



DIGITAL PERSUASION: THE ROLE OF INFLUENCER ENGAGEMENT IN GEN Z'S PURCHASE BEHAVIOR

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Abstract

The rapid evolution of digital media has transformed consumer persuasion, positioning social media influencers (SMIs) as key agents in shaping Generation Z's purchase behavior. This study examines how influencer engagement metrics, including likes, comments, and shares, function as digital social proof and shape Gen Z consumers' trust, perceived authenticity, and purchase intention. Using a quantitative descriptive-analytical design, data were collected from 150 Indian Gen Z respondents aged 13–28 through an online survey. Correlation analysis showed that credibility ($r = 0.71$) and trustworthiness ($r = 0.63$) had the strongest positive associations with purchase intention, followed by attractiveness ($r = 0.68$), expertise ($r = 0.63$), and content quality ($r = 0.59$). The findings show that while engagement builds visibility, authenticity and transparency remain what actually drives persuasion. Drawing on Source Credibility Theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), the study finds that engagement cues shift from peripheral to central processing once audiences see an influencer as genuine and trustworthy. These insights extend classical persuasion models into the digital domain and point to the growing importance of authenticity-driven campaigns in brand-influencer collaborations aimed at Gen Z. The study adds to the understanding of how engagement, trust, and authenticity together shape persuasive impact in India's rapidly expanding influencer economy.

Keywords: Influencer Marketing, Generation Z, Digital Persuasion, Trust, Authenticity



Introduction

The rise of personal computing in the 1990s, followed by the rapid spread of smart phones from the mid-2000s onward, changed marketing communication, shifting brand–consumer interactions from traditional media to social media platforms. The emergence of social media influencers (SMIs) has transformed traditional marketing by giving brands a more relatable and authentic way to connect with consumers easily and efficiently. Influencer marketing has become a key promotional tool, built around social media personalities who hold credibility among specific audiences (Casaló et al., 2020). Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012, is a digitally native and socially connected demographic, which makes them highly receptive to influencer content (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). The Indian influencer marketing industry was valued at approximately USD 360 million in 2023 and is projected to surpass USD 500 million by 2025 (Statista, 2024). With over 80% of brands allocating a portion of their digital budgets to influencer collaborations, understanding the psychological mechanisms that convert engagement into purchase behavior has become more pressing. Gen Z consumers rely heavily on peer validation and perceived authenticity, so social media influencers function less as advertisers and more as digital opinion leaders who shape attitudes, trust, and consumption behavior.

This shift is particularly pronounced in India, where smart phone penetration and affordable data plans have compressed the timeline over which digital-first consumer habits have taken hold. Unlike markets where influencer marketing evolved gradually alongside maturing e-commerce infrastructure, India's influencer economy has grown in tandem with rapid mobile internet adoption, producing a consumer base that is simultaneously highly connected and still developing the critical media literacy to evaluate sponsored content. This dual condition makes the Indian Gen Z context a particularly instructive setting for examining how engagement and trust interact, since audiences are exposed to influencer marketing at high volume without necessarily possessing the accumulated skepticism seen in more mature influencer markets.

According to Statista (2024), India is home to more than 450 million Gen Z social media users, the world's largest young digital consumer segment. This demographic spends an average of 3–4 hours daily on social media platforms, particularly Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat, which makes them prime targets for influencer-based marketing campaigns. Despite how widely influencer marketing is used, the psychological mechanisms driving Gen Z's purchasing behavior remain underexplored. Specifically, few studies examine how engagement indicators, such as likes, comments, and content authenticity, translate into trust and purchase decisions (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Existing research in Western contexts has looked at influencer credibility and authenticity, but little of it has empirically examined how engagement cues and trust interact to shape purchase decisions among Indian Gen Z consumers. This gap points to the need to study digital persuasion within

India's evolving consumer culture, where social validation, perceived honesty and interactive communication determine how brand trust forms.

