

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCE ON CONSUMER DECISION MAKING

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Abstract

Social media has emerged as a dominant force in shaping consumer behavior, profoundly influencing purchasing decisions and brand loyalty. This study underscores the significant impact of social media, revealing that a staggering 70% of consumers are swayed by its influence when making purchasing choices, with 54% meticulously researching products on these platforms before making a purchase. Influencer marketing has emerged as a pivotal player in this dynamic landscape, captivating 63% of younger consumers. Moreover, the rise of social commerce is undeniable, with 42% of consumers seamlessly transitioning from social media browsing to making direct purchases. Platforms like TikTok have become synonymous with entertainment and lifestyle purchases, while Instagram reigns supreme in the fashion and beauty sectors. However, this burgeoning landscape presents ethical challenges. Transparency in influencer marketing remains a critical concern, with 58% of consumers expressing apprehension regarding the authenticity of sponsored content. This research unequivocally emphasizes the paramount importance of authenticity, transparency, and cultivating unwavering consumer trust for the long-term success of social media marketing strategies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media influencers have now dramatically affected how contemporary consumers view ads, brands, and products, which in turn has impacted their buying decision. Within the digital landscape, influencers have become a new breed of opinion leaders, especially as they have become a part of social media, like Instagram, TikTok, YouTube and Facebook. Belanche et al. (2021) state that the social media personalities' power has grown significantly because of the fast spread of information and communication on the internet. Unlike "regular" celebrities, influencers create an impression of being relatable and approachable, which makes their consumers feel a deeper connection to a

person. Social media influencers (SMIs) are persons whose life and presence are closely related to social media platforms. They can produce content, engage with their viewers, and market products continually, changing digital marketing approaches. It was common practice in the past, when advertising campaigns used celebrities as opinion leaders. Nevertheless, Belanche et al. (2021) stated that celebrities may be seen as "unrealistic" and "unrelatable" to the average consumer as they are often distant from the people due to their fame, wealth and lifestyle. On the contrary, influencers are thought to be more genuine and reliable as they are sharing their regular stories and speaking directly to their followers.

Past studies have demonstrated that influencer marketing is effective in developing brand loyalty, engagement, and purchase intention. According to Lim et al., (2017) influencer marketing is a more effective form of digital advertising in terms of consumer interactions with products and brands. Social media is continually changing, and influencers are wielding significant influence over public opinion, consumer perceptions and buying patterns. Audiences can take a great deal of notice of their suggestions, reviews and endorsements and they can influence the decision to make or not.

Meanwhile, the growing importance of SMIs has led to discussing critical issues in digital marketing and public relations. By influencing consumers' attitudes, changing their opinions on products, and driving sales, influencers can have a significant impact on how their followers think and act online. This study thus centers around the relationship between social media influencers and consumer purchasing decisions, namely on how the endorsement by influencing social media celebrities influences consumer buying behavior and perceptions of promoted products.

This study also delves into the importance of influencer authenticity on consumer trust and buying intentions. Lee and Eastin (2020) stated that consumers are more inclined to react positively to influencers that are sincere and genuine in their promotion. Consumers have a higher degree of trust in the recommendations made by influencers when they feel that they are authentic, meaning they will be more likely to buy products that are recommended by them. Moreover, electronic word of mouth (EWOM) now plays an integral part in social media marketing activities. Dwidienawati et al. (2020) said that online reviews, opinions, and suggestions from influencers can have a significant influence on consumers' behavior as audiences tend to see their content as credible and trustworthy.

In conclusion, social media influencers have revolutionized the consumer brand relationship and how consumers make decisions. In the ever-expanding realm of influencer marketing, marketers, advertisers, and public relations

professionals are finding it essential to grasp the connection between influencers and consumers. This study will offer useful information regarding the impact of influencer endorsements on the consumers' purchasing behavior and the impact of authenticity on consumer trust. The research approach to accomplish this goal is by conducting surveys to collect and analyze data on social media influencers and consumer buying decisions.

