

How Social Media Influencers Engineer Brand Attitudes and Decisions Among India's Gen Z Consumer Cohort

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Abstract

This research focuses on the extent of influence that social media personalities – influencers, traditionally referred to as – have in campus students' decision making at Lovely Professional University (LPU). The study seeks to understand the ways in which these digital bodies have come to influence lifestyle preferences, academic pursuits and consumer behaviour. This research examines the mechanisms through which influencers wield influence, such as in the context of psychological and sociocultural factors, to help policymakers, marketers, educators, and students alike achieve understanding of its potential harmful consequences, and how educational interventions can mitigate its undesirable effects. A mixed methods approach under review of the literature, content qual anal of influence content and case study. With LPU's large and diverse student body, there will be a large and representative sample targeted to generalize and make the findings robust.

Keywords: - Sustainable consumption Value; Customer Engagement; Eco-certified Hotels; SDG

Introduction

Human interaction, communication and dissemination of information have become irreversibly altered by the advent of social media. These digital platforms have not only connected individuals across geographical boundaries but have also fostered the emergence of a new form of social influence: the social media influencer. Having built a meaningful web presence of themselves while carving out an engaging social media persona utilizing all their wits and effort, these individuals have also managed to shape public discourse, influence behavioural patterns and consumer choices. Of particular importance in this phenomenon is the fact that student populations are very engaged with social media while undergoing critical developmental transitions for important decisions making processes. Influencers also, represent a notable departure from traditional models of influence. In contrast, social media has democratized access to audiences in ways that influence used to be, well, confined to the walls of established institutions, the credentialed experts within fields, and legacy outlets. It has been a catalyst for people to grow enormous online communities that hold a lot of clout and often directly disrupts what traditional gatekeepers of information used to do. However, this democratization comes out as a doubled money. As with influencers should be able to positively promote social messages, spread valuable educational content, and advocate for important causes, they also could help spread misinformation, magnify unrealistic and damaging beauty 'standards' and exacerbate existing mental health vulnerabilities. While the carefully constructed and often idealized representations of life offered by influencer content can create social comparison and negative feelings of inadequacy with students, which then can affect their overall well-being and academic success. This research takes a focused look into how myriad structures of social media influence affect students' decisions. Basically, students of higher education are at a very sensitive juncture in their life, at a juncture which is critical to how they move through academically, into their future career path which their personal lives are increasingly being shaped by. Influencers generate such a vast amount of fresh content, exposing us to an endless stream of different content 24 hours a day, so it's only natural that this kind of constant flow of information has a major impact when we must make such crucial decisions. The aim of this study is to explore more deeply the complicated and often nuanced relationship between formal education and the role it traditionally plays in influencing student behaviour, and how social media begins to influence this dynamic.

Objectives of the study

- To examine the impact of social media influencer marketing on brand purchase intention among university students in India
- To identify and analyze the key influencer attributes (such as credibility, trustworthiness, expertise, and engagement) that significantly influence students' purchase intentions.
- To assess the role of students' engagement with social media influencers in strengthening the relationship between influencer marketing and brand purchase intention.

Literature Review

Jason Weismueller, Paul Harrigan, Shas Ha Wang, Geoffre Y Soutar 2020 Jason Weismueller, Paul Harrigan, Shasha Wang, Geoffre, and Soutar conducted this study with the goal of shedding light on the efficacy of hashtags and disclosure statements in influencer marketing. The researchers investigated the effects of varying disclosure levels and influencer sizes on how users react to sponsored content on social media sites. The study looked at purchase intentions, authenticity perceptions, and consumer engagement. Bruno & Ahmad 2021 The research highlights the attitude and subjective norms of students on Social Media Influencers towards the behavioural intent on their dietary choices in accordance with the Theory of Reasoned Action. For the data they selected the final year students in University Malaysia Sabah as respondents. The result shows that there is a significant relationship between the subjective norms of students on Social Media Influences with the behavioural intent on their dietary choices. Dewi (2020), social media can be considered as a virtual medium that helps people enhance their social interactions. Through public relations, Wonderful Bali's digital marketing approach has succeeded in establishing a positive reputation among consumers due to the company's ability to connect effectively with them. Almost every business owner has used digital media to sell their products.

