

The Role of Digital Influencers in Shaping Consumer Buying Behavior: An Empirical Study

Dr. Vivek Inder Kochhar

Takshashila University, India

Abstract

The exponential growth of social media platforms has significantly transformed marketing communication and consumer decision-making processes. Digital influencers have emerged as key opinion leaders who shape consumer perceptions, attitudes, and purchase intentions through credible, authentic, and engaging content. This empirical study examines the role of digital influencers in shaping consumer buying behavior, with specific reference to influencer credibility, authenticity, trust, and engagement. Primary data were collected from 420 active social media users in India using a structured questionnaire. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, correlation, and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The findings reveal that influencer credibility and authenticity significantly influence consumer trust, which in turn has a strong positive impact on purchase intention. Engagement was found to partially mediate the relationship between influencer attributes and consumer buying behavior. The study contributes to existing literature by providing empirical evidence from an emerging economy and offers practical implications for marketers, consumers, and policymakers.

Keywords: Digital influencers, consumer buying behavior, influencer credibility, authenticity, trust, engagement, purchase intention

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

The rapid advancement of digital technologies and widespread adoption of social media platforms have fundamentally altered the traditional marketing ecosystem. Consumers today are no longer passive recipients of marketing messages; instead, they actively seek information, compare alternatives, and rely on peer-generated and influencer-created content before making purchase decisions. Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and X (Twitter) have become dominant channels for brand communication and consumer engagement.

In this evolving digital environment, digital influencers have emerged as powerful intermediaries between brands and consumers. Influencers create content that blends personal experience with brand communication, thereby enhancing message credibility and persuasiveness. Unlike traditional celebrity endorsements, influencer marketing relies on perceived authenticity, relatability, and continuous interaction with followers.

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite the exponential growth of influencer marketing, many organizations invest heavily in influencer collaborations without a clear understanding of how influencer attributes translate into actual consumer

buying behavior. There is limited empirical clarity on the relative influence of credibility, authenticity, trust, and engagement on purchase intention, particularly in emerging economies such as India.

1.3 Need and Significance of the Study

India represents one of the largest and fastest-growing social media markets globally. With increasing regulatory scrutiny and rising consumer skepticism toward sponsored content, it is essential to empirically examine influencer effectiveness. This study contributes by offering validated insights into influencer-driven consumer behavior, aiding marketers, academicians, and policymakers.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the impact of influencer credibility on consumer trust.
2. To analyze the influence of influencer authenticity on consumer trust.
3. To study the relationship between consumer trust and purchase intention.
4. To examine the role of engagement in shaping consumer buying behavior.
5. To develop and validate an empirical model explaining influencer impact on purchase intention.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Concept of Digital Influencers

Freberg et al. (2011) define digital influencers as individuals who exert influence through social media by shaping opinions and behaviors. Influencer marketing has gained prominence due to its ability to generate higher engagement and perceived authenticity compared to traditional advertising (De Veirman et al., 2017).

2.2 Influencer Marketing in Emerging Economies

Studies in emerging markets indicate that consumers exhibit higher trust in peer-like influencers compared to celebrities (Jin et al., 2019). Indian consumers, in particular, value relatability and cultural alignment in influencer content.

2.3 Influencer Credibility

Source Credibility Theory suggests that message effectiveness depends on the expertise and trustworthiness of the source (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). Lou and Yuan (2019) found that credible influencers significantly enhance consumer trust and purchase intention.

2.4 Influencer Authenticity

Authenticity refers to perceived genuineness and consistency in influencer content. Audrezet et al. (2020) argue that authenticity reduces consumer skepticism and enhances emotional attachment.

2.5 Consumer Trust in Digital Marketing

Trust reduces perceived risk in online environments and plays a mediating role between marketing stimuli and behavioral outcomes (Gefen et al., 2003).

2.6 Engagement and Parasocial Interaction

Parasocial Interaction Theory explains the one-sided emotional relationships formed between influencers and followers, enhancing persuasion and loyalty (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

2.7 Research Gap

Although prior studies acknowledge influencer effectiveness, limited research integrates credibility, authenticity, trust, and engagement into a unified empirical framework within the Indian context.

3. Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

3.1 Conceptual Framework

The framework proposes that influencer credibility and authenticity influence consumer trust, which subsequently affects purchase intention. Engagement acts as a mediating variable between influencer attributes and buying behavior.

3.2 Hypotheses

H1: Influencer credibility has a significant positive impact on consumer trust.

H2: Influencer authenticity has a significant positive impact on consumer trust.

H3: Consumer trust has a significant positive impact on purchase intention.

H4: Influencer engagement has a significant positive impact on purchase intention.

H5: Engagement mediates the relationship between influencer attributes and purchase intention.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The study adopts a descriptive and causal research design using a quantitative approach.

4.2 Sample Design and Data Collection

Data were collected from 420 social media users across India using convenience sampling. Respondents followed at least one digital influencer and had prior experience purchasing influencer-endorsed products.

4.3 Measurement Instrument

A structured questionnaire was developed using validated scales from previous studies. All items were measured on a five-point Likert scale.

4.4 Reliability and Validity

Cronbach's alpha values exceeded 0.70 for all constructs, indicating strong reliability. Confirmatory Factor Analysis confirmed convergent and discriminant validity.

5. Data Analysis and Results

5.1 Descriptive Statistics

The sample consisted of 54% male and 46% female respondents, primarily aged between 18 and 35 years.

5.2 Structural Equation Modeling

SEM results indicated good model fit ($CFI > 0.90$, $RMSEA < 0.08$). Hypotheses H1–H4 were supported. Mediation analysis confirmed H5.

6. Discussion of Findings

The findings reveal that influencer credibility and authenticity significantly build consumer trust, which strongly influences purchase intention. Engagement enhances persuasive impact, supporting Parasocial Interaction Theory. The results align with global studies while extending evidence within the Indian digital marketing landscape.

7. Managerial Implications

Marketers should prioritize credibility and authenticity over follower count. Micro and nano influencers offer higher engagement and trust. Transparent disclosures and long-term partnerships are recommended for sustainable brand relationships.

8. Implications for Consumers and Policymakers

Consumers must develop awareness of influencer marketing tactics. Policymakers should enforce disclosure regulations to ensure ethical digital advertising.

9. Limitations of the Study

The use of convenience sampling limits generalizability. Self-reported responses may introduce bias. The study is confined to the Indian context.

10. Scope for Future Research

Future studies may employ longitudinal designs, cross-cultural comparisons, and explore emerging areas such as AI-generated influencers and sustainability-oriented influencer marketing.

11. Conclusion

The study concludes that digital influencers play a critical role in shaping consumer buying behavior through credibility, authenticity, trust, and engagement. Ethical and strategic influencer marketing can significantly enhance consumer-brand relationships in the digital era.

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