Prior studies focus mainly on influencer credibility or endorsement effectiveness but rarely link engagement behavior with purchase intention (Jin et al., 2019). Understanding this relationship is vital for brands aiming to design effective digital persuasion strategies. Despite the global relevance of influencer marketing, empirical studies focusing on Gen Z consumers in India remain scarce. Most prior work examines Western markets, overlooking cultural nuances in trust perception and digital engagement behavior. Addressing this gap, the present study provides one of the first integrated models linking engagement metrics, authenticity, trust, and purchase intention among Indian Gen Z consumers. The study extends classical persuasion models such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and Source Credibility Theory (Hovland & Weiss, 1951) into the digital influencer context. By integrating these frameworks, it conceptualizes how peripheral cues like likes, comments, share and the reach of follower interactions can activate central processing routes through perceived authenticity and trust, ultimately influencing purchase intention. To analyze the influence of engagement metrics on purchase intention. To assess the potential intermediary role of trust and authenticity. To evaluate platform-based differences in purchase responses among Gen Z consumers.

This study connects marketing psychology and digital communication by showing how social engagement builds persuasion and loyalty. It offers strategic insights for influencer campaign design, helping optimize engagement-driven conversion for Gen Z audiences. By drawing on Source Credibility Theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), the study provides a theoretical basis for explaining how engagement cues evolve into persuasive mechanisms that shape Gen Z's trust, authenticity perception, and purchasing behavior.

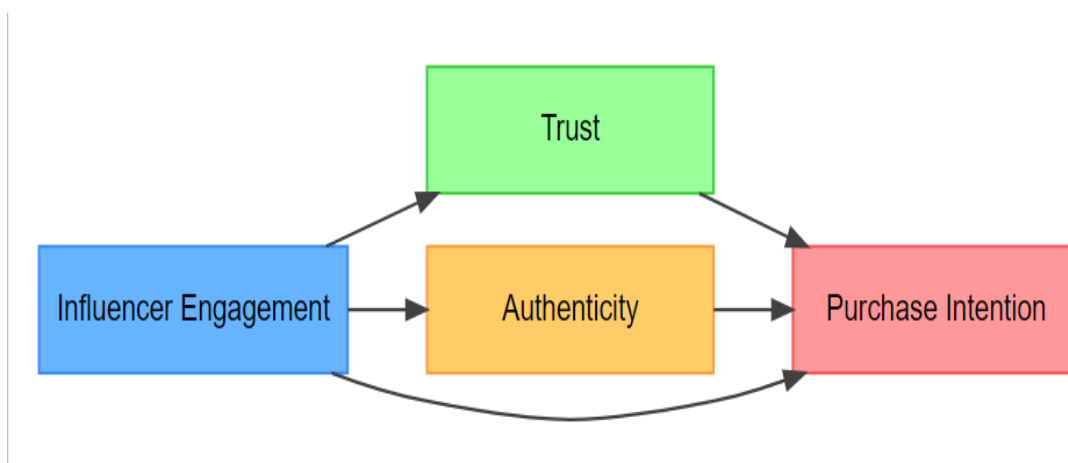


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework Influence of Engagement Metrics on Purchase Intention through Trust and Authenticity



Literature review

The rise of social media influencers (SMIs) has changed the marketing environment by shifting persuasive power from traditional celebrities to relatable, peer-like figures. Studies show that influencer endorsements produce stronger attitudes toward both the advertisement and the brand than celebrity endorsements do, because followers see influencers as more authentic and similar to themselves (Jin et al., 2019). This parasocial similarity increases trust and makes persuasive communication more effective. A central mechanism through which influencers affect consumer decision-making is visible engagement: likes, comments, shares, and follower reach, all of which act as forms of social proof. These engagement cues strengthen perceptions of popularity and social endorsement, significantly increasing purchase intention among younger audiences (De Veirman et al., 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019). These findings confirm that engagement metrics are not just vanity indicators; they are behavioral signals that shape perceived product value and credibility.