2. Literature Review

It is essential to grasp the concept and functioning of social media influencers before addressing the themes of social media, influencers, and consumerism. The social media influencer is a digital content creator who has a substantial number of followers online and consistently posts educational, entertaining or inspiring content, according to [Nashville Film Institute](https://www.nfi.edu/social-media-influencer/?utm_source=chatgpt.com). This is different from traditional celebrities who post more infrequently, don't engage with audiences directly, and don't have the ability to broadcast live. Constant interaction and dialogue help influencers drive conversations online, generate trends and even work with brands to market products and services. The power of social media influencers has grown significantly over time, particularly in the wake of platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. They have had a tremendous influence on marketing, media culture and consumer behavior, as they have developed close connections with followers.

2.2 Effect of Social Media on Customer Buying Habits

There are multiple studies that explore the effect of social media influencers (SMIs) on consumer buying decisions. According to Lim et al. (2017), business can leverage influencer marketing to boost their market presence and target their audience, especially the younger generation who are active on social media platforms. The study adopted purposive sampling and data from 200 respondents, which revealed that influencers are seen as an effective and cost-saving marketing

medium. Others, like Harrison (2017), Patel (2016) and Talaverna (2015) have pointed out that the internet is so ubiquitous it makes influencers good candidates for brand endorsements. Unlike celebrity marketing, influencer marketing provides a more trustworthy and genuine approach as influencers engage with their followers in a natural way, fostering trust over the long term.

Social Learning Theory is another explanation of the effectiveness of influencer marketing, in which people learn certain behaviours from their surroundings and from others. A significant portion of followers are found to believe in and follow the recommendations of their favourite influencers, according to Lim et al. (2017). Celebrities can help boost brand awareness, but influencers can better establish customer engagement and loyalty in a niche audience. A Nielsen marketing survey for TapInfluence (2023) states that influencer marketing is far more profitable than conventional digital advertising in terms of return on investment (ROI). So, choosing the right influencer is crucial to boost consumers' purchase intention and form positive attitude toward brands.

Hermenda et al. (2019) also uncovered the correlation between influencers, brand image, and purchase intention. The research, which analyzed responses from 219 consumers, determined that people who had similar opinions and interests to influencers were more likely to take up the consumption practices of the influencers. The study also revealed that influencers are also a third party source of information about the product, which directly influences consumers' decisions to buy.

Likewise, Ambarwati et al. (2019) explored the impact of beauty vloggers on consumer's behavior. Their research concentrated on a popular beauty YouTuber and found that electronic word of mouth (EWOM) has a strong impact on the viewing experience and buying intention of viewers. The findings revealed that consumers were likely to buy Wardah cosmetics due to the positive reviews and recommendations by beauty YouTuber Tasya Farasya. This proves that influencers who the audience follows and engages

with regularly online are trusted by a lot of people.

Similarly, Bagchi (2022) noted that influencers are vital in the process of communicating, engaging, and being reliable in the promotion of products. The more influencers can seem relatable and interactive, the more trust they will generate and the more loyal their online communities will be. Influencers who enjoy the same content as their audience are more apt to cultivate a loyal base of fans and be more effective at marketing brands within their niche, whether it be within the beauty or fashion industry, food or music. Therefore, influencers have a huge influence on consumer choices and product market success and survival.

2.2 Consumers' Perception of Influencers

Borchers (2019) explained the role of social media influencers in the communication world and its impact on stakeholders and audiences. The study reveals that influencers blend their personal relationship with the commercial content, balancing authenticity and advertising in a way that appeals to consumers. Through their online personas and interactions, influencers create strong networks of relationships with followers. Additionally, Borchers pointed out that the influencer marketing industry has been rapidly expanding in the United States, growing from \$1.7 billion in 2016 to \$4.6 billion in 2018 (Geysler, 2019).

