) studies impulsive buying behaviour for Gen Z females and how it relates to fashion (specific to the United Kingdom) when triggered by Instagram. The research project uses the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) framework in determining which Instagram marketing strategies (Trends versus Influencer Marketing; Micro versus Macro Influencers; Pictures versus Videos; Sponsored Posts versus User-Generated Content) inspire impulsive buying behaviour for Gen Z females—and finds that awareness through influencers and user-generated content encourages impulse buys.

Effect of Platform and Content Type

With the onset of numerous platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts, there appeared a change in the levels of form and substance of influencer content. Jain, Rana, and Dwivedi (2022) found that "short, visually rich, and entertaining content leads to higher engagement and recall rates." Storytelling, humour, and real-life experiences have been furnished by influencers as the three principal reasons behind consumer trust and action.

Influencer Marketing in the Indian Context

Post-pandemic, the Indian influencer marketing market has seen rapid growth adapting to the localized cultural import. As per the report titled "*Tuning into Consumer*," EY India (2022) reveals that consumers now want to consume content in regional languages, and influencers from Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities have started becoming more prominent. The Indian audience appreciates content that is educational and informative, such as product tutorials or personal experience reviews, over flashy promotion, especially in domains like finance, health, and sustainable living.

Dhanesh and Duthler (2023), citing studies conducted in the recent past, have stated that Indian consumers have become more sophisticated now and expect both influencers and brands to be transparent, to share their values, and to be socially responsible to the extent that social causes,

sustainability, or mental health awareness are supported by influencers... alongside brand endorsement.

More generally, recent studies see both influencer marketing and its demand as having further developed. Authenticity, emotional connection, cultural relativity, and transparency in content have been cited as the four pillars that shape and influence any influencer's effectiveness. In contrast, maintaining trust in more market-oriented and commercialized times poses a challenge. Especially in divided markets like India, influencer marketing remains a unique alternative for strategically and culturally sensitive storytelling to establish more intense consumer relations on a deeper and more enduring level.

Research Gap

According to an extensive review of the literature, consumer attitudes toward brands through influencer marketing have been studied significantly, but most studies, among others, Černikovaitė (2019) and Septiani (2024), are heavily dependent on secondary data and theoretical models and tend to focus more on platforms like Facebook and Instagram. In reviewing the studies, they do account for certain regional contexts but tend to overgeneralize consumer responses. When looking at the trend, COVID-19 has reshaped consumers' traditional digital habits, especially younger people.

What our study does is that it understands influencer culture from a first-hand, experiential standpoint of a Gen Z consumer and digital native. The prior studies were done before or during the early stages of influencer marketing, and this was before COVID-19 shaped the current fast-evolving influencer space we are currently in. The lockdowns of 2020 saw a large acceleration in the movement toward digital content democratization, which meant that there are now countless young people continuing to use smartphones, ring lights, and social media from their own homes on their own terms, and they have emerged as influencers in their own right. More than just how digital content is experienced, this has altered both the body of influencers and the body of consumers who are interacting with brand messages.

Our research also considers the post-pandemic consumer landscape that reflects the mentality of today's consumer, who values trust, relatability, and authentic communication above all. Much of the past research does not take into account how the pandemic + digital saturation + social isolation have reframed consumer value in influencer-brand relationships.

Importantly, in contrast to previous research which primarily analyses referencing statistical impacts or marketing frameworks, We combine qualitative/real-life experiences/first-hand experiences of how consumers use media and observe it secondly through content, meaning we combine both first-hand and second-hand/media data to use expertise to demonstrate a deeper understanding of how contemporary consumers view influencer marketing.

We are using lived experience, which represents an evolution of social science research, combining academic research and lived experience, and will capture a fresh perspective to normalize a developing insider viewpoint to showcase the thinking, rationale, and motivation of the consumer today as they respond to their values with new consumption norms across marketing practices alongside the Gen Z generation, who are the audiences and creators in the influencer ecosystem.

Theoretical Framework

1. Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) – Ajzen (1991):

The Theory of Planned Behaviour supports that behaviour is the result of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1985). As such, in the concept of influencer marketing:

- Attitude relates to whether consumers have a positive or negative response to buying something because of an influencer.
- Subjective norms result from endorsement by the influencer and their community, which suggests buying something is an appropriate action—and often, a trendy one.
- Perceived behavioural control is the result of whether actions can be taken and if the information is available and credible—in many situations, influencers make information more credible, available, and relatable.

Therefore, this theory applies to assess how consumers will respond to an influencer's content, because if a transformation of those values is possible, and they align with what a consumer believes, it's only natural to want to convert those beliefs into action.

Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM):

Therefore, where the eWOM comes into play, it concentrates on the quasi-advertisement nature of influencers—with their word and developments come information vetted by peers (Delafrooz, Rahmati, and Abdi, 2019). Instead of a formalized commercial stunt, eWOM is an informal transaction borne out of trust that viewers compile on their part and trust they assume forthcoming from the influencer. Yet these influencers are more than just random strangers who stumbled upon a product. They are akin to peer-reviewed journals, adopting a story of their own to pass along to viewers and compiling assessments of how other like-minded individuals may view products in kind.

Thus, through storytelling and anecdotal evidence, behind-the-scenes peeks, Q&As and comment sections, and live chats, the ability for a viewer to truly engage with the content creates a society that would not exist through commercially attempted messaging. Rather, it's peer-to-peer.

Post-Lockdown Contextual Relevance

What also makes my framework relevant is the contextual awareness of the digital transfer post-lockdown since March 2020. In a society where social media dominance and reliance

happened overnight—especially with lockdowns during a sometimes-impersonal winter—more people found solace in social media platforms, and many turned to rely upon content creation/influencing as a viable career option post-lockdown. More people have the ability to become influencers, and during this analysis through my Gen Z perspective, I not only come to understand from the researcher's viewpoint but also from the inside analysis of such influenced media.

Research Objectives

1. To explore the social media influencer effect on buying behaviour for a targeted Gen Z segment.
2. To evaluate trust, authenticity and engagement as relevant factors for successful influencer partnerships.
3. To use the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and eWOM to assess actions and attitudes toward influencer marketing.
4. To note that post-lockdown there was a boom in content creators and accessibility to content creation, which means more people than ever took on the role of social media influencers.
5. To compare consumer responses to influencers based on content niches—fashion, beauty, electronics, lifestyle, etc.
6. To contribute to the discussion with a qualitative Gen Z approach in addition to academic peer reviewed comparative approaches.
7. To provide tactical suggestions for brands on how to work with social media influencers to create genuine connections with consumers that translate into buying decisions.

Research Questions

1. Is influencer marketing causing consumers to purchase things they wouldn't have purchased otherwise, particularly regarding Gen Z?
2. How do trust, authenticity and engagement affect an influencer's reputation and consumer perception of their marketing?
3. Where does the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) come into play when analysing how social media influencers affect consumers?
4. Post-lockdown, why has an increased population of social media influencers changed consumer perceptions about products and the likelihood of purchasing online?
5. What products are affected by social media influencers and do consumers respond similarly regardless of product type?
6. Does relatability and previous storytelling make a social media marketing campaign more valid due to personal connections?

What can brands do to mitigate authenticity and trust when using social media influencers in a hyper-saturated marketplace effectively? **Research Methodology**

This study aims to explore the efficacy of influencer marketing on consumer behaviour specific to the Indian

market. It highlights the influencers' capacity to control buying decisions, brand perceptions, and consumer trust. Ultimately, the study seeks to understand the extent to which influencer marketing changes consumer attitudes towards brands/products, facilitates purchase intentions, and empowers those who did not previously possess such control via traditional marketing campaigns.

Nature of Influencer Marketing:

This study finds out how influencer marketing is used across platforms from Instagram and YouTube to niche applications like Moj and Josh. It reviews the hierarchy of influencers (mega, macro, micro, and nano) and how the tiered levels of trust diffuse consumer trust and subsequently brand loyalty.

Channels of Dissemination:

The importance of analysing influencer marketing through channels of dissemination such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and byte-sized video applications demonstrates the accessibility of influencer marketing and the engagement it holds and penetrates across various demographic levels within India.

Impact on Indian Consumers:

The focal point of the primary research question is the impact of such influence on Indian consumers, relative to survey responses from varying demographic populations, especially Generation Z and Millennials who engage most with digital entry points. These questions attempt to find the result of exposure to influencer marketing relative to consumer perception, emotional engagement with brands, loyalty, and intention of purchase.

Consumer Buying Behaviour:

The final question that the research answers is: how much influence does influencer marketing contribute to buying behaviour in India? This means assessing whether influencer marketing provides better product awareness, fosters trust in brands, and whether consumers actually buy something or recommend something based on the influence.

Hypothesis:

H₀ (Null Hypothesis): Influencer marketing has no significant impact on consumer perception or purchasing behaviour. Most importantly, this null hypothesis (H₀) is that even though social media influencers exist and reign supreme, the results would be no different than if no one was there to suggest things to consumers, and they have a neutral attitude towards brands with or without the help of influencers.