This body of work also suggests that engagement works differently at different stages of the customer decision journey: early-stage awareness responds more strongly to sheer visibility (likes, shares, reach), while later-stage purchase consideration depends more on the perceived depth of interaction, such as thoughtful comments and sustained follower dialogue rather than passive likes alone. This distinction matters for how engagement metrics should be read. A high volume of shallow engagement does not necessarily carry the same persuasive weight as a smaller volume of substantive, conversation-driven engagement.

Perceived authenticity is another important dimension. Authenticity, made up of sincerity, expertise, transparency, and consistency, has been confirmed as a key predictor of influencer effectiveness (Audrezet, De Kerviler, & Moulard, 2020). When audiences see an influencer as genuine, trust grows, and followers become more receptive to promotional content (Ki, Cuevas, Chong, & Lim, 2020). Authenticity, then, often mediates the relationship between influencer activity and purchase intention. Credibility and promotional fit matter too. Research shows that when influencers disclose paid partnerships, stay within their product niche, and communicate transparently, this significantly boosts perceived credibility and brand attitude (Boerman, Willemsen, & Van Der Aa, 2017; Hwang & Zhang, 2018). Overly commercialized content or a poor fit between influencer and brand, on the other hand, can undermine persuasion even when engagement is high (Schouten et al., 2020).

This suggests that authenticity and credibility work less as isolated traits and more as an interconnected set of signals that audiences read as a whole. A highly engaging influencer who comes across as insincere may generate visibility without conversion, while a moderately engaging but highly credible influencer can still convert audiences into buyers. This distinction matters especially for Gen Z audiences, who have grown up alongside influencer marketing and, as a result, have a sharper eye for telling genuine enthusiasm apart from paid promotion.



Recent scholarship has expanded the scope of influencer research into new digital contexts. The emergence of AI-generated and virtual influencers such as Lil Miquela or India's Kyra has raised questions about synthetic authenticity and algorithmic persuasion (Woods, 2023). Studies show that while AI influencers lack human spontaneity, they often come across as more professional and give brands more control, adding a new dimension to digital trust. Comparisons between micro- and macro-influencers similarly show that smaller-scale influencers often generate stronger engagement and trust because they feel more relatable (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2023). These findings suggest that an influencer's size and perceived humanity are important determinants of persuasion effectiveness among Gen Z consumers. A growing trend known as "de-influencing" has emerged recently, where creators advise followers against certain products, signaling a cultural shift toward authenticity and transparency (AP News, 2023). This trend shows that engagement stays beneficial only when it is perceived as genuine; excessive commercialization can erode credibility and reduce persuasion (Erasmus University Rotterdam, 2024). Recent evidence identifies trust and perceived authenticity as mediators, and platform type as a moderator, in the engagement–purchase relationship. TikTok's short-form, entertainment-driven format amplifies visibility and virality, for instance, while YouTube's long-form content builds expertise and trust more effectively (Casaló et al., 2020; van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021). A 2024 study by Erasmus University Rotterdam also found that the informativeness and entertainment value of influencer posts enhance perceived authenticity, leading to higher follower trust and purchase intent (Erasmus University, 2024).

These platform-level distinctions carry practical weight for the Indian context specifically, where Instagram and YouTube dominate influencer marketing spend but are often treated interchangeably in campaign planning. If trust is cultivated through different routes on each platform, then a single unified engagement metric applied uniformly across platforms risks understating the actual persuasive value of a campaign running on a trust-building platform like YouTube relative to a visibility-driven platform like Instagram.

From a theoretical standpoint, the influence of engagement and authenticity can be understood through two foundational models: Source Credibility Theory (Hovland & Weiss, 1951) and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Source Credibility Theory holds that message effectiveness depends on the perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness of the communicator, which lines up closely with influencer attributes. ELM, meanwhile, explains how audiences process persuasive messages through either central or peripheral routes; in influencer contexts, visible engagement acts as a peripheral cue that can shift to central processing once authenticity and trust are perceived as high. Together, these frameworks help explain how influencer engagement leads to persuasion and purchase behavior.

