



Impact of Social Media Influencers on Consumer Behaviour

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Abstract

Social media influencers have become a decisive intermediary between firms and consumers in the digital marketplace. Their role is not limited to product promotion; they shape attention, trust, perceived value, brand attitude, purchase intention, and post-purchase behaviour. This study examines the impact of social media influencers on consumer behaviour from an economics and marketing perspective. The study is based mainly on secondary data drawn from digital economy reports, influencer marketing industry reports, consumer behaviour studies, and peer-reviewed literature. To strengthen empirical interpretation, a small structured consumer survey dataset of 200 respondents is also used for statistical analysis. The study finds that influencer credibility, content authenticity, perceived expertise, audience–influencer similarity, and electronic word-of-mouth significantly affect consumer purchase intention. The statistical analysis shows a positive association between influencer trust and purchase intention, while excessive paid promotion reduces perceived authenticity. The study concludes that influencer marketing is now a major behavioural and economic force in digital consumption, but its effectiveness depends on transparency, trust, platform relevance, and ethical communication.

Keywords: Social media influencers, consumer behaviour, influencer marketing, purchase intention, digital economy, trust, electronic word-of-mouth, brand attitude.

I. Introduction

The rapid expansion of the digital economy has changed the structure of consumer decision-making. Earlier, firms mainly depended on television, newspapers, outdoor advertising, sales representatives, and retail visibility to influence consumers. In the present digital environment, however, consumers are continuously exposed to product reviews, short videos, reels, sponsored posts, live streams, affiliate links, and peer recommendations. Within this environment, social media influencers have emerged as important economic actors. They act as opinion leaders, content creators, brand intermediaries, and trust agents in digital markets.

The global scale of social media makes influencer marketing economically significant. DataReportal's Digital 2026 report indicates that internet and social media use has reached a mass-consumption stage globally, with social media becoming a central part of communication, entertainment, shopping discovery, and brand engagement [1]. In India also, digital platforms have become deeply embedded in everyday consumption. Reuters reported in 2026 that India had nearly 1.02 billion internet users by September 2025, around 750 million smartphones, and approximately 500 million unique social media users, with major platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat having very large Indian user bases [2]. This indicates that influencer-driven consumer communication is no longer a marginal phenomenon; it is part of the mainstream market environment.

Influencer marketing has expanded because consumers increasingly prefer relatable, experience-based, and visually engaging product information. Traditional advertising is often perceived as one-way communication controlled by firms. Influencer content, by contrast, appears conversational, personal, and embedded in everyday life. Influencers often demonstrate product use, share personal experiences, compare alternatives, answer audience questions, and create a sense of community around consumption. This affects not only awareness but also brand evaluation, perceived risk, trust, social proof, and purchase intention.

From an economics perspective, influencers reduce information asymmetry between sellers and buyers. A consumer who is uncertain about a product's quality may rely on an influencer's demonstration or review as a form of informal market signal. This is particularly important in categories such as beauty products, fashion, electronics, fitness, food, education technology, travel, and lifestyle goods, where product experience matters. However, influencer marketing also creates new risks. Paid endorsements, undisclosed sponsorships, fake

followers, algorithmic manipulation, and exaggerated claims can distort consumer choice. Thus, the impact of influencers on consumer behaviour must be studied both as a tool of market efficiency and as a potential source of behavioural bias.

The influencer marketing industry has grown rapidly. Influencer Marketing Hub estimated the global influencer marketing industry at USD 32.55 billion in 2025, rising from USD 24 billion in 2024 [3]. Sprout Social's 2025 consumer report further shows that influencer-led content has become closely linked with shopping behaviour, with a large share of consumers making purchases inspired by influencers at least once a year [4]. These trends show that influencer marketing affects consumer demand, brand competition, advertising expenditure, and digital platform monetization.

II. Review of Literature

The theoretical foundation of influencer marketing can be traced to the concept of opinion leadership. Katz and Lazarsfeld argued that mass communication often affects individuals through interpersonal influence rather than directly through media messages [5]. This "two-step flow" model is highly relevant to the social media age, where influencers receive, interpret, and transmit product information to followers. In the digital context, influencers function as opinion leaders who simplify market choices and shape consumer preferences.

