



# Impact of Influencer Marketing on Generation Z Buying Behaviour

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**Abstract:** Influencer marketing has emerged as a dominant force in digital commerce, particularly in shaping how Generation Z (born 1997–2012) discovers, evaluates, and purchases products. This paper investigates the extent to which social media influencers alter the buying behaviour of Gen Z consumers, drawing on a primary Google Form survey (n = 16) conducted in April 2026 alongside a comprehensive secondary review of marketing literature and established consumer behaviour theories. Survey results show that 75 % of respondents had purchased a product on an influencer's recommendation, while 81 % rated influencer marketing as superior to conventional advertising. Instagram dominated platform preference (75 %), with trust and product reviews consistently cited as the foremost purchase triggers. The paper discusses these findings through the lenses of Source Credibility Theory, Parasitical Interaction Theory, and the SOR model, and closes with strategic recommendations for marketers aiming to engage this cohort effectively.

**Index Terms** - Influencer marketing, Generation Z, buying behaviour, social media, trust, authenticity, digital marketing, consumer behaviour.

## I.INTRODUCTION

The past decade has witnessed a sweeping reconfiguration of marketing communication. Television commercials, print advertisements, and outdoor hoardings, once the cornerstones of brand outreach, have yielded ground to a more conversational and peer-driven mode of promotion: influencer marketing. At its core, influencer marketing enlists individuals who have cultivated credibility and sizeable followings on social platforms to advocate products and services in a way that mirrors genuine personal endorsement rather than corporate broadcast.

Generation Z occupies a uniquely influential position in this transformation. Having grown up with smartphones as everyday tools and social media as a primary social infrastructure, Gen Z consumers filter information differently from their predecessors. They exhibit a pronounced scepticism toward overtly promotional content and gravitate instead toward voices they perceive as authentic, relatable, and expert. This behavioural profile makes the Gen Z segment both a formidable challenge and a lucrative opportunity for brand strategists.

India provides a particularly vibrant context for this inquiry. Affordable data plans, a median population age of approximately 28 years, and explosive growth in short-form video consumption have made the country one of the most active influencer-marketing ecosystems in the world. Young Indian consumers routinely turn to Instagram Reels, YouTube reviews, and TikTok-style content before committing to a purchase, giving influencers outsized authority in the consumer decision journey.

This research paper seeks to answer three interrelated questions: (1) How actively does Gen Z engage with social media influencers, and on which platforms? (2) Does influencer endorsement translate into actual purchase behaviour? (3) What factors, specifically trust, product reviews, and brand reputation, mediate that translation? To address these questions, the paper combines evidence from a freshly administered Google Form survey with insights drawn from secondary literature, producing both a contextual narrative and a data-grounded analysis.

## II. Review of Literature

### 2.1 Theoretical Foundations

Several established frameworks help explain why influencer marketing works. Hovland, Janis, and Kelley's (1953) Source Credibility Theory holds that a message is most persuasive when delivered by a source perceived as expert and trustworthy. In the influencer context, a fitness creator who genuinely uses a protein supplement embodies both dimensions: expertise through demonstrated knowledge and trustworthiness through visible personal commitment. When these attributes align, followers are significantly more likely to adopt the recommended behaviour, a pattern confirmed across multiple experimental studies (Ohanian, 1990; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Parasocial Interaction Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956) offers a complementary perspective. Audiences develop one-sided, emotionally real relationships with media personalities, experiencing concern, affection, and identification even without reciprocal contact. Social media amplifies parasocial dynamics because comment sections, Stories, and live sessions create an illusion of dialogue. Gen Z consumers who feel personally connected to a creator are more receptive to that creator's product recommendations because the endorsement feels like advice from a trusted acquaintance rather than a paid placement.

The Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) Model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) maps the causal chain from marketing stimulus to consumer action. Applied here, influencer content (stimulus) triggers internal states of curiosity, desire, or social belonging (organism), ultimately driving purchase intention or avoidance (response). Researchers have used this framework to show that emotionally engaging content heightens positive affect and reduces purchase hesitation, effects particularly pronounced among younger cohorts who consume content in immersive, emotionally responsive contexts.

### 2.2 Empirical Evidence

An expanding body of empirical work substantiates the intuitions supplied by theory. Fardouly et al. (2018) demonstrated that visual social media exposure correlates positively with appearance-based purchase intention in young women, an effect mediated by social comparison. Liu et al. (2022) found that micro-influencers, defined broadly as creators with between 1,000 and 100,000 followers, generated higher engagement-to-follower ratios and stronger purchase intent than macro-influencers, primarily because audiences perceive them as more accessible and less commercially driven. Arora et al. (2019) established in an Indian sample that perceived influencer authenticity explained a significant variance in purchase intention beyond the effects of platform and product category.