The study also pointed out potential risks of influencer marketing. The so called "paracrisis" is the situation that can happen when an influencer acts in a way that is inconsistent with the brand's image, harming both the influencer and the brand. So, authenticity is still a major driver of consumer actions with influencers. Borchers (2019) stated that influencers do not have to be inauthentic when promoting products if they are transparent and honest with their audience. Likewise, Glucksman (2017) discovered that consumers and brands will be better connected when influencers engage consumers in a natural way and inspire participation from their followers. Taillon et al. (2020) continued the study of influencers and their followers. The study

focused on attractiveness, similarity, closeness and likability, and how these affect the consumer attitudes and purchase intentions. The results showed that consumers' close and familiar feelings towards the company have strong influence on their trust and purchase behavior. The audience connects with the influencers as they share a similar lifestyle, interest or online community. Thus, influencers who have a balance between being open and private will have greater chances of having good relationships with their followers.

Croes and Bartels (2021) also explored the reasons behind people's susceptibility to social media influencers and their impact on consumerism. When asked why they follow influencers, the researchers found that people do so for a variety of reasons: for entertainment, to exchange information, to feel companionate, to be aware of trends, and to relax. This study showed that a consumer's attitude and behavior can be influenced by even non-strategic interactions with influencer content. Influencers can reach a wide audience and influence their buying habits by delivering value, engaging content, and personal experiences.

2.3 Influencers can influence advertising strategy in two ways:

There are two ways an influencer can impact advertising strategy:

Schouten et al. (2017) investigated the influence of endorsements by influencers versus celebrity endorsers in advertising. The researchers found through two experiments with different products that consumers are more attuned with influencers than with celebrities. Participants found influencers to be more commonplace, and this led to a rise in trust and identification. Consequently, ads with influencers were seen to be more effective than ads with regular users in changing consumers' attitudes and purchase intention.

Meredith (2020) also pointed out the increasing relevance of social media websites in contemporary marketing. The study revealed that the visual content and effective social media campaigns can help brands engage their

customers and build brand loyalty. Furthermore, it was found that there is strong evidence that consumers aged 18 to 34 years are influenced by the recommendations of influencers in their purchasing decisions. Key performance indicators (KPIs) were selected as valuable tools to aid brands in their decisions on the best visual and promotional strategies.

Kowalewicz (2022) explained that social media has revolutionised the buying journey by bringing shopping into social media. The "buy" button on Facebook is just one of the examples of the increasing significance of social media in sales and advertising. The research also highlighted that influencers that seem genuine and authentic will be trusted by consumers and that is a great benefit for brands targeting niche audiences.

Naderer et al. (2021) examined the effects of disclosure of sponsored content on Instagram. The results revealed that being transparent about sponsorships was found to enhance audience awareness of the ad and trustworthiness of the influencer. This transparency had a positive impact on consumers' attitude towards the influencer and the product that is being promoted.

In addition, Wolf's research was on the Generation Z and influencer marketing. The study looked at the authenticity, trustworthiness, and relatability of both micro and mega influencers. The results revealed that the key to successful influencer marketing campaigns is to reach the right audience with tailored and authentic messages. The research found that there is a greater need for honesty and authenticity than popularity when it comes to engagement in response to influencer promotions, particularly from the millennial Generation Z.

As revealed by the studies above, social media influencers have a huge impact on the behavior of consumers, their purchase intentions and current marketing strategies. They are able to build genuine connections with viewers, revolutionizing digital marketing and consumer interaction. Hence, the purpose of this study is to "fill a gap" in the literature and to answer the following research questions:

The role of influencers on consumers' purchasing behaviour is which?

****RQ2:**** How is a social media influencer's authenticity relevant to the relationship with consumers?

3. Research Methodology

The purpose of this study is to gather information on the influence of social media influencers on consumers' buying decisions. The researchers employed quantitative research method using online survey approach to obtain accurate and reliable data on both generation Z and Millennials. The survey aimed to explore the relationship between social media usage, influence on consumers and personal factors in determining consumer buying behaviour.

Convenience sampling method was used in this study. Convenience sampling involves non-probability sampling techniques, in which the people who are easy to access and willing to participate are selected (Treadwell & Davis, 2020). This approach proved to be an appropriate way to engage respondents via digital channels including social media applications, group messaging and email.