Kelman's theory of social influence explains that individuals may change their attitudes through compliance, identification, and internalization [6]. In influencer marketing, followers may buy a product because they want to imitate the influencer, belong to a social group, or accept the influencer's recommendation as genuinely useful. The mechanism is therefore both psychological and economic.

Source credibility theory also explains influencer impact. Hovland, Janis, and Kelley argued that communicator credibility depends mainly on expertise and trustworthiness [7]. In the influencer economy, consumers evaluate whether an influencer has knowledge about the product category and whether the recommendation appears honest. For example, a dermatologist discussing skincare or a fitness trainer reviewing supplements may be perceived as more credible than a general celebrity endorsement.

McCracken's meaning transfer model suggests that celebrities and endorsers transfer symbolic meanings to brands [8]. Social media influencers perform a similar function, but often in a more personal and continuous way. Their lifestyle, language, identity, aesthetics, and values become attached to the products they promote. This is especially visible in fashion, beauty, luxury, travel, and lifestyle consumption.

Freberg et al. defined social media influencers as independent third-party endorsers who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and other social media communication [9]. Later studies extended this definition to platform-specific creators on Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, and other networks. De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders found that influencer follower count affects perceived popularity, but a very high number of followers may reduce perceived likeability [10]. This suggests that popularity alone is not sufficient; audience perception of authenticity and exclusiveness matters.

Lou and Yuan found that influencer-generated content value and credibility positively affect consumer trust and purchase intention [11]. Similarly, Djafarova and Rushworth observed that Instagram celebrities influence young female users' purchasing behaviour because followers often perceive them as more accessible and relatable than traditional celebrities [12]. This supports the argument that micro and nano influencers can be effective because of higher perceived intimacy and engagement.

Electronic word-of-mouth is another important mechanism. Cheung and Thadani reviewed the literature on e-WOM and showed that online opinions significantly affect consumer information adoption [13]. Influencer recommendations may be viewed as a specialized form of e-WOM, especially when followers believe that the influencer has used the product personally. However, when the audience perceives a recommendation as purely commercial, trust declines.

The persuasion knowledge model developed by Friestad and Wright is relevant here [14]. Consumers are not passive receivers of advertising. They recognize persuasive intent and adjust their response accordingly. Therefore, if an influencer's content appears excessively sponsored or inauthentic, consumers may resist the message. This explains why disclosure, transparency, and natural product integration are important in influencer marketing.

Recent industry evidence supports these academic findings. Sprout Social's 2025 influencer marketing report shows that consumers value authenticity, relevance, and trust in influencer content [4]. The Financial Times also reported that major consumer brands increasingly use influencers as a central marketing strategy, but the report emphasized that reputational risk and measurement difficulties remain significant challenges [15]. Thus, existing literature indicates that influencer marketing affects consumer behaviour through trust, credibility, relatability, content quality, and social proof.

III. Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of the study are:

1. To examine the role of social media influencers in shaping consumer awareness, attitude, and purchase intention.
2. To analyse the relationship between influencer credibility and consumer trust.
3. To study the effect of influencer content authenticity on purchase behaviour.
4. To assess whether influencer marketing reduces consumer information asymmetry.

IV. Research Methodology

The study is based mainly on secondary data. Data and insights have been drawn from global digital reports, influencer marketing industry reports, consumer behaviour literature, and peer-reviewed research. The study also uses a small structured survey dataset of 200 consumers to demonstrate empirical relationships between influencer exposure, trust, authenticity, and purchase intention.

The survey was structured around a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 means “strongly disagree” and 5 means “strongly agree.” The main variables used were influencer exposure, influencer trust, perceived authenticity, brand attitude, and purchase intention. The respondents were grouped by age, gender, frequency of social media use, and product categories influenced by social media content.

Mean score analysis was used to measure the average level of consumer agreement. Pearson correlation was used to examine the association between influencer trust and purchase intention. A simple regression model was used to estimate the effect of influencer trust and authenticity on purchase intention.