The de-influencing phenomenon, where creators advise against certain purchases, illustrates Gen Z's critical engagement and skepticism toward over-commercialization (AP News, 2023). This



shows that engagement stays beneficial only as long as it is perceived as authentic; excessive promotion can reverse its persuasive effect. Despite considerable research in Western contexts, empirical studies exploring real engagement metrics and actual purchase behavior among Gen Z consumers in emerging economies remain limited (Lou & Kim, 2021). There is also a lack of comprehensive models that integrate engagement, authenticity, trust, and purchase intention across platforms. The present study addresses this gap by empirically testing these constructs in an Indian Gen Z context, linking influencer engagement metrics with the role of authenticity and trust in shaping purchase intention.

By situating the analysis within an Indian Gen Z sample specifically, the study also responds to calls within the literature for research that moves beyond Western-centric assumptions about digital trust formation, recognizing that consumer skepticism, platform preference, and disposable income constraints in emerging markets may shape the engagement-to-purchase pathway differently than in the mature markets where most existing influencer marketing theory has been developed and tested.

Research Methodology

The present study adopted a quantitative descriptive–analytical research design to examine how influencer engagement metrics influence Gen Z consumers' purchase decisions. A structured, self-administered Google Form questionnaire was used to collect primary data, focusing on key constructs such as perceived authenticity, trust, engagement level, and purchase intention. The population comprised Generation Z individuals (aged 13–28 years) active on social media across various Indian states. Using purposive sampling, data were gathered from 150 respondents, ensuring representation of different genders, educational levels, and income brackets. The inclusion criterion required respondents to be regular users of at least one social-media platform and to follow at least one influencer.

The questionnaire consisted of 27 items divided into five sections: (i) Demographic profile, (ii) Social-media usage pattern, (iii) Engagement behavior (likes, comments, time spent), (iv) Perceived authenticity and trust, and (v) Purchase behavior. All measurement items were adapted from validated scales in previous literature (Lee & Eastin, 2021; Casaló et al., 2020) and modified to suit Gen Z contexts. Data were coded and analyzed using SPSS 26.0 and Excel. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographic variables. correlation analysis tested relationships among engagement, trust, authenticity, and purchase intention.

Correlation strength was interpreted using conventional benchmarks in social science research, where coefficients above 0.50 are generally considered strong, values between 0.30 and 0.50 moderate, and values below 0.30 weak; this framing was used consistently when discussing the relative importance of each influencer attribute in the Results and Discussion sections.



Sampling Procedure and Data Collection Process

The questionnaire was distributed digitally through social media platforms and messaging groups frequented by Gen Z users, which let the study reach a geographically dispersed sample across multiple Indian states within a limited data-collection window. Purposive sampling was chosen over random sampling because the study needed respondents who actively follow influencers and engage with branded content, a criterion that a general random sample would not reliably satisfy. Before the main survey was circulated, the questionnaire was reviewed for clarity and face validity, and minor wording adjustments were made so the items would be easily understood by a Gen Z audience unfamiliar with formal marketing terminology.

Ethical Considerations

Participation in the survey was voluntary, and respondents were informed of the study's academic purpose before beginning the questionnaire. No personally identifiable information was collected, and responses were anonymized prior to analysis, in keeping with standard ethical practice for survey-based social science research.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive Findings

The demographic profile revealed the age-wise distribution of respondents shows that the majority (58.33%) fall within the 22–25 years age group, indicating that most participants belong to early adulthood. This is followed by 19–21 years (25%), suggesting a strong representation from late adolescents and young college-age individuals. The data highlights that the study sample is predominantly young adults aged 19–25 years, which aligns with the typical age bracket of Generation Z respondents who are most active on social media and more likely to engage with influencer-driven online content.

