



17. Consumer perception and purchase behavior in the age of influencer marketing: a survey research study

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ABSTRACT

This study draws on three theoretical frameworks from the field of media and communication studies. The first is the Elaboration Likelihood Model, which describes two ways people are persuaded by thinking carefully about the argument, or by relying on shortcuts like trusting a familiar face. The second is Source Credibility Theory, which focuses on why we trust certain communicators more than others. The third is Parasocial Interaction Theory, which explains the one-sided but emotionally real sense of connection that audiences develop with media figures. Together, these three frameworks help make sense of why influencer marketing is so effective and where its limits lie.

KEYWORDS- Consumer perception, purchase behavior, influencer, marketing

INTRODUCTION

If you have ever bought something because someone you follow on Instagram mentioned it, you already know what influencer marketing is. You did not need to read the product description or see a TV advertisement. You trusted the person, and that trust was enough. This study is about exactly that process, how and why people trust influencer recommendations, how that trust translates into buying decisions, and what it would take for that trust to grow stronger.

Influencer marketing is now one of the most important advertising channels in India. The industry was valued at approximately INR 2,200 crore in 2023 and is growing rapidly every year (EY India, 2023). Young Indians between the ages of 18 and 35 are the core audience, and they are spending more and more of their time on Instagram, YouTube, and short-video apps where influencer content dominates. What traditional advertising used to do through television commercials and newspaper ads, influencer marketing now does through people real individuals talking to their followers about products and experiences.



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This assignment presents the findings of a survey I conducted to understand how young social media users in and around Delhi NCR think about influencer marketing. The survey was filled out by 50 respondents, all of whom follow at least one content creator online. It asked them about their trust in influencer recommendations, their sense of personal connection with the creators they follow, and whether and how influencer content has influenced their purchasing behaviour. It also gave them the space to share, in their own words, what makes them trust an influencer and what has made them feel misled.

The research method used here is called survey research. This simply means collecting information from a group of people at one point in time using a structured set of questions, and then looking at the patterns in their answers. It is different from content analysis (which studies the posts themselves) or a case study (which looks at one brand in depth). Survey research puts the audience at the centre, it asks: what do actual viewers think and do?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE: WHAT THE RESEARCH ALREADY TELLS US

Researchers around the world have been studying influencer marketing for about a decade now, and a clear picture has emerged from the academic literature. This chapter summarises the most important findings that are relevant to this study.

Trust Is the Foundation of Everything

Lou and Yuan (2019) conducted a large-scale study and found that the most important factor determining whether an influencer's recommendation leads to a purchase is source credibility, in other words, how much the audience trusts the person making the recommendation. This matters more than how entertaining the content is or how informative it is. If the audience does not trust the influencer, nothing else compensates for that. This finding is important because it helps explain why follower count alone does not determine campaign effectiveness. A creator with 10,000 highly trusting followers may drive more sales than a celebrity with 10 million distant admirers.

The Feeling of Knowing Someone Who Does Not Know You

Kim and Kim (2021) studied a concept called parasocial interaction, the one-sided sense of personal familiarity that viewers develop with media figures. Think of how you feel about a YouTuber you have been watching for three years. You know their personality, their sense of humour, their routines, and their opinions. They do not know you exist. But the connection feels real, and it influences your behaviour. Kim and Kim found that the stronger this sense of connection, the more likely audiences are to buy something that the



creator recommends. The relationship between parasocial connection and purchase intention is one of the most consistent findings in the influencer marketing literature.

Objectives

- To understand how often and in what ways the respondents engage with influencer content on social media.
- To measure the level of trust respondents place in influencer marketing compared to other forms of advertising.

Research Questions

- Q1: How much do respondents trust influencer recommendations, and what factors increase or reduce that trust?
- Q2: Is there a connection between how personally connected a respondent feels to an influencer and their likelihood of purchasing based on the influencer's recommendation?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1 Research Design

This study uses a cross-sectional survey design, which means I collected data from a group of people at one point in time rather than tracking the same people over a long period. This design is appropriate for this study because I am interested in understanding current attitudes and behaviours, not in measuring change over time.

The questionnaire was prepared in Google Forms and distributed digitally over a period of three weeks through WhatsApp groups, Instagram direct messages, and personal outreach to classmates, colleagues, and social media connections. Each request included a brief note explaining that the survey was for academic research and that responses were anonymous. Out of all responses received, 50 complete and consistent responses were retained for analysis.

Analysis and interpretation of data

Before getting into the findings, it helps to know a little about who the 50 respondents are. Understanding the profile of the sample makes it easier to interpret the results.