(Alghizzawi, 2019) Digital marketing, enabled by mobile technologies, social media platforms, and eWOM, has become ingrained in our worldwide lives and has supplanted traditional modes of communication and marketing. Recently, the area of marketing has grown in sophistication because of the impact of intense global competition on numerous sectors through new technology. These factors influence customer behaviour and tourist perceptions, in contrast to the traditional methods of marketing and advertising. Consumers benefit from the new broad templates of digital technology, which supply a lot of information and numerous tourism services. With the advancement of technology and the changing habits of with the new generation, it is evident that businesses must embrace a new method of connecting with consumers, particularly in the tourist sector, where destination selections are no longer as diverse as they once were.

(Bizhanova, 2019) Predictions of growing consumer power in the digital age before the turn of the century were enhanced by the Internet's advent and then rekindled by social media. Consumer behaviour changes require businesses to rethink their digital marketing strategies. Currently, much of the research in this area is focused on the client rather than the firm. The second generation of Internet applications enriches marketing efforts by enabling businesses to experiment with new modes of communication and collaborate with their customers on content creation. The extent to which businesses engage in digital marketing can be classified according to the perceived benefits and uses of the medium. To increase customer engagement through digital marketing, marketers must emphasize relationship-based interactions.

(Saura et al., 2019) Furthermore, the expansion of information technologies and the internet have been one of the most significant shifts in the company world over the previous decade. The internal structure and organization of businesses have developed in response to the emergence of a digital environment shaped by internet business models and digital marketing (DM) approaches.

Durai et al., (2019), to comprehend what digital marketing tactics are, it's helpful to categorize what is not digital marketing. Printed, broadcast, television, and billboards are not examples of digital marketing. These channels were highly lucrative for a long time, but these aren't as efficient now. By using digital marketing channels and methods the marketers can analyze their marketing campaigns to understand what is working and what is not working in real-time. While the internet is inextricably linked to digital marketing, other mediums are critical as well. With the phenomenal expansion of smartphones and tablets in recent years, mobile phones has emerged as a generally accepted channel for

digital marketing. Social media has turned into a formidable proponent for digital marketing. Initially, social networks were intended to facilitate in-person connections. It has led to the transformation of social networks such as Facebook and Twitter into valuable digital marketing tools. For the success of business in today's world, it is important to have a strong digital footprint within the internet. For this purpose, when a business is defining its marketing plan, it should incorporate a solid digital strategy. Without a digital marketing strategy, new client engagements, brand awareness, and revenue-generating prospects are likely to suffer.

King (2019), that companies should keep the above factors that influence their consumers in consideration to adopt the appropriate strategies in their digital marketing efforts. They must conduct a comprehensive strategy to address the consumer's needs and using the potential provided by the digital marketing platform by activating those factors that influence them the various digital marketing channels. For businesses to address this new market successfully, they must first understand the elements in which their consumers live, how they think, and how their perception is shifting in response to the increased use of technology in their daily activities. After all, positive consumerism serves as an opportunity for businesses. Keeping this in mind, businesses must develop appropriate digital strategies that cater to customers want to increase their chances of survival and growth, particularly due to the volume and pace of change. caused through digitization.

Lockett (2018) to enable small retail business owners to improve derived sales with digital marketing, they must hire the right people, utilize successful advertising methods, and carefully select explicit content online. Additionally, corporate leaders developed direct contacts with the community to raise brand awareness, accelerate growth, and ensure long-term viability. Business executives utilize a variety of communication platforms to create and promote products and services in the retail business, as well as to improve their organization's performance.

Research Gap

Student life revolves around social media now and how they perceive it, their behaviour, and the decisions they take. Though the work done so far has largely been about the effects that social media has on consumer behaviour and mental health in general, there are large gaps in what more concrete, specific research has been done when it comes to the effects social media has on university students. Here are some key gaps in this research address:

Psychological and emotional effects resulted: While we knew influencers were able to build strong bonds with their followers, we don't know how that affects university students' self-esteem and decision making. For instance, the opportunity for student comparison is riddled with idealized, idealized versions of life presented by influencers, resulting in feelings of inferiority, pressure to conform, and decision making based on trends over self, personal, and goal requirements.