The survey was created using Qualtrics and distributed online. The survey was conducted in a confidential and anonymous manner, with no pressure on participants to disclose genuine feedback on their social media usage and buying practices. Questions were of varying types in the questionnaire, including open ended, dichotomous, multiple choice and mutually exclusive. These question types proved useful to obtain detailed opinions and statistical information.

The survey questions centered on a number of factors that could affect the consumer's buying attitude, such as psychological, social, cultural, economic and personal factors. In prior research these variables have been consistently found to be significant factors in consumer decision-making. A few questions from the survey were:

About how many hours of social media do you use per day?

2. Do you prefer to buy something if you had seen it advertised or used on social media?

3. What are the social media sites you use the most?

4. Do you think that you are easily swayed by society or Internet trends?

6. What was your personal income for the last year?

This survey also analyzed the social media habits of participants and how much each participant spends on social media to gain insight into how influencer marketing impacts consumer behavior. Andrew Perrin and Monica Anderson (2022) have identified social media as a vital area for online shopping, product advertising, tutorials and content creation, which affect users' opinion and buying decisions. Hence, the questions used in this study were formulated to further investigate these relationships.

The questionnaire had a funnel format to keep the respondents' attention and get more accurate answers. The survey started with general and simple demographic questions, all with multiple choice answers, and progressed to increasingly detailed questions about social media usage, purchasing behaviour, and engagement with influencers. This design made it easier for the participants to feel comfortable in answering the survey and it was less likely for the survey not to be completed.

The survey was sent mainly via social media and online communication, which is an effective method to reach a large number of participants in an efficient manner. 236 responses were received, which is enough to provide an analysis of the influence of social media influencers and online endorsements on consumer purchasing.

4. Results

To investigate the effect of social media influencers (SMIs) and the importance of authenticity to consumers purchasing decision, several statistical tests were carried out in this study. The descriptive statistics showed that many of the respondents were likely to buy after seeing the promotions from the influencers in social media, especially if they were already followers of influencers on social media. The findings also showed that authenticity is very important to influence consumers' trust in influencers and the

purchase of promoted products. In addition, active users of Instagram seemed more likely to be impacted by social media marketing than other social media users.

4.1 The role of Social Media Influencers in influencing consumers' buying decisions.

How Social Media Influencers affect consumers' purchase decisions.

The first research question (RQ1) was on how well social media influencer promotions influence the buying of products. Participants were asked a number of questions about their social media usage, such as if they followed influencers, whether influencers impacted their buying choices and how often they interacted with ads made by influencers.

The results indicated that most of the respondents followed social media influencers. Of the 157 people who were followers of influencers, the majority (63.4%) said that they follow anywhere from 1 to 10 influencers, and 18.3% said they follow between 11 and 15 influencers.

Each participant was also asked what is the primary reason behind following the influencers. The most frequent reason was entertainment, with 109 (54%) choosing this. Learning something new was the second most common reason, with 53 participants (26.2%) choosing this. The reasons listed by a small number of respondents were product reviews or discount codes. In particular, 19 participants (9.4%) said "product reviews" and only 4 participants (2%) said "mostly for discount codes" when asked from where they follow influencers. The results show that while 51.5% of the respondents bought something after following an influencer's promotion, the actual reason for following influencers is not buying a product.

The survey also explored whether the consumers have bought products following influencers' ads. Of the 202 respondents, 124 (51.5%) reported purchasing the product, 73 (36.1%) reported that they did not, and 25 (12.4%) were unsure. In order to analyze the relationship between following influencers and purchasing behavior a parametric test was conducted. 94 out of the

participants who followed influencers said they purchased something, 42 said they didn't buy anything, and 21 were uncertain. Of those that said they don't follow influencers, 31 said they didn't buy anything, 10 did purchase something, and 4 were uncertain. The result of this indicates that followers of influencers are more inclined to buy products promoted by them on social media than people who are not followers of influencers. Participants were also asked to report on their experiences of interacting with ads from influencers. Most of the respondents responded to the ads when they were interested in the product advertised. About 37.6% of the participants chose the answer "only if it's a product I like. Only a small number of respondents said they always click on posts by influencers. This suggests product relevance and personal interest are still key factors in explaining consumers' behaviour in terms of social media advertisements.