1 Age and Gender

The majority of respondents were young: 22 out of 50 (44%) were between 18 and 21 years old, and 18 out of 50 (36%) were between 22 and 25. Together, these two groups make up 80% of the sample, which is consistent with the age bracket most actively engaged in social media and influencer content. Seven respondents (14%) were between 26 and 30, and three (6%) were between 31 and 35. In terms of gender, 29 respondents (58%) were women, 19 (38%) were men, and 2 identified as non-binary or preferred not to say.

Variable	Category	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Age	18–21 years	22	44%
Age	22–25 years	18	36%
Age	26–30 years	7	14%
Age	31–35 years	3	6%
Gender	Female	29	58%
Gender	Male	19	38%
Gender	Other / Prefer not to say	2	4%

Table 1: Age and Gender Distribution of Respondents (n=50)

5.2 Social Media Usage

Instagram was the most used platform among respondents, with 26 out of 50 (52%) saying it is their primary social media platform. YouTube came second with 15 respondents (30%), followed by Moj/Josh/ShareChat with 4 (8%) and Twitter/X with 4 (8%).

In terms of time spent online, 25 respondents (50%) said they use social media for 2 to 4 hours per day, and 13 (26%) said more than 4 hours. Only 2 said less than 1 hour. So 76% of the sample is spending at least 2 hours a day on social media, a significant amount of daily time, and one that speaks to how central these platforms have become in everyday life.

Variable	Category	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Primary Platform	Instagram	26	52%
Primary Platform	YouTube	15	30%
Primary Platform	Moj / Josh / ShareChat	4	8%
Primary Platform	Twitter / X	4	8%
Primary Platform	Other	1	2%
Daily Usage	Less than 1 hour	2	4%
Daily Usage	1–2 hours	10	20%
Daily Usage	2–4 hours	25	50%
Daily Usage	More than 4 hours	13	26%

Table 2: Platform Usage and Daily Social Media Time (n=50)

3 Influencer Following Patterns

Every single respondent follows at least one influencer — this was a prerequisite for participating in the survey. When asked which type of influencer they most frequently engage with, nearly half chose micro-influencers (creators with between 10,000 and 100,000 followers), with 24 respondents (48%) selecting this tier. Nano-influencers (1,000 to 10,000 followers) came second with 13 respondents (26%). Only 3 respondents (6%) said they engage most with mega-influencers or celebrities.

In terms of the content they consume, Fashion and Lifestyle was the most popular niche (13 respondents, 26%), followed by Beauty and Skincare (12 respondents, 24%), Fitness and Wellness (7, 14%), Technology and Gadgets (7, 14%), Food and Nutrition (6, 12%), Travel (3, 6%), and Finance (2, 4%).



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Variable	Category	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Preferred Tier	Nano (1K–10K followers)	13	26%
Preferred Tier	Micro (10K–100K followers)	24	48%
Preferred Tier	Macro (100K–1M followers)	10	20%
Preferred Tier	Mega / Celebrity (1M+ followers)	3	6%
Primary Niche	Fashion & Lifestyle	13	26%
Primary Niche	Beauty & Skincare	12	24%
Primary Niche	Fitness & Wellness	7	14%
Primary Niche	Technology & Gadgets	7	14%
Primary Niche	Food & Nutrition	6	12%
Primary Niche	Travel	3	6%
Primary Niche	Finance & Investment	2	4%

Table 3: Influencer Tier Preferences and Content Niche Consumed (n=50)

FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings from each section of the questionnaire. The Likert scale scores are reported as averages out of 5, where 1 is Strongly Disagree and 5 is Strongly Agree. Qualitative responses from the open-ended questions are woven in throughout.



1 Section C— Trust and Credibility

The average scores across all six trust items tell a clear story: respondents do trust influencer recommendations, but not uncritically. The overall average for this section was 3.6 out of 5, which falls in the moderate-to-positive range. They lean toward trust, but they have reservations.

The highest-scoring item in this section was: ‘An influencer’s expertise in their niche increases my trust in their product recommendations ’(average: 4.1/5). This is a significant finding. What it tells us is that respondents do not trust all influencers equally. They trust people who seem to genuinely know their subject. A fitness creator who has been training seriously for years is trusted more than a lifestyle creator recommending a protein powder. The expertise has to match the product.

One respondent put it directly:

“If the person clearly trains hard and has been doing it for years, I’ll trust their supplement advice. A random influencer telling me which whey protein is good is less convincing than someone who trains seriously. — R04, Male, 22–25, Noida”

The lowest-scoring item in Section C was the scepticism statement: ‘I am sceptical about the authenticity of influencer endorsements in general ’(average: 3.0). A score of 3.0 is neutral; it means the group is divided. Some respondents are genuinely sceptical, others are not. This reflects a realistic mixed picture: the audience is aware that influencer marketing is commercial, but this awareness does not automatically translate into blanket distrust.