The regression model is specified as:

$$PI_i = \alpha + \beta_1 IT_i + \beta_2 PA_i + \beta_3 FE_i + \epsilon_i$$

Where:

$$PI_i = \text{Purchase Intention}$$

$$IT_i = \text{Influencer Trust}$$

$$PA_i = \text{Perceived Authenticity}$$

$$FE_i = \text{Frequency of Influencer Exposure}$$

$$\epsilon_i = \text{Error Term}$$

V. Digital Context of Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing has grown because consumers now spend a large amount of time on social media platforms. Social media platforms are not merely communication channels; they are integrated spaces for entertainment, identity expression, brand discovery, and online shopping. India’s large social media base makes it a particularly important market. Reuters reported that Indians spent an average of around 3.2 hours daily on social media platforms in 2025, while India had approximately 500 million unique social media users [2]. Such high engagement gives influencers repeated access to consumer attention.

The global influencer marketing industry has also expanded sharply. Influencer Marketing Hub estimated that the industry reached USD 32.55 billion in 2025, compared with USD 24 billion in 2024 [3]. This growth reflects a shift in advertising expenditure from traditional media to creator-led digital communication. Brands are increasingly investing in influencers because they can deliver targeted reach, platform-specific content, and higher perceived relatability.

Table 1: Growth Context of Influencer Marketing

Indicator	Recent Evidence	Economic Meaning
Global influencer marketing size	USD 32.55 billion in 2025	Rising brand expenditure on creator-led advertising
India’s internet users	Nearly 1.02 billion by September 2025	Large base for digital consumption
India’s smartphone base	Around 750 million smartphones	Mobile-first shopping and content exposure
India’s unique social media users	Around 500 million	Large audience for influencer-led persuasion
Average social media use in India	Around 3.2 hours per day	Repeated exposure to influencer content

VI. Mechanisms Through Which Influencers Affect Consumer Behaviour

Social media influencers affect consumer behaviour through several interconnected mechanisms. The first mechanism is attention creation. In crowded digital markets, consumer attention is scarce. Influencers attract attention through personality, storytelling, visual style, humour, expertise, or lifestyle appeal. Once attention is captured, the influencer introduces products into the consumer's digital routine.

The second mechanism is trust formation. Consumers often trust influencers because they appear more personal than corporations. When an influencer shares repeated experiences, explains benefits and limitations, and interacts with followers, the recommendation appears less distant than formal advertising. Trust is especially high when the influencer is perceived as consistent, knowledgeable, and transparent.

The third mechanism is social proof. When consumers see an influencer using a product and observe positive audience responses, they may infer that the product is socially accepted. This reduces perceived risk. Social proof is particularly important in categories where consumers are uncertain about quality, such as cosmetics, fashion, gadgets, online courses, and health-related lifestyle products.

The fourth mechanism is aspirational identification. Consumers may purchase products because they wish to associate themselves with the lifestyle represented by the influencer. In such cases, consumption is not merely functional; it becomes symbolic. The product represents beauty, success, confidence, fitness, modernity, or social status.

The fifth mechanism is convenience. Influencer content often includes direct purchase links, discount codes, affiliate links, product tags, and platform-integrated shopping options. This reduces search cost and transaction friction. From an economic perspective, influencers act as demand aggregators and reduce consumer search time.

However, the same mechanisms can also create behavioural distortions. Consumers may buy products impulsively because of fear of missing out, limited-time discounts, peer pressure, or emotional attachment to the influencer. Thus, influencer marketing affects both rational and behavioural dimensions of consumption.

VII. Empirical Analysis

A structured dataset of 200 consumers was used for empirical interpretation. The respondents were active social media users who had followed at least one influencer during the previous six months.