Impact of Content Formats: Students love such platforms as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts as they deliver short, short and engaging content. But there's the problem, how does that rapid consumption of this shiny, bite sized information affect their thinking critically or making educated decisions?

Role of Specific Influencer Types: All influencers are not treated in studies the same, and different types have different effects. For instance: a) Micro-influencers: Are smaller audiences better for student engagement? b) Finfluencers: What effect does financial influence have on students' money habits? C) Health influencers: Are they promoting sustainable lifestyles, or are they making unrealistic expectations? We need to analyze how these categories make a difference for students in different ways.

Pilot Study

Before rolling out the full survey, a small trial tested how clear, dependable, and well-structured the tool really was. Out came an early copy of the questionnaire every single one of its 30 rating questions plus personal detail sections - handed to 30 carefully picked individuals who also happened to belong to the intended pool: undergrads and grads alike. This mini-group varied on purpose - different ages, fields of study, and genders mixed so any quirks in responses could show up before the big run. Such variety helped spot whether results might tilt based on who answered when later digging into broader data patterns.

One aim stood out at first: spotting unclear wording in the questions. It also mattered how well people felt the rating scale matched their opinions. Instead of assuming it worked, there was testing around to see if the online form caused hiccups - technically or mentally. People answered casually, asked simply to note anything fuzzy, repeated, or hard to place on the scale provided.

After gathering early responses, Cronbach's Alpha got calculated to check how well the survey questions were held together. A score of $\alpha = 0.87$ came out - well above the standard mark of 0.70 showing solid consistency across answers. This suggests the tool worked reliably, with each item pointing clearly toward what it aimed to measure. Because some people found certain wordings unclear, small tweaks happened to three questions. Confusion mainly showed up around lines meant to capture doubt versus overall confidence, so edits focused there.

That first small trial acted like an early warning system ahead of the main data gathering. Not just checking if the survey made sense psychologically, yet making sure the math tools lined up right too - things such as Descriptive Analysis, Independent Samples T-Test, and One-Way ANOVA fit how the numbers would flow in. Shaped further by what showed up during testing, the updated form then went out to all 220 people picked for the study.

Sampling Technique

In this study, we strategically selected Lovely Professional University (LPU) students as our target population to investigate the influence of celebrity endorsements on brand perceptions. LPU, a premier institution in Phagwara, India, hosts a heterogeneous student body exceeding 30,000 individuals, encompassing undergraduates and postgraduates from diverse academic disciplines such as Business Administration, Engineering, Pharmacy, Arts & Sciences, and Vocational Studies. This institution's demographic richness—with students hailing from all 28 Indian states and over 50 countries—provides a microcosm of India's youth, aligning with our objective to capture culturally and academically varied perspectives.

Measurement of Variables

Variables are measured using **5-point Likert scales** (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) for consistency with prior studies (Till & Shimp, 1998; Alshetti & Al Mubarak, 2019). Key constructs include:

- **Brand Perception:** Adapted from the TEARS model (Trustworthiness, Expertise, Attractiveness, Respect, Similarity).
- **Purchase Intentions:** "How likely are you to purchase a product endorsed by a celebrity?" (1 = Very Unlikely, 5 = Very Likely).
- **Demographic Variables:** Gender, discipline, and social media usage frequency.

Data Analysis Techniques

In this study, we employed a multi-faceted statistical approach to analyze the interplay between celebrity endorsements and students' brand perceptions. Our methodology was guided by the research objectives and hypotheses, ensuring alignment between analytical techniques and the study's theoretical framework. Below is a detailed breakdown of the techniques utilized:

1. Independent Samples t-Test:

To address Hypothesis H₄ (gender-based differences), we conducted an independent samples t-test. This enabled us to compare mean brand perception scores between male and female students. We ensured assumptions of normality (Shapiro-Wilk test) and homogeneity of variance (Levene's test) were met before interpreting results. The t-test's simplicity and efficacy in comparing two groups made it ideal for testing gender as a moderating variable.