H₁ (Alternative Hypothesis): Influencer marketing has a significant impact on consumer perception and purchasing behaviour.

Therefore, through the alternative hypothesis (H₁), one can predict that given exposure to influencer marketing, consumer perception of specific brands will be enhanced in comparison to when no marketing is done, fostering trust and brand loyalty with increased intent to purchase.

Methodology of the Study

Quantitative Method:

Survey

The quantitative method used to determine "The Impact of Influencer Marketing on Consumers" is survey. Surveys serve as a baseline for statistical data collection regarding consumer perception and subsequent action associated with marketed content via social media influencers (Vrontis et al., 2021). It arrives at a conclusion based on how well influencer marketing penetrates a situation and why, ultimately, it has an impact on consumers and their behaviours.

Rationale for Survey Method:

Surveying is important to understand the approach. Surveying provides insight directly from the horse's mouth—what consumers are thinking ultimately helps understand what could further persuade or influence them with future exposure. Survey assesses quantitatively how much consumers trust influencers, if they purchase based on influencer interaction, and how they engage with brands after influencer-themed situations. Surveying allows for comprehensive findings across expansive data definitions for set variables in a quantifiable manner to seek statistically significant results (Roberts, 1999).

Sampling Strategy:

Random sampling relative to demographics (age, gender) is the sampling strategy. This makes findings generalizable with proper adjustments but also gives a deeper understanding as to why certain brands fare better or worse with influencer content than others based upon demographic-based factors.

Sample Design:

- **Survey (Quantitative):**
 - o Sample Methodology: Questionnaires distributed to a random population of all ages and genders.
 - o The sample population is inclusive of different demographics, which offers a well-rounded, legitimate study of the phenomenon.

Sample Size:

- **Survey (Quantitative):** Sample of 115 respondents.

Sampling Method:

- **Survey (Quantitative):** Simple random sampling to send out questionnaire.

Data Analysis:

Quantitative data collected through the survey will be statistically analysed. Trends, correlations, and patterns will be identified to interpret the role of influencer marketing in shaping consumer behaviour. Statistical tools will be applied to derive meaningful insights regarding the effectiveness and reach of influencer marketing strategies.

Findings & Data Analysis

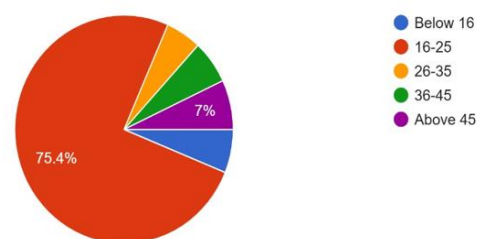
Demographic information:

Age

The age distribution shows that 75.4% of respondents are within the age group of 16–25, 7% of them are above 45 years, and the remaining 17.6% are a collective of the rest of the age groups.

The majority of respondents are from the age group of 16–25, which indicates that influencers have a major impact on this demographic, as these people are the most active on social media, engage with this type of content, and are the main target audience for marketing campaigns.

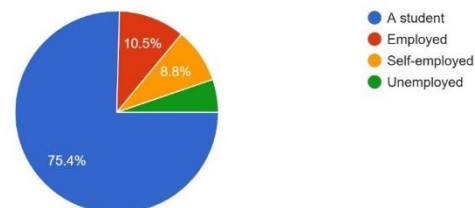
Age
114 responses



Occupation

Most of the respondents are students, which again suggests a younger demographic of respondents who are digitally active and regularly interact with marketed posts and make consumer decisions.

Are you currently:
114 responses

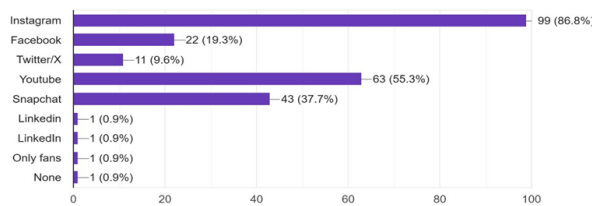


Social Media Usage and Influencer Engagement:

Social Media Platforms Usage

Instagram is the most used social media application by the respondents, making it the top priority channel for marketing. It is followed by YouTube, which is a strong influence with influencers trying food recipes and tech gadgets. The rest have niche engagement, as Snapchat and Twitter see less of the marketing.