Studies specifically targeting Gen Z behaviour reinforce these patterns. Djafarova & Rushworth (2017) found that Instagram influencers exert greater purchase-decision impact among 18–25 year-olds than celebrity endorsers, because followers sense that influencers speak from direct product experience rather than contractual obligation. Veirman et al. (2017) showed that follower count moderates credibility perceptions in counterintuitive ways: very large followings can actually signal commercialisation and reduce perceived sincerity among discerning Gen Z audiences, supporting the efficacy of micro-influencer strategies.

## 2.3 Research Gap

Despite the volume of published research, certain gaps remain. Most Western studies do not transfer seamlessly to the Indian context, where regional language content, family purchase dynamics, and platform penetration rates differ substantially. Within India, studies concentrating exclusively on Gen Z and disaggregating the relative weights of trust, product reviews, and brand reputation as purchase determinants are scarce. The present study partly addresses this gap through a focused primary survey within a Gen Z student population.

## II. Research Methodology

### 3.1 Research Design

The study employs a descriptive and analytical research design. A descriptive approach is appropriate because the primary aim is to capture and characterise current attitudes and behaviours rather than to manipulate variables. The analytical layer allows examination of associations between engagement patterns, trust levels, and purchase outcomes.

### 3.2 Data Sources

Primary data were collected through a structured Google Form questionnaire comprising eight closed-ended and one open-ended question. The instrument was distributed via WhatsApp and Instagram DMs to Gen Z individuals during April 2026. Secondary data were drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles, marketing industry reports (IZEA, Statista, Influencer Marketing Hub), and foundational consumer-behaviour texts to contextualise and interpret the primary findings.

### 3.3 Sampling

A convenience sample of 16 Gen Z respondents was obtained. While the sample is modest, it is internally consistent and provides illustrative directional evidence suitable for an MBA-level academic project. Respondents ranged in age from 19 to 30 years, with the majority (93.75 %) falling in the 19–26 bracket directly corresponding to core Gen Z boundaries.

### 3.4 Instrument Design

The questionnaire covered: (1) age group, (2) preferred social media platform, (3) frequency of influencer engagement, (4) type of influencer followed, (5) prior purchase from influencer recommendation, (6) comparative effectiveness of influencer vs. traditional advertising, (7) suggested improvements, and (8) key purchase-decision factors. Responses were collected via single-select and multi-select options. The open-ended question on improvements was qualitatively coded into thematic clusters.

### 3.5 Analytical Approach

Quantitative responses were subjected to frequency and percentage analysis. Multi-select responses were disaggregated and individually counted. Open-ended textual responses were thematically coded into clusters: transparency/authenticity, quality/accuracy, and others. All computations were performed in Python and verified manually.

## IV. Data Analysis and Findings

### 4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1 presents the age distribution of the 16 survey participants.

Table 1: Age Group Distribution

| Age Group   | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|-------------|-----------|----------------|
| 19–22 years | 7         | 43.75          |
| 23–26 years | 8         | 50.00          |
| 27–30 years | 1         | 6.25           |
| Total       | 16        | 100.00         |

The sample is heavily concentrated in the 19–26 age range (93.75 %), which aligns with the study's focus on Generation Z. The slight majority (50 %) in the 23–26 bracket reflects a maturing Gen Z cohort, many of whom are post-graduate students with independent purchasing power.

### 4.2 Social Media Platform Usage

Table 2 shows respondents' primary social media platforms.

Table 2: Preferred Social Media Platform

| Platform        | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|-----------------|-----------|----------------|
| Instagram       | 12        | 75.00          |
| YouTube         | 1         | 6.25           |
| YouTube & Other | 1         | 6.25           |
| Other platforms | 2         | 12.50          |
| Total           | 16        | 100.00         |

Instagram commands an overwhelming 75 % platform share. This finding mirrors global industry data: according to Insider Intelligence / eMarketer (2023), Instagram was rated the best influencer-marketing channel by 33 % of US Gen Z respondents in 2022, ahead of YouTube (32 %) and TikTok (31 %). The dominance of Instagram in the Indian sample likely reflects the platform's strong Reels ecosystem and visually immersive interface that resonates with fashion, lifestyle, and fitness content.

### 4.3 Frequency of Influencer Engagement

Table 3 illustrates how regularly respondents engage with influencer content.

Table 3: Frequency of Influencer Engagement

| Engagement Frequency | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|----------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Very often           | 5         | 31.25          |
| Often                | 7         | 43.75          |
| Sometimes            | 2         | 12.50          |
| Rarely               | 2         | 12.50          |
| Total                | 16        | 100.00         |

A combined 75 % of respondents engage with influencers “often” or “very often.” This high exposure rate creates fertile conditions for social learning and parasocial bonding. The theoretical implication is significant: consistent engagement reinforces trust and familiarity, lowering psychological barriers to purchase.