2. One-Way ANOVA:

We applied one-way ANOVA, followed by post-hoc Tukey tests to pinpoint group differences. When Levene's test indicated unequal variances, we supplemented our analysis with Welch's ANOVA for robustness. This method revealed how discontinuation of endorsements disproportionately affected students with higher agreement levels.

3. Descriptive Statistics:

Prior to inferential analysis, we summarized demographic and Likert-scale data using frequencies, means, and standard deviations. This provided context for interpreting later findings, such as the predominance of neutral attitudes in certain cohorts.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

The research examined 220 students through a gender split and staged them according to age groups and their courses and academic positions.

Characteristics	No of Students	Percentage
Female	90	41.00%
Male	130	59.00%
Age group		
18-20 years	32	14.55%
21-23 years	101	45.91%
24-26 years	87	39.55%
Academic Programme		
B. Tech/Engineering	72	32.73%
BBA/Commerce	61	27.73%
MBA/Management	79	35.91%
Other	8	3.64%
Year of Study		
1st year	35	15.91%
2nd year	81	36.82%
3rd year	73	33.18%
4th year/ PG Final year	31	14.09%

Male students represented 59% of the total respondents in the research population whereas females made up 41%. A gender discrepancy in the survey population has the potential to affect research outcomes unless gender proves irrelevant to brand perception. Most respondents fell between 18–20 years old (14.55%) while people in their 21–23 years bracket made up the remaining group (45.91%). The research showed that students 24–26 years totaled 39.55% of the total respondents. The study mostly captures the views of young adults since this demographic actively connects with brands and marketing initiatives. Most survey participants came from MBA/Management (35.91%) and Engineering (32.73%), BBA/Commerce (27.73%), and Others (3.64%) each of the total participants. Management students typically understand branding concepts well so their increased participation in this study might result in analytical findings. About forty percent of students belonged to the undergraduate group while the remaining forty percent were postgraduates. 3rd year undergraduate students comprised the most substantial population segment (40%) while 2nd year then 4th year and finally 1st year students composed the remaining percentages of 25% each. Student responses represent diverse viewpoints because the survey includes equal numbers between undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Analysis

Brand Perception between Male and Female students: Table 1. Independent Sample Test

Q#	Mean (Male)	Mean (Female)	Mean Diff	t-stat	p-value
Q1	3.154	3.806	-0.652	-5.536	0.0000
Q2	3.446	4.144	-0.698	-5.637	0.0000
Q3	3.508	4.044	-0.536	-4.278	0.0000
Q4	3.185	4.111	-0.926	-6.350	0.0000
Q5	3.762	4.067	-0.305	-2.513	0.0127

This test checked whether gender causes a statistically significant difference in influencer marketing attitudes. 21 out of 30 items (70%) showed statistically significant differences between males and females ($p < 0.05$). In every significant item, females scored higher than males, meaning women are more positively influenced by influencers across trust, authenticity, brand perception, and purchase intent.

- **The largest differences were on items related to:**
- Genuine product use by influencers (Mean Diff = -0.926 , $p < 0.001$)
- Knowledge/expertise of influencers (Mean Diff = -0.698 , $p < 0.001$)
- Trust in recommendations (Mean Diff = -0.652 , $p < 0.001$)

Only 9 items were NOT significant, mostly related to scepticism and price sensitivity — areas where males and females thought similarly. Levene's test confirmed variance equality for most items, so the standard Student's t-test was used; Welch's correction was applied where variances differed. Gender is a significant factor in influencer marketing receptivity. Female respondents are substantially more influenced than males, especially on trust and authenticity dimensions.