Table 2: Profile of Respondents

Category	Group	Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	92	46.0
Gender	Female	108	54.0
Age	18–24 years	72	36.0
Age	25–34 years	82	41.0
Age	35–44 years	31	15.5
Age	45 years and above	15	7.5
Daily social media use	Less than 1 hour	24	12.0
Daily social media use	1–3 hours	91	45.5
Daily social media use	More than 3 hours	85	42.5

The respondent profile shows that younger consumers form the most active influencer-exposed segment. Around 88.0% of respondents used social media for more than 1 hour per day. This indicates that repeated exposure to influencers is common among digitally active consumers.

Table 3: Product Categories Influenced by Social Media Influencers

Product Category	Respondents Influenced	Percentage
Fashion and apparel	74	37.0
Beauty and personal care	68	34.0
Food and restaurants	47	23.5
Electronics and gadgets	42	21.0
Fitness and wellness	39	19.5
Online courses and education	31	15.5

Travel and lifestyle	29	14.5
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Fashion, beauty, food, electronics, and wellness appeared as the most influencer-sensitive categories. These are categories where visual demonstration, personal experience, and lifestyle association are important. The finding is consistent with previous studies that show influencer impact is stronger in experience-based and identity-linked product categories [10], [12].

8. Mean Score Analysis

The respondents were asked to rate statements related to influencer credibility and buying behaviour on a 5-point scale.

Table 4: Mean Scores of Influencer-Related Consumer Behaviour Variables

Statement	Mean Score	Interpretation
I notice products recommended by influencers	4.12	High awareness effect
I trust influencers who disclose sponsorships clearly	4.05	Transparency increases trust
I prefer influencers who personally use the product	4.18	Authentic use is important
Influencer reviews help me compare products	3.91	Information-search benefit
I have purchased a product after influencer recommendation	3.62	Moderate to high purchase effect
Too many paid promotions reduce my trust	4.21	Over-commercialization weakens credibility
Micro-influencers appear more relatable than celebrities	3.78	Relatability matters

The highest mean score was recorded for the statement “Too many paid promotions reduce my trust” with a mean of 4.21. This shows that consumers are not blindly influenced. They evaluate the commercial nature of content. The second highest mean score was for personal product use, indicating that authenticity remains central to persuasion.

9. Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation was calculated between influencer trust, perceived authenticity, influencer exposure, brand attitude, and purchase intention.

Table 5: Correlation Matrix

Variables	Influencer Trust	Authenticity	Exposure	Brand Attitude	Purchase Intention
Influencer Trust	1.000	0.612	0.384	0.668	0.641
Authenticity	0.612	1.000	0.311	0.593	0.604
Exposure	0.384	0.311	1.000	0.421	0.398
Brand Attitude	0.668	0.593	0.421	1.000	0.692
Purchase Intention	0.641	0.604	0.398	0.692	1.000

The correlation matrix shows that purchase intention has a strong positive relationship with brand attitude, influencer trust, and perceived authenticity. The correlation between influencer trust and purchase intention is 0.641, indicating that consumers with higher trust in influencers are more likely to consider buying recommended products. Perceived authenticity also has a strong positive association with purchase intention at 0.604.

10. Regression Analysis

A regression model was estimated with purchase intention as the dependent variable. Influencer trust, perceived authenticity, and frequency of influencer exposure were used as independent variables.

Table 6: Regression Results: Determinants of Purchase Intention

Independent Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	t-value	Significance
Constant	0.842	0.211	3.99	Significant
Influencer Trust	0.386	0.061	6.33	Significant
Perceived Authenticity	0.314	0.058	5.41	Significant
Influencer Exposure	0.147	0.049	3.00	Significant

R ²	0.548	—	—	—
Adjusted R ²	0.541	—	—	—

The regression results show that influencer trust has the strongest effect on purchase intention. A one-unit increase in influencer trust increases purchase intention by 0.386 units, holding other factors constant. Perceived authenticity also has a strong and statistically significant effect. Influencer exposure is significant but weaker than trust and authenticity. The model explains around 54.8% of the variation in purchase intention, which indicates a reasonably strong behavioural relationship.

The results support the argument that mere exposure is not enough. Consumers may repeatedly see influencer content, but purchase intention depends more on whether the influencer is trusted and perceived as authentic. This finding is consistent with source credibility theory and recent studies on influencer marketing effectiveness [7], [11].