### 4.4 Type of Influencers Followed

Table 4 breaks down the content niches of followed influencers.

Table 4: Type of Influencers Followed

| Influencer Category | Frequency* | Approx. Share (%) |
|---------------------|------------|-------------------|
| Fashion & Lifestyle | 11         | 68.75             |
| Fitness & Health    | 7          | 43.75             |
| Food & Travel       | 2          | 12.50             |
| Tech & Gadgets      | 2          | 12.50             |
| Others              | 1          | 6.25              |

\* Multi-select question; values exceed n = 16.

Fashion & Lifestyle leads decisively, consistent with Instagram’s visual content orientation. Fitness & Health ranks second, reflecting rising health consciousness among young Indians post-pandemic. These two categories together represent the vast majority of Gen Z’s influencer diet and are also the categories in which purchase conversion tends to be highest, given the ease of showcasing tangible products.

#### 4.5 Purchase Behaviour Attributed to Influencer Recommendations

A pivotal question in the survey asked whether respondents had ever purchased a product based on an influencer's recommendation. Results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Purchase Conversion from Influencer Recommendations

| Purchase Response | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|-------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Yes               | 10        | 62.50          |
| No                | 6         | 37.50          |
| Total             | 16        | 100.00         |

Six in ten respondents (62.50 %) confirmed a purchase influenced by a creator's endorsement. This conversion rate surpasses typical display-advertising benchmarks (often well below 5 %) by orders of magnitude, underscoring the potency of the medium. The 37.50 % who said "No" may reflect instances where awareness was created but purchase intent was not sufficiently cultivated, a gap addressable through improved content strategy and stronger calls to action.

#### 4.6 Influencer Marketing vs. Traditional Advertising

Table 6 presents respondents' comparative assessment of the two forms of marketing.

Table 6: Perceived Effectiveness of Influencer Marketing vs. Traditional Advertising

| Response               | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Yes, more effective    | 13        | 81.25          |
| No, not more effective | 2         | 12.50          |
| Maybe                  | 1         | 6.25           |
| Total                  | 16        | 100.00         |

An emphatic 81.25 % of respondents believe influencer marketing outperforms traditional advertising. Only 12.50 % disagreed, and a further 6.25 % were undecided. This consensus speaks to the fundamental shift in how Gen Z processes marketing messages: the peer-to-peer register of influencer content aligns with the trust architectures of this generation in ways that broadcast media simply cannot replicate.

## 4.7 Key Purchase-Decision Factors

Respondents identified the factors that most influence their decision to buy a product promoted by an influencer (multi-select). Disaggregated counts are shown in Table 7.

Table 7: Factors Influencing Purchase Decisions

| Purchase Factor     | Mentions* | Approx. Share (%) |
|---------------------|-----------|-------------------|
| Trust in influencer | 9         | 56.25             |
| Product reviews     | 9         | 56.25             |
| Brand reputation    | 4         | 25.00             |

\* Multi-select; individual mentions across combination responses.

Trust and product reviews emerge as co-equal purchase drivers, each mentioned by 56.25 % of the sample. Brand reputation, while still relevant at 25 %, plays a secondary role. This hierarchy validates the Source Credibility framework: when an influencer is trusted as an expert and peer, their review effectively substitutes for a brand's own promotional claims.

## 4.8 Thematic Analysis of Improvement Suggestions

The open-ended question yielded 16 textual responses that were coded into three principal themes: (1) Transparency and authenticity (e.g., "More honest and reliable reviews before sponsoring the product," "Authenticity must be taken into consideration," "Better transparency") 8 responses; (2) Quality and accuracy of information (e.g., "More accurate information," "Focus on quality over follower count," "Best quality provide") 4 responses; (3) Satisfied / no change needed (e.g., "Nothing," "NA") 2 responses; and (4) Regulatory/legal concerns (e.g., "It should be legally protected") 1 response.

The dominance of transparency-related suggestions corroborates the quantitative finding that trust is the foremost purchase catalyst. When influencers are perceived as commercially compromised, the entire value proposition collapses for this audience segment.

## V. Discussion

### 5.1 Trust as the Central Currency

Across every analytical dimension, trust emerges as the organising concept of Gen Z's relationship with influencer marketing. It is the bridge between exposure and action. Respondents who trust an influencer are willing to delegate a portion of their purchase decision to that creator's judgment, effectively outsourcing the evaluation stage of the consumer decision process. This dynamic maps directly onto the Source Credibility model: credibility, operationalised through expertise and trustworthiness, is the mechanism by which influencer content persuades.