Brand Perception among students: Table 2. Descriptive test

Q#	Statement (Short)	N	Mean	Std Dev	Median	Interpretation
Q1	Trust in influencer recommendations	220	3.420	1.034	4.0	Neutral–Agree
Q2	Influencers appear knowledgeable	220	3.732	1.014	4.0	Agree
Q3	Influencers are honest about products	220	3.727	1.033	4.0	Agree
Q4	Influencers genuinely use products	220	3.648	1.102	4.0	Agree
Q5	Expertise increases purchase confidence	220	3.915	0.952	4.0	Agree

Q#	Statement (Short)	N	Mean	Std Dev	Median	Interpretation
Q6	Influencers promote mainly for money	220	3.682	1.065	4.0	Agree
Q7	I doubt honesty of recommendations	220	3.527	1.078	4.0	Agree
Q8	Promotions feel like advertisements	220	3.745	1.072	4.0	Agree
Q9	Sceptical about accuracy of claims	220	3.618	1.028	4.0	Agree
Q10	Content feels authentic and genuine	220	3.432	1.018	4.0	Neutral–Agree
Q19	Purchased after influencer recommendation	220	3.791	1.035	4.0	Agree
Q20	Likely to buy if favourite endorses it	220	3.855	1.032	4.0	Agree
Q25	I compare prices before buying	220	4.164	0.946	4.0	Agree–Strongly Agree
Q26	More confident after extensive review	220	4.218	0.923	5.0	Agree–Strongly Agree

By Academic Programme: Table 3. One Way Anova Test

Q#	F-statistic	p-value	Significant?
Q1	4.498	0.0044	Yes
Q2	42.082	0.0000	Yes
Q3	11.830	0.0000	Yes
Q4	6.877	0.0002	Yes
Q5	16.590	0.0000	Yes

This test compared whether students from different academic backgrounds (MBA, B.Tech, BBA/Commerce, Other) responded differently. 29 out of 30 items (97%) showed statistically significant differences across academic programmes ($p < 0.05$). The highest F-statistics were seen on items about influencer knowledge/expertise ($F = 42.08$, $p < 0.001$) and brand perception ($F > 15$), indicating that academic background very strongly differentiates how students perceive influencer credibility. MBA/Management and BBA/Commerce students showed higher mean scores on trust and purchase intent, consistent with their commerce-oriented mindset that values marketing communication. B.Tech/Engineering students were comparatively more sceptical and less influenced, reflecting an analytical and technical mindset. Only 1 item was not significant across all four groups, showing just how powerful academic background is as a differentiator. Academic programme is the strongest demographic differentiator in this study. Commerce and management students are far more receptive to influencer marketing than engineering students.

By Age Group: Table 4. One Way Anova test

Q#	F-statistic	p-value	Significant?
Q1	14.662	0.0000	Yes
Q2	24.648	0.0000	Yes
Q3	30.414	0.0000	Yes
Q4	10.107	0.0001	Yes
Q5	45.776	0.0000	Yes

This test compared whether different age groups (18–20, 21–23, 24–26 years) responded differently to influencer marketing. All 30 out of 30 items (100%) showed statistically significant differences across age groups ($p < 0.05$) making this the most universally significant test in the study. The highest F-statistics appeared on items related to expertise and content quality ($F = 45.78$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting age strongly shapes how people evaluate influencer credibility. The 18–20 age group tends to show higher impulsive purchase tendencies and content engagement younger consumers are more easily influenced. The 24–26 age group (older, likely post-graduate) shows higher scepticism and more deliberate decision-making before buying based on influencer advice. The 21–23 age group (the majority, $N = 101$) falls in between, representing a balanced and moderate attitude. Age is a universal differentiator every single item was affected by age group. Younger consumers (18–20) are the most vulnerable to influencer influence, while older students (24–26) exercise more critical judgment.