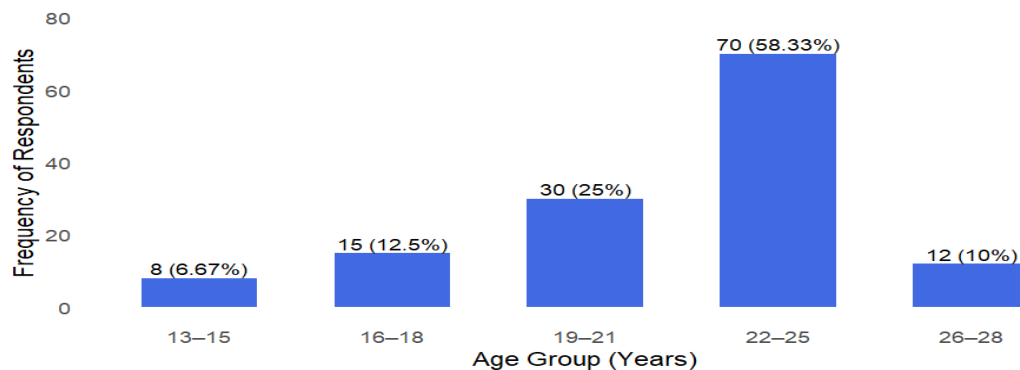


Figure 2. Age distribution of the respondent
[68]



The socio-demographic data reveal that most respondents were undergraduates (51.33%) and postgraduates (40%), indicating a young and educated Gen Z population. Region-wise, North India (40%) and East India (35.33%) dominated, reflecting strong representation from these zones. Nearly one-third (36%) of respondents earned ₹10 000–25 000 per month, while 28% had less than ₹10 000, showing limited financial independence typical of students and early professionals. Family support (42.67%) was the primary source of income, followed by part-time jobs (24%).

This income profile is consistent with a respondent base still largely dependent on family or part-time earnings rather than full-time employment, which is typical of a population that includes both undergraduate and postgraduate students. It also has a bearing on how purchase intention should be interpreted in this study: for a majority of respondents, purchase decisions influenced by influencer content are likely constrained by limited discretionary income, meaning that engagement and trust may shape preference and intention to buy more strongly than they shape the frequency or scale of actual purchases.

Regional concentration in North and East India also merits some caution when generalizing the findings nationally, since consumer attitudes toward influencer content in South and West Indian markets, which are underrepresented in this sample, may reflect different linguistic, cultural, or platform-usage patterns not captured here.

Age distribution also warrants a brief note: the sample skews toward the 19–25 age bracket, which captures the core of the Gen Z cohort most active on influencer-driven platforms, but underrepresents the youngest (13–18) and oldest (26–28) edges of the Gen Z definition used in this study. Future replications with a more evenly distributed age spread could clarify whether the credibility-driven pattern reported here holds consistently across the full Gen Z age range or is concentrated within the early-to-mid twenties segment surveyed most heavily in this sample.

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Education	Undergraduate	77	51.33
	Postgraduate	60	40.00
	High School	8	5.33
	Ph.D	4	2.67
Region	North India	60	40.00
	East India	53	35.33
	West India	19	12.67
	Central India	8	5.33
	South India	7	4.67
	Northeast India	3	2.00
Monthly Income / Allowance	₹10,000–25,000	54	36.00
	<₹10,000	42	28.00
	₹25,000–50,000	30	20.00
	>₹50,000	24	16.00
Source of Income	Family Support	64	42.67



Part-time Job	36	24.00
Full-time Job	30	20.00
Freelancing/Business	20	13.33

Table 1. Socio-Demographic Profile of Respondents

Instagram (78%), WhatsApp (76.7%), and YouTube (72.7%) were the most used platforms, confirming their dominance among Gen Z. Brand image (56%) and influencer recommendations (33.3%) strongly shaped purchase loyalty. Most respondents used social media for entertainment (48%) and learning (22.67%). Nearly half (49.33%) spent 1–3 hours daily on these platforms, and 49.33% reported occasional influencer-based purchases, highlighting moderate but consistent influence of digital creators on buying intent.