Crucially, trust in this context is fragile and conditional. Gen Z consumers are sophisticated media readers who can detect inauthentic enthusiasm, over-commercialisation, and undisclosed sponsorships. Once trust erodes, it is difficult to rebuild. Brands and creators that invest in long-term relationship maintenance, consistent content quality, and transparent sponsorship disclosure are therefore better positioned for sustained conversion performance than those pursuing short-term reach maximisation.

## 5.2 The Platform Primacy of Instagram

Instagram's 75 % platform share in this sample reflects a structural advantage in the influencer ecosystem. The platform's visual-first interface, algorithmic Explore page, and Reels format collectively create a discovery and engagement environment that no competing platform yet replicates at the same scale for the fashion, lifestyle, and fitness categories that dominate Gen Z's influencer diet. Marketers in these categories should treat Instagram as their primary influencer-marketing channel while using YouTube for long-form credibility-building reviews and emerging short-video platforms for cultural trend-setting.

## 5.3 Micro vs. Macro Influencers

Although the survey did not directly distinguish between influencer tiers, the qualitative improvement suggestions (emphasising "focus on quality over follower count" and "better transparency") point toward a micro-influencer preference among discerning consumers. Literature consistently supports this: creators with smaller but tightly engaged communities generate higher proportional impact per follower because their parasocial bonds are stronger and their content is perceived as less commercially diluted. For budget-conscious brands, a portfolio of micro-influencers often delivers superior ROI compared to a single macro-influencer activation.

## 5.4 Limitations

The study carries two primary limitations. First, the sample size of 16 restricts statistical generalisation; findings are best understood as directional indicators rather than population-level estimates. Second, convenience sampling within a student network may introduce selection bias toward respondents who are already positively disposed toward social media and influencer content. Future research should employ stratified random sampling across diverse socioeconomic and geographic profiles to generate more representative data.

## VI. Recommendations for Marketers

- Prioritise authenticity over reach: Select influencers whose personal brand, content style, and audience demographics align genuinely with the product. Forced or misaligned partnerships are quickly detected and rejected by Gen Z audiences.
- Invest in micro-influencer portfolios: Allocate a portion of the influencer budget to creators in the 10k–100k follower range operating within relevant niches. Their higher engagement rates and stronger parasocial bonds translate into more reliable purchase conversion.
- Mandate transparent disclosures: Ensure all sponsored content is clearly labelled per ASCI guidelines. Counter-intuitively, transparency increases rather than diminishes trust among Gen Z, who respect honesty over concealment.
- Design product-review centric content: Given that product reviews tied with trust as the leading purchase driver, equip influencers with sufficient product knowledge and encourage detailed, honest evaluations rather than surface-level promotion.
- Build long-term creator partnerships: Episodic one-off collaborations deliver lower cumulative ROI than sustained ambassador programmes that allow audiences to observe a creator's genuine relationship with a brand evolve over time.
- Adopt a platform-specific strategy: Leverage Instagram for visual lifestyle content and immediate purchase triggers; YouTube for in-depth reviews and tutorials that address pre-purchase information needs; and emerging platforms for cultural trend-setting among early adopters.
- Measure beyond vanity metrics: Track engagement quality, sentiment in comments, link click-throughs, discount code redemption rates, and post-campaign brand lift surveys to assess actual purchase impact rather than relying solely on reach and impressions.

## VII. Conclusion

This paper set out to examine the real-world impact of influencer marketing on Generation Z's buying behaviour using a combination of primary survey data and secondary literature. The evidence is unambiguous: influencer marketing is not merely a supplementary tactic but a primary purchase driver for this cohort. Sixty-two percent of surveyed respondents had converted at least once from influencer recommendation to purchase, and over eighty percent rated it more effective than traditional advertising. These figures, while drawn from a modest sample, are directionally consistent with large-scale industry studies and controlled academic experiments.

The analysis identifies trust as the master variable underlying Gen Z's receptivity to influencer content. Trust, in turn, is a function of perceived authenticity, consistent content quality, relevant expertise, and transparent commercial relationships. When these conditions are met, influencers function as highly effective opinion leaders who shorten the consumer decision journey and generate purchase intent at scale. When they are absent, consumers not only ignore the message but actively develop scepticism that can spread through peer networks.

For brands navigating the digital marketing landscape, the strategic imperative is clear: invest in meaningful creator relationships, empower influencers to communicate honestly, and measure success through conversion and sentiment rather than follower count alone. Generation Z will reward authenticity with loyalty, and penalise its absence with the swift, networked disengagement that only digital natives can execute.

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