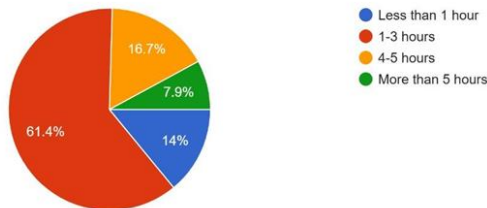
Which social media platforms do you use regularly? (Select all that apply)
114 responses



Time Spent on Social Media Every Day

Most of the social media users spend an average amount of time scrolling, which gives influencers ample time window to put out their content for the audience to engage with it timely.

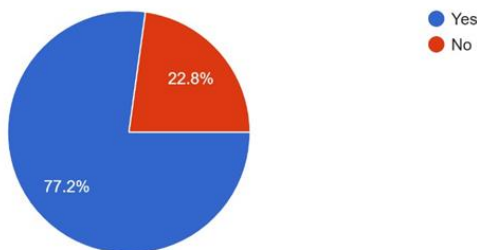
How many hours do you spend on social media daily?
114 responses



About Following Social Media Influencers

To the most valuable question, a vast number of respondents engage with social media influencers, confirming the idea that these influencers are an important source of entertainment and information for them.

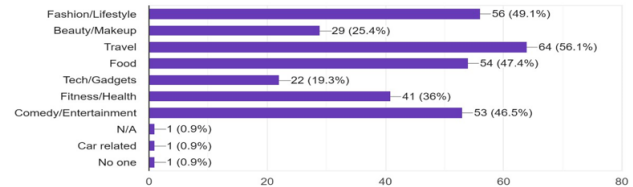
Do you follow any social media influencers?
114 responses



About the Type of Influencers Who Are Being Followed

Comedy/Entertainment, travel, and Fashion/Lifestyle are the most followed categories, closely followed by food, fitness, and beauty. This demographic is parallel with the younger respondents.

What type of influencers do you follow the most? (Select all that apply)
114 responses

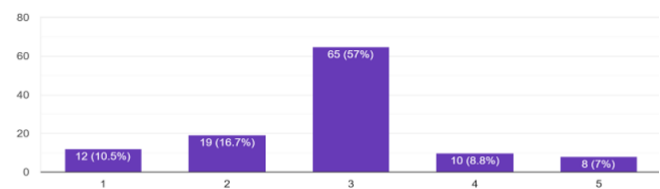


Influence on Consumer Behaviour:

Trustworthiness of Influencer Recommendations

On a scale of 1–5, where 1 is the most trustworthy and 5 is the least trustworthy, the majority of respondents have voted 3, which indicates that they are neutral in their trust in influencer recommendations. Though, people are leaning more towards trusting the recommendations.

How trustworthy do you find influencer recommendations?
114 responses

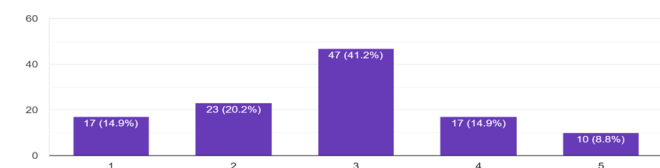


About Influencing the Perception of a Brand

On a scale of 1–5, where 1 is strongly agree and 5 is strongly disagree, most of the respondents are leaning towards 1–3, indicating general agreement.

Most of the respondents agree that influencers have an effect on their perception of a brand. This indicates that influencers play a strong hand in building the image of a brand and shaping the perspective of consumers on that particular brand.

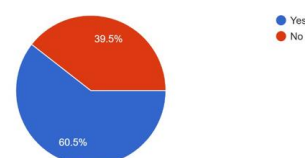
Do you think they influence your perception of a brand?
114 responses



About Purchasing a Product Based on an Influencer's Recommendation

Over half of the respondents disclose that they have acted on influencers' recommendations and have bought products because of them. This indicates that influencers are a common factor and a medium between a brand and its consumers.

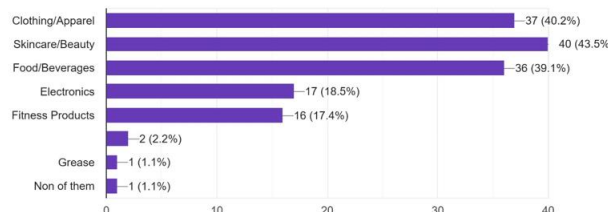
Have you ever purchased a product based on an influencer's recommendation?
114 responses



If Yes, What Kind of Product Was It?

Skincare and clothing purchases are at the top of the list, which suggests that the visual content from influencers has made the most impact. This is closely followed by food/beverage recommendations.