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Frequently used social media app	Instagram	117	78.0
	WhatsApp	115	76.7
	YouTube	109	72.7
	Snapchat	46	30.7
	Facebook	32	21.3
	Others	6	4.0
Loyalty	Brand Image	84	56.0
	Influencer Recommendation	50	33.3
	App Features/Experience	48	32.0
	Advertisement	31	20.7
	Others (Personal Experience, Friends, Research, etc.)	12	8.0
Purpose of Social Media Use	Entertainment	72	48.00
	Learning / Information	34	22.67
	Communication	28	18.67
	Shopping	12	8.00
	Others	4	2.67
Time Spent on social media	1–3 hours/day	74	49.33
	3–5 hours/day	46	30.67
	<1 hour/day	18	12.00
	>5 hours/day	12	8.00
Purchase Frequency (Influencer-based)	Sometimes	74	49.33
	Often	40	26.67
	Rarely	24	16.00
	Very often	12	8.00

Table 2. Social Media Usage and Influencer-Based Purchase Behavior

The socio-demographic characteristics presented in Table 1 highlight that the majority of respondents are young, educated individuals with limited independent income and high reliance on family support. This profile aligns with the general socio-economic composition of Gen Z consumers in India, who are highly active on digital platforms but remain in the early stages of financial independence. Building upon this background, Table 2 explores how these respondents engage with



social media, particularly in terms of their platform preferences, motivations for usage, loyalty orientation, and frequency of influencer-driven purchases. This behavioral data provides crucial insight into how influencers, brand attributes, and social media exposure translate into actual purchase intentions, thereby forming the foundation for analyzing the relationship between influencer attributes and consumer behavior.

This behavioral profile also reflects a generation that treats social media less as a passive entertainment channel and more as an active information source for purchase-related decisions, which is exactly why engagement-driven cues carry more weight for this cohort than they might for older demographics who rely more on traditional advertising or word-of-mouth outside digital spaces.

Correlation Analysis

The results revealed that all influencer attributes exhibited a positive and statistically significant relationship with purchase intention (Table 3 and Figure 1). Among these, credibility ($r = 0.71$) showed the strongest association with purchase intention, indicating that respondents are more likely to purchase products recommended by influencers they perceive as reliable, authentic, and transparent. Trustworthiness ($r = 0.63$) also demonstrated a substantial positive correlation, highlighting the importance of honesty and ethical communication in influencing consumer confidence. Attractiveness ($r = 0.68$) and expertise ($r = 0.63$) were found to have moderately strong correlations with purchase intention, suggesting that visually appealing and knowledgeable influencers are effective in shaping attitudes toward advertised products. Content quality ($r = 0.59$), though slightly weaker, still exhibited a positive correlation, emphasizing that engaging and well-produced content contributes significantly to consumer engagement and decision-making. Credibility and trustworthiness are the most influential determinants of Gen Z consumers' purchase intention, followed by attractiveness, expertise, and content quality. This reinforces the idea that authenticity and professional integrity outweigh superficial appeal in digital endorsement contexts. Brands are therefore encouraged to collaborate with influencers who consistently display credible expertise, transparent messaging, and genuine alignment with the promoted products.

The inter-attribute correlations reported in Table 3 further indicate that credibility and trustworthiness are themselves strongly associated with one another, suggesting that respondents do not evaluate these attributes in isolation but instead form a composite impression of an influencer's reliability. Similarly, the moderate-to-strong association between attractiveness and trustworthiness implies that visual appeal, while secondary to credibility, still interacts with perceived honesty rather than functioning as a wholly independent driver of purchase intention. This pattern lends further support to the idea that Gen Z consumers process influencer attributes as a bundled signal of overall credibility rather than weighing each cue in strict isolation.