Theoretical Contribution

This work adds something real to what we already know about how influencers affect buying choices, especially among students in India. Using ideas from Source Credibility Theory (Ohanian, 1990) and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), it shows through data that young people's willingness to buy is shaped by how honest, knowledgeable, and genuine influencers seem online. Earlier studies get a boost here because results show these effects do not play out the same way across groups - differences appear clearly when looking at gender, field of study, or age. What stands out is how personal traits shift the impact, making outcomes less predictable but more revealing. Notably, the data shows women scored higher on trust and buying interest in 21 out of 30 cases, pointing to a pattern often missed when studying influencers in India. What stands out is how students from commerce and management backgrounds respond more strongly, likely because they encounter marketing ideas more often. Instead of treating everyone the same, these patterns suggest influence works differently depending on background. Behind the numbers, learning environment seems to shape reactions just as much as personal traits. So, while gender matters, so does what people study - each nudging their responses in distinct ways. Rather than one-size-fits-all theories, new models might need to reflect such splits among consumers.

Managerial Contribution

Here's what managers can take away. This research gives clear points for anyone running influencer campaigns aimed at students. Female audiences between 18 and 23 react more than others when influencers promote products. Because of this, companies in fashion, beauty, daily-use goods, or lifestyle spaces might shift spending where it counts. Instead of spreading efforts thin, focusing on Instagram Reels and YouTube review-style videos could bring better results - especially since those formats pull stronger engagement from young women. Decisions around budget shouldn't be random; platform choice matters just as much as message. Here's another point: trust levels tend to run lower among B.Tech and engineering students. That means tech-focused groups often respond better when messages stick to clear proof instead of big dreams. Product demos can work well. So do honest breakdowns backed by real expertise. Storylines about success? Not so much. Working with small-name influencers makes sense - provided they know their field inside

out. Big names on social media usually miss the mark here. Authority matters more than reach. It shows how often students check prices and hunt down reviews - shows they know their way around tech while watching every dollar. Pairing influencer posts with clear costs, real discounts, yet full product breakdowns help turn interest into buying choices. Skip these details? Then even big-name shoutouts might only land in ears, never wallets.

Conclusion

Fast spread of social media changed how people choose what to buy. Influencers now play a big role in that shift. Instead of just ads, young shoppers pay attention to personalities online. This research looked at students and their reactions to those influencers. It checked if things like gender, course of study, or age make a difference. Trust levels, opinions, and buying choices were measured closely. A total of 220 students answered questions designed to capture real feelings. Numbers came from averages, comparisons between groups, and variance checks. Each question used a five-point scale to rate thoughts. Results showed clear patterns across different types of learners. Some traits are shaped more than others. Not everyone responded the same way. Differences appeared when comparing majors. Age had subtle effects on attitude strength. Gender splits revealed distinct trends too. Overall, personal background matters in digital influence. The data supports that idea without overstating it. Patterns stood out clearly once sorted by category. Influence isn't uniform; it shifts based on who is watching. Right off, numbers showed students tend to like influencer marketing - just not too much. Most answers fell from 3.4 to 4.2 out of 5, so there's some approval floating around. Yet, they didn't hand over full trust without questions. What stood out was how often they checked prices or looked up reviews first. That step comes before buying anything influencers talk about. It paints a picture: young people online, watching posts, but also watching their wallets. They let suggestions in, sure - but only one piece among others when deciding what to buy. Blind belief? That doesn't show up here. Instead, choices seem slow, thought through. In India, many students live on tight budgets. Because of that, every rupee gets attention - and influencer pushes get tested, not taken straight. Notably, results from the independent samples t-test highlighted clear gender patterns. Across the survey, women rated 21 of 30 statements much differently than men did; these gaps favored female participants every time. When it came to believing claims about products, feeling that influences were genuine, or being sure about buying something recommended, the divide stood out sharply. Because of this trend, young women appear more open to influence from online personalities compared to young men. Their answers suggest stronger emotional bonds develop during interactions with digital creators - bonds that lead to actual decisions. From here, those planning campaigns may want to consider who responds when messages come through social figures. It isn't just numbers - it points toward real behavioral contrasts worth noticing. From the One-Way ANOVA findings, new clarity emerged about how study field and age shape responses. Though 29 of the 30 aspects shifted clearly between degree types, every single one changed across age brackets - showing differences ran deep. Students in commerce tend to view influencer posts with a marketer's eye, reacting strongly to clever messaging; those in engineering look harder at proof and logic before responding.

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