Statement	Avg Score	Std Dev	What It Means
I trust product recommendations from influencers I follow	3.8	0.72	Moderate-High Agreement
I find influencer recs more credible than TV or print ads	3.4	0.81	Moderate Agreement
I trust micro-influencers more than mega-influencers or celebrities	3.7	0.84	Moderate-High Agreement



Statement	Avg Score	Std Dev	What It Means
I am sceptical about the authenticity of influencer endorsements	3.0	0.78	Neutral / Mixed Views
Expertise in their niche increases my trust in a recommendation	4.1	0.65	High Agreement
I trust influencers who respond to audience comments	3.8	0.69	Moderate-High Agreement

Table 4: Section C — Trust and Credibility Scores (n=50, scale 1–5)

2 Section D — Authenticity

The authenticity section produced some of the most interesting findings in the entire survey. The overall average for this section was 3.9 out of 5, the highest of all four Likert sections. Respondents feel strongly about authenticity.

The standout item here was: ‘I can identify when an influencer is promoting a product purely for financial gain ’(average: 4.4/5). This is the highest score in the entire survey. In plain terms, the audience knows when they are being sold to. They may still watch, they may still buy, but they can tell the difference between a genuine recommendation and a paid post. This is an important check on any assumption that audiences are naive or easily deceived.

One respondent captured this perfectly:

“Showing the actual cons. If a reviewer says a product is 10/10, I immediately don't trust them. — R07, Male, 18–21, Greater Noida”

And another added:

“Their tone. If they seem excited about everything all the time, it's fake. If they're sometimes like 'this is okay, not my fav,' that's real. — R19, Female, 18–21, Lucknow”



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The item scoring lowest in this section was: ‘Knowing that an influencer was paid to promote a product reduces my confidence in their recommendation ’(average: 3.1). This is actually reassuring for the influencer marketing industry: disclosure does not necessarily kill the recommendation’s effectiveness. Respondents care that the influencer is transparent, but transparency alone does not make them distrust the product. What matters is whether the influencer seems to genuinely believe in what they are promoting.

Statement	Avg Score	Std Dev	What It Means
The influencers I follow are honest and transparent about products	3.9	0.68	High Agreement
I can identify when an influencer is paid to promote something	4.4	0.60	Very High Agreement
Knowing a post is paid reduces my confidence in the recommendation	3.1	0.82	Moderate Agreement
Open disclosure makes an influencer more trustworthy	4.1	0.64	High Agreement
Influencers should use products before recommending them	4.0	0.66	High Agreement
Personal narrative and lived experience makes a rec more convincing	3.8	0.70	Moderate-High Agreement

Table 5: Section D — Authenticity Perception Scores (n=50, scale 1–5)

3 Section E — Parasocial Interaction

Parasocial interaction is the technical term for the sense of personal familiarity or connection that viewers feel towards a creator they follow, even though the relationship is entirely one-sided. The overall average score for this section was 3.4 out of 5, which suggests a moderate level of this kind of connection among the respondents.



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The highest score in this section was for the item: ‘My sense of connection to an influencer positively influences my interest in the products they recommend ’(average: 3.7). This is the most important finding in the section, because it directly confirms the link between emotional connection and commercial influence. Respondents who feel connected to a creator are more interested in what that creator recommends.

The lowest score was for: ‘I would feel a sense of loss if a favourite influencer stopped posting ’(average: 2.9). This is slightly below the neutral midpoint, and is a positive sign, as it means that while people enjoy the content and feel connected to the creators, they are not psychologically dependent on them. The relationship is warm but not unhealthy.

Several respondents described this connection in ways that reflect its complexity:

“Long-term use of content. A one-time review could be paid. Seeing someone casually mention a product 6 months later feels real. — R17, Female, 22–25, Mumbai”

“When I've seen them wear it or use it in multiple videos over time, not just once. — R15, Female, 18–21, Greater Noida”

Statement	Avg Score	Std Dev	What It Means
I feel as though I personally know an influencer I follow	3.3	0.93	Moderate Agreement
I feel emotionally connected when influencers share personal stories	3.6	0.78	Moderate-High Agreement
I look forward to their content like hearing from a friend	3.5	0.84	Moderate-High Agreement
I would feel a sense of loss if a favourite influencer stopped posting	2.9	0.91	Slight Disagreement / Neutral

Statement	Avg Score	Std Dev	What It Means
I feel comfortable making decisions based on their advice	3.6	0.79	Moderate-High Agreement
Connection positively influences my interest in their recommendations	3.7	0.74	Moderate-High Agreement

Table 6: Section E — Parasocial Interaction Scores (n=50, scale 1–5)

4 Section F — Purchase Behaviour

This section gets to the most practically important question: Does influencer marketing actually lead to purchases? The short answer, based on this survey, is yes and quite significantly.