Influencer Attribute	Credibility	Trustworthiness	Attractiveness	Expertise	Content Quality
Credibility	1	0.82**	0.63**	0.72*	0.68
Trustworthiness	0.63*	1	0.59**	0.55*	0.68
Attractiveness	0.59*	0.72**	1	0.48*	0.57
Expertise	0.54	0.56*	0.65**	1	0.59
Content Quality	0.67	0.48*	0.59*	0.63*	1
Purchase Intention	0.71	0.63*	0.68*	0.63*	0.59

*($p < 0.05$); **($p < 0.01$).

Table 3. Correlation Between Influencer Attributes and Purchase Intention

Note: the bolded bottom row (Purchase Intention) reports each attribute's correlation with purchase intention specifically; these are the coefficients referenced throughout the Results, Discussion, and Conclusion sections. The remaining cells show inter-attribute correlations among the five influencer attributes themselves.

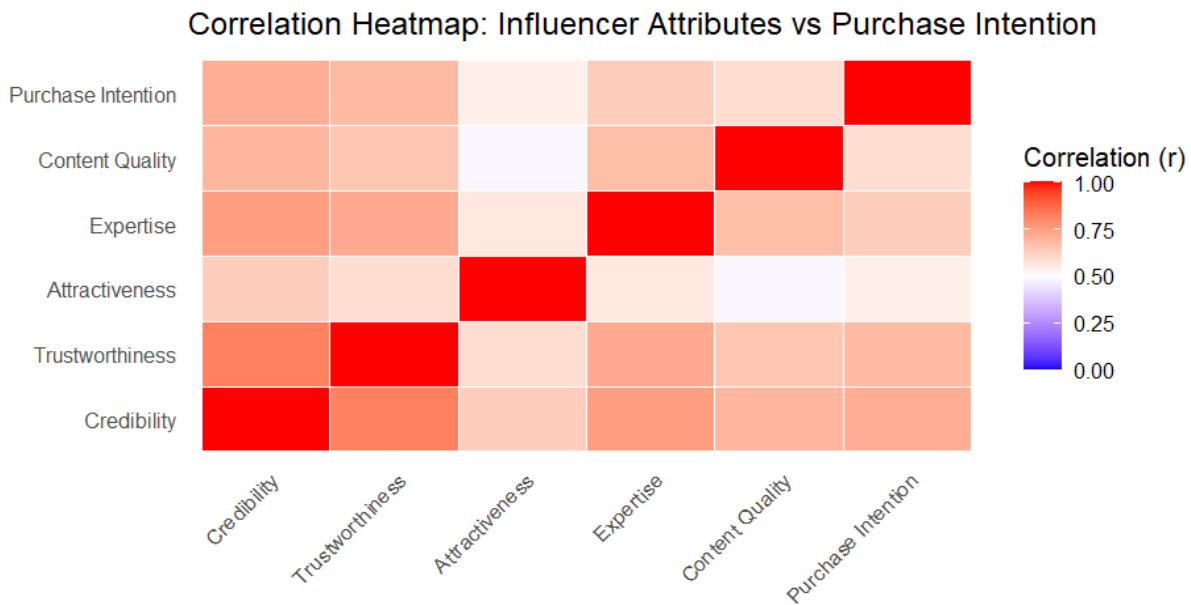


Figure 3. Correlation Heatmap Showing the Relationship Between Influencer Attributes and Purchase Intention

These findings corroborate earlier works by Djafarova and Rushworth (2017), Lou and Yuan (2019), and Sokolova and Kefi (2020), who reported that influencer credibility and trust are major drivers of consumer confidence and behavioral intention. The consistency of these results with prior international studies reinforces the external validity of the findings in the Indian context.



Discussion

The study provides empirical evidence that engagement-driven social proof plays a central role in digital persuasion among Gen Z consumers. The high correlation between credibility and purchase intention indicates that authenticity and integrity outweigh superficial appeal, confirming that young audiences prefer influencers who demonstrate expertise, transparency and personal connection with followers. The findings validate the Source Credibility Theory (Hovland & Weiss, 1951), highlighting that expertise and trustworthiness remain fundamental to persuasive communication even in digital contexts. Furthermore, the positive and significant relationships observed between influencer attributes and purchase intention align with the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), suggesting that when audiences perceive genuine intent, they process influencer messages through the central route, leading to stronger purchase attitudes and behavioral commitment.