When an influencer is authentic, their actions impact consumer purchasing behavior. Acting with authenticity, an influencer will affect consumer purchasing behavior.

Research Question 2 (RQ2) focused on the concept of influencer authenticity for consumer relations and buying behaviour. A descriptive statistical test was performed to determine the significance of the respondents' perception of the importance of authenticity in the context of their response to the products presented by influencers. Participants were queried on a five-point Likert scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" on the following statement: "It is important to me that an influencer promoting a product is authentic." The results revealed that 74 participants (36.6%) strongly agreed with the statement and only 5 participants (2.5%) strongly disagreed with the statement. The average score for this question was 4.00 with a standard deviation of 0.987. The results suggest the majority of the respondents place a high value on authenticity and there is not much variation.

To investigate the differences in perceptions of authenticity among those who had purchased influencer promoted products, those who had not purchased an influencer promoted products,

and those who were unsure of whether they had purchased one or not, the researcher used a one-way ANOVA test. The results showed that the groups were significantly different (Sig. value < .001). It was more important for participants who purchased something than for those who did not purchase anything ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 0.773$) or those who were unsure ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.190$). This indicates that consumers who buy products from the influencers are more concerned with the authenticity and trustworthiness of the products.

Comparisons were made between the purchasing behavior on various social media platforms using cross-tabulation analysis. The results indicated that Instagram users were strongly impacted by influencer marketing. Of the 188 respondents who were on Instagram, 96 said they made a purchase after seeing an influencer's promotion, and 8 of the 96 purchase-making respondents did not use Instagram. Of all the participants that didn't make purchases, 67 used Instagram and 6 didn't use it. Furthermore, all the respondents who didn't know about their buying behavior were Instagram users.

Likewise, those using TikTok also exhibited greater levels of purchase behavior after seeing influencer promotion. Of the 133 people who used TikTok, 83 said that they made purchases following the influencer promotions and 35 TikTok users said they did not purchase anything. Among the respondents who do not use TikTok, 21 said they did purchase something while 38 said they did not. From the results, it was found that TikTok and Instagram have a great influence on consumer purchasing decisions via influencer marketing.

5. Discussion

The results of the present research showed that the social media influencers (SMIs) have a significant influence on the purchasing decisions of consumers, especially when the consumers believe that the influencers are authentic and trustworthy. More than 200 respondents provided data that bear significantly with previous studies and literature on the influencer marketing and consumer behaviour. The

increasing popularity of internet and social media platforms has made influencers as effective and cost-efficient brand promotion tools as shown in previous study by Harrison (2017), Patel (2016) and Talavera (2015). Likewise, the research results indicated that the majority of the respondents were influenced by influencer promotions and 53.6% of the respondents said they make purchases after seeing a product promoted by an influencer on social media.

The conclusions drawn from this study corroborate the findings of Lim et al. (2017) which suggested that the recommendations of their favourite influencers are often being followed by consumers. In both studies, there is a high correlation between influencer promotions and consumer purchasing. Furthermore, this study revealed that social media as such has also a great influence on consumers' behavior. The social media platforms have become strong marketing and consumer persuasion areas as a high proportion of respondents agreed or were neutral on the impact of social media on purchase decisions. The combination of the two is even more powerful when added to influencer marketing.