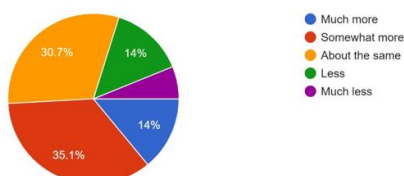
If yes, what kind of product was it? (Select all that apply)
92 responses



Impact of Social Media Influencers Compared to Traditional Advertising (TV, Print Ads) on Purchasing Decisions

Nearly half of the respondents think that influencers have more influence than traditional advertising. This indicates that people are shifting from traditional ways to modern, digital forms of marketing and advertising. Though, a small but noticeable portion of people still value the traditional methods.

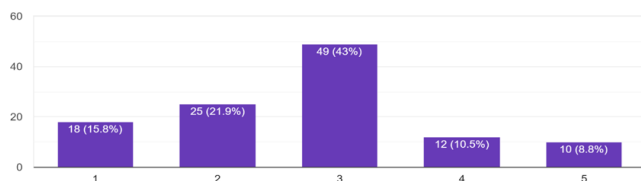
How much influence do social media influencers have on your purchasing decisions compared to traditional advertising (TV, print ads)?
114 responses



About Connection to a Brand When an Influencer Promotes It

On a scale of 1–10, where 1 is strongly agree and 10 is strongly disagree, people lean more towards 1–5. This data indicates a clearly strong bond that consumers feel towards the brand when influencers promote it, and this bond can enhance emotional and loyal connections between the brand and its consumers.

Do you feel a stronger connection to a brand when an influencer you like promotes it?
114 responses

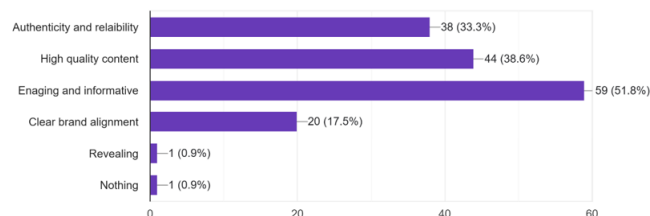


Success Factors in Influencer Marketing: What Makes Influencer Promotion Successful

Engaging and informative content stands out as the top factor in successful influencer marketing. Respondents are more

supportive of content that gives out clear, authentic, and high-quality messages, while mismatched or overly promotional content can send the wrong message.

In your opinion, what makes influencer promotion successful? (Select all that apply)
114 responses



Chi-Square Test Report

This report presents the results of Chi-Square Tests of Independence to determine whether there is a significant association between social media influence and two demographic variables: Age Group and Employment Status.

1. Age Group vs Social Media Influence

Contingency Table:

Age Group	No	Yes
16-25	31	55
26-35	2	4
36-45	4	3
Above 45	6	2
Below 16	2	5

Chi-Square Test p-value: 0.1987

Interpretation: Since the p-value is greater than 0.05, we do not reject the null hypothesis. There is no significant association between Age Group and Social Media Influence.

2. Employment Status vs Social Media Influence

Contingency Table:

Employment Status	No	Yes
A student	28	58
Employed	5	7
Self-employed	9	1
Unemployed	3	3

Chi-Square Test p-value: 0.0053

Interpretation: Since the p-value is less than 0.05, we reject the null hypothesis. There is a significant association between Employment Status and Social Media Influence.

Conclusion

This research was able to assess the power of influencer marketing on consumer understanding, likelihood to purchase, and brand loyalty and engagement with a digitally engaged audience. Findings indicated that influencer marketing has a

strong effect on consumers. For example, the majority of survey participants agree that influencers allow them to understand brands better, and that influencers lead to more purchases than other forms of advertising.

The most swayed categories are fashion, beauty, alcohol/food, and exercise/fitness. In addition, many survey participants noted that they are more in touch with their feelings about a brand if someone is trusted/influencing.

Furthermore, the research reveals that successful partnerships with an influencer are based on considerations of authenticity, trust, quality, and brand identity. Thus, it would appear that consumers want to be sold to and guided to products, but not through a commercialized, untrustworthy route. They want to be sold to through people who champion relatable, developed processes for consumption. Thus, while the appeal and effectiveness of influencer marketing are on the rise, it would seem that brands need to be even more careful to collaborate with like-minded persons who will not jeopardize the integrity of a brand. Ultimately, influencer marketing is not a flash-in-the-pan social phenomenon; it's an opportunity for brands and consumers to engage with one another in a new fashion, as social media-driven product seekers—especially younger demographics—depend upon this new way to get what they want from brands (Vrontis et al., 2021). With increased digitally engaged conversations and burgeoning social demands of transparency fostered through social media, the power and potential of influencer marketing will only increase over time. This research shows that there is a significant association between Employment Status and Social Media Influence whereas there is no significant association between Age Group and Social Media Influence.

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