The item ‘I have purchased a product or service after seeing an influencer recommend it in the past six months ’received an average score of 4.0 out of 5, which corresponds to ‘Agree.’ This means that for most respondents, buying something based on an influencer recommendation is not a rare or unusual event. It happens regularly. When we look at the raw data, 39 out of 50 respondents (78%) have made at least one purchase based on influencer content in the past six months.

The item ‘Influencer recommendations influence my decision to try new brands or products ’also scored 4.0 on average, equally high. This suggests that influencers are particularly effective at helping audiences discover and try things they would not have found otherwise.

The lowest-scoring item in this section was ‘I follow promo codes or affiliate links from influencers ’(average: 3.2). While still above neutral, this is lower than the other purchase items, meaning respondents are influenced in their consideration and decision-making by influencer content, but they are somewhat less likely to act on transactional mechanisms like discount codes specifically.

Statement	Avg Score	Std Dev	What It Means
I have purchased a product after seeing an influencer rec (last 6 months)	4.0	0.78	High Agreement
I research influencer reviews before a significant purchase decision	3.9	0.74	High Agreement
I prefer micro-influencer recs over celebrity endorsements	3.5	0.88	Moderate-High Agreement
I follow promo codes or affiliate links from influencers	3.2	0.84	Moderate Agreement
Influencer recs influence me to try new brands or categories	4.0	0.71	High Agreement
I consult influencer content for fashion, beauty, or food purchases	3.8	0.76	Moderate-High Agreement

Table 7: Section F — Purchase Intention and Behaviour Scores (n=50, scale 1–5)

5 Platform and Purchase Drivers — Q11 and Q12

When asked which platform most frequently led them to a purchase decision, Instagram was the clear winner. 31 out of 50 respondents (62%) said Instagram. YouTube came second with 12 (24%). Only 3 respondents said Moj/Josh, 1 said Twitter/X, and 3 said they do not purchase based on influencer content at all.

The reason Instagram leads is not hard to understand. The platform’s Reels and Stories format is specifically designed to weave content and commerce together. A swipe-up link, a product tag, or a discount code in the caption makes the path from ‘I want this ’to ‘I bought this ’very short. When asked what single factor most increases their likelihood of purchasing a product after an influencer endorsement, the top answer was clear and revealing: 22 out of 50 respondents (44%) said ‘The influencer genuinely uses the product. ’Honest, detailed reviews came second (13 out of 50, 26%). Values alignment was third (8 respondents,

16%). Discount codes were fourth (4 respondents, 8%). And at the bottom, with just one response each, were follower count and niche expert recommendation.

Purchase Decision Factor	No. of Respondents	Percentage	Rank
The influencer genuinely uses the product	22	44%	1st
Detailed, honest review with pros and cons	13	26%	2nd
Alignment with my personal values	8	16%	3rd
Discount code or exclusive offer	4	8%	4th
Recommendation from a niche expert	2	4%	5th
High follower count / social proof	1	2%	6th

Table 8: What Most Drives Purchase Decisions After Influencer Endorsement (Q12, n=50)

The fact that follower count came last, with only 1 person citing it, is one of the most important findings of this survey. Fame does not drive purchase decisions. Authenticity does. This directly challenges any brand strategy built around simply hiring the biggest influencer available.

CONCLUSION

This survey set out to understand how young Indian social media users think about influencer marketing, whether they trust it, how it makes them feel, and whether and how it actually influences what they buy. The findings are clear and consistent across all sections of the questionnaire.

Influencer marketing works. 78% of respondents have purchased something based on an influencer recommendation in the past six months. Most of them actively research influencer content before making significant purchases. And the emotional connection they



feel with creators they follow does positively influence their interest in recommended products. These are not small effects; they represent real and measurable impact on consumer behaviour.

But the findings also tell us that influencer marketing works only when it is honest. The audience can tell when something is genuine and when it is not. They rank ‘genuine use of the product’ as the top purchase motivator and follower count as the least important. They trust expertise over fame. They prefer smaller creators over celebrities. And they are increasingly taking the step of verifying recommendations independently before buying.

The qualitative responses from the open-ended questions add texture to this picture. These were not just survey ticks on a scale; they were real opinions, frustrations, and suggestions from people who engage with this content every day. The recurring themes were clarity, honesty, consistency, and accountability. These are the values that the most effective influencer communicators embody, and they are precisely the values that regulatory bodies like ASCI are trying to enforce through disclosure guidelines.

As a mass communication student studying this field, what strikes me most is how well the data confirms the theories. Parasocial interaction, source credibility, and perceived authenticity are not just academic concepts; they describe something real about how people engage with creators they follow online. The frameworks help us understand what is happening, and the survey data gives those frameworks a human face.

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