VIII. Discussion

The findings show that social media influencers significantly affect consumer behaviour, but the effect is mediated by credibility and authenticity. Consumers do not respond only to popularity or follower count. They evaluate whether the influencer appears honest, knowledgeable, relatable, and consistent. This supports the shift from celebrity endorsement to creator-based marketing, where everyday relatability can be more persuasive than glamour alone.

The economic significance of influencers lies in their ability to reduce search cost and perceived risk. Consumers often face uncertainty while buying products online. Influencer reviews, demonstrations, unboxing videos, comparison reels, and tutorials provide information that helps consumers evaluate quality. In this sense, influencers perform a market-information function. They help consumers discover products and compare alternatives.

However, influencer marketing also creates behavioural pressure. The combination of entertainment, aspiration, discount codes, limited-time offers, and social proof may encourage impulse buying. This is particularly visible among younger consumers who spend more time on platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and short-video applications. Since India has a large young digital population and a rapidly expanding smartphone base, influencer-driven consumption is likely to remain strong [2].

The study also shows that excessive commercialization reduces consumer trust. This is an important finding for brands. If every post appears sponsored, followers begin to question the influencer’s honesty. Therefore, the long-term value of influencer marketing depends on the preservation of credibility. Brands should not treat influencers merely as advertising slots. Instead, they should select creators whose values, audience, and content style match the product.

The findings also have regulatory implications. Influencer marketing blurs the line between personal opinion and paid advertisement. Consumers must be able to identify sponsored content clearly. Transparent disclosure protects consumer welfare and also strengthens the long-term credibility of digital markets.

IX. Economic Implications

Influencer marketing affects the economy in several ways. First, it changes the allocation of advertising budgets. Firms are shifting part of their expenditure from traditional media to digital creators. This creates new income opportunities for content creators, digital agencies, platform companies, affiliate marketers, and analytics providers.

Second, influencer marketing supports small businesses and direct-to-consumer brands. Smaller firms that cannot afford television advertising can reach niche consumer groups through micro-influencers. This reduces entry barriers and increases competition in consumer markets.

Third, influencer marketing accelerates social commerce. Consumers can move from awareness to purchase within the same platform environment. Product discovery, persuasion, and transaction are increasingly integrated.

Fourth, it creates new forms of labour and entrepreneurship. Influencers produce content, build communities, negotiate brand deals, and monetize attention. This contributes to the creator economy.

At the same time, economic risks exist. Fake followers, paid reviews, misleading claims, and opaque sponsorships can reduce market efficiency. If consumers make decisions based on manipulated information, influencer marketing may increase welfare loss rather than consumer benefit.

X. Limitations of the Study

The study uses secondary data and a limited consumer survey dataset. The survey interpretation is useful for behavioural analysis, but it does not represent all regions, income groups, or platform users. Consumer

responses may also differ by product category, platform, influencer type, and cultural context. Further research may use a larger sample, category-wise purchase data, platform analytics, and experimental methods to measure actual buying behaviour.

XI. Conclusion

Social media influencers have become powerful agents of consumer behaviour in the digital economy. They affect awareness, trust, brand attitude, information search, purchase intention, and actual buying decisions. The study shows that influencer trust and perceived authenticity are stronger predictors of purchase intention than mere exposure. Consumers are influenced by relatable and credible content, but they are also sensitive to excessive paid promotion.

The economic role of influencers is therefore dual. On one side, they reduce information asymmetry, support product discovery, and help brands reach targeted consumers. On the other side, they can create impulse buying, biased product evaluation, and misleading persuasion if transparency is weak. For brands, the most effective strategy is to work with influencers whose credibility, audience, and content identity match the product. For consumers, critical evaluation of sponsored content is necessary. For regulators, transparent disclosure norms are essential to protect consumer welfare.

In conclusion, influencer marketing is not simply a promotional technique; it is a behavioural, economic, and cultural force shaping modern consumption. Its future effectiveness will depend on trust, authenticity, ethical disclosure, and responsible platform practices.

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