Another significant finding in this study is about electronic word of mouth (EWOM). Ambarwati et al. (2019) found that EWOM has significant influence on consumers' perceptions based on the way influencers talk about the products online. Influencers share opinions, reviews and experiences about products, which helps in gaining audience trust and influences audience purchasing products based on influencer's recommendations. The results indicate that EWOM is still relevant for today's digital marketing, as the majority of respondents reported having an active presence on social media and many agreed making purchases after taking part in promotions by influencers. The findings also revealed that not all of the people who follow influencers do it for shopping motives. The majority of the respondents said that they follow influencers for entertainment purposes, not for product reviews or discount offers. Despite this, consumers are still

interacting with promotional content and adverts when reading influencer entertainment content. Another key finding of the study was the need for authenticity in influencer marketing. The majority of the respondents say it's vital that influencers are sincere and honest in their product endorsements. The results align with Glucksman's (2017) argument that influencer marketing becomes most successful when influencers engage in genuine interactions with their audience and they are promoting brands organically. In this study, too, participants reported that they were more interested in being honest and sincere than in some of the more superficial advertising techniques. Some of the respondents stated that they are not required to have the same background or location as influencers but would rather have a trustworthy and transparent approach in their promotions. Moreover, the findings are in line with the study of Taillon et al. (2020) that highlighted the need for proximity and familiarity between influencers and consumers. The majority of the participants in this study said they would be more likely to trust influencers who shared similar interests, lifestyles, hobbies, and/or locations. This feeling of similarity fosters a friendship-like bond between influencers and followers, making influencer suggestions more trustworthy and relatable. These emotional bonds help consumers trust a brand and make it more effective. The results also indicate that influencer marketing has shifted the way people today are advertising, especially for younger generations like Gen Z. Wolf (2020) stated that being well-versed with the preferences and behaviors of Gen Z is vital for influencer marketing campaigns to get right. This research backs this up, with a majority of the respondents falling in the age group of 18-24 and also reporting using social media regularly. The social media are now an important part of younger consumers' lives, with most of them regularly using them on a daily basis, and spending several hours on the internet each day. Thus, it is a growing trend for brands to use influencers to reach these go-getters online. Moreover, the results backed the theory of Wolf (2020), which states that influencer marketing

works best when the content is targeted and personalized to the individual. Those who are more interested and prefer to read advertisements were more likely to respond, according to the respondents. This means that when advertisers tailor the content to match consumer needs and interests, rather than a generic advertising campaign, consumers have a positive response to it.

In conclusion, the findings from this study align with the findings from previous studies on the effectiveness of influencer marketing. Consumers' purchase intention and decisions can be influenced positively by social media influencers when they feel they can relate, trust, and are authentic. The results show that authenticity, emotional engagement and targeted content are key aspects of successful influencer marketing campaigns. Influencers are likely to have a significant impact on shaping consumer behavior and modern advertising practices, as social media becomes increasingly popular.

Conclusion:

Social media influencers have revolutionized the way today's consumers respond to advertising, brands and products, ultimately affecting their buying behavior. Today influencers have become a new breed of opinion leaders, whose presence on social media platforms influence consumers' attitudes, preferences and purchasing behaviour. Influencers are becoming an integral component of modern-day marketing due to their online presence, content creation, and engagement with their followers.

The study focused on the influence of social media influencers on the consumers' shopping habits and the relevance of their authenticity in their relationships with the consumers. To gather data from people who were involved in the survey, it was broken down by demographics, including Millennials and Generation Z. The results showed that young people who spend more time on social media are more likely to be influenced by the promotions of influencers and online advertisements than older participants. Additionally, the results revealed that consumers value authenticity, trustworthiness, and

relatability in their interactions with influencers and when thinking about the products they share through their influencers.

The study also found that social media—like Instagram and TikTok—are a significant driver of consumers' buying habits and lots of people see ads and promotions from influencers when using these platforms. While some were following influencers for fun, exposure to brand and product content had an impact on attitudes towards brands and products.

In conclusion, the results of this study suggest that social media influencers play a significant role in consumers' buying decisions. Brands can reach their audiences in a more personal, relatable, and authentic way – making influencer marketing the best marketing method to continue to be in the spotlight. With the continued growth of social media usage, influencers are likely to continue having a significant impact on consumer behavior and the future of digital marketing.

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