These results also reflect how digital marketing is shifting. The rise of de-influencing (AP News, 2023) shows that Gen Z consumers are critical and discerning, rewarding influencers who communicate honestly over those who lean into overt promotion. Engagement, in this sense, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for persuasion; authentic trust remains the deciding factor. Platform-level differences matter too: Instagram's visual and interactive format amplifies parasocial connections and emotional resonance, while YouTube builds trust through deeper cognitive and affective engagement with long-form content (Casaló et al., 2020; van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021). Brands should therefore match influencer selection to platform characteristics to get the most out of engagement-to-purchase conversion. These findings add a more nuanced understanding of digital persuasion by empirically confirming the relational impact of authenticity and trust. The evidence supports the idea that effective influencer marketing depends less on popularity metrics and more on transparent, credible communication that builds long-term consumer loyalty.

The findings also carry implications beyond the immediate scope of influencer marketing. The relatively stronger role of credibility and trustworthiness over attractiveness suggests a broader shift in how Gen Z consumers process persuasive communication generally: attributes signaling honesty and competence are weighted more heavily than surface-level appeal, even in a media environment saturated with visually curated content. This pattern is consistent with the central-route processing described in the Elaboration Likelihood Model, wherein message-relevant cues such as credibility and expertise exert stronger and more durable influence on attitude change than peripheral cues like attractiveness or popularity, once the audience is sufficiently motivated to evaluate the source. Given that Gen Z consumers are frequently characterized as highly engaged yet highly skeptical digital natives, this suggests that influencer marketing strategies built primarily around follower counts or visual polish may yield diminishing returns over time, whereas strategies that



foreground demonstrable expertise and transparent communication are more likely to sustain persuasive impact.

This has a direct bearing on how brands brief influencers: rather than instructing creators to maximize likes or follower counts, campaign briefs might more usefully instruct creators to demonstrate product knowledge, disclose sponsorships candidly, and maintain a consistent tone across sponsored and organic content, since these are the behaviors that the present findings link most directly to purchase intention.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that influencer engagement plays a decisive role in shaping the online purchase intentions of Generation Z consumers in India. Engagement metrics such as likes, comments, followers, and shares are not just vanity indicators; they function as digital social proof signals that strengthen perceptions of credibility and authenticity. The correlation results showed that credibility ($r = 0.71$) and trustworthiness ($r = 0.63$) had the strongest positive associations with purchase intention, followed by attractiveness ($r = 0.68$), expertise ($r = 0.63$), and content quality ($r = 0.59$).

These findings confirm that Gen Z consumers are more influenced by perceived authenticity and emotional connection than by follower counts or promotional intensity. Unlike traditional advertising, influencer marketing works through relational cues: transparency, sincerity, and the perceived genuineness of the influencer's persona. This aligns with Source Credibility Theory, which emphasizes the role of expertise and trustworthiness, and with the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), which shows that consumers process authentic content through the central route, leading to stronger persuasion and brand commitment. The research adds to existing literature by empirically examining the role of authenticity and trust in digital persuasion, extending classical communication theories into the modern influencer marketing context. It also fills a regional gap by presenting Indian evidence where Gen Z audiences are among the most socially connected yet highly skeptical digital consumers. From a strategic perspective, the study suggests that engagement alone cannot guarantee persuasion; authenticity needs to be built into every influencer-brand collaboration. As Gen Z consumers increasingly demand transparency, credibility has become the new currency of digital marketing.

Overall, the study reframes influencer engagement not as an end goal in itself but as a signal that only translates into purchase behavior when it is grounded in perceived honesty and expertise. For an emerging market like India, where influencer marketing is expanding rapidly but regulatory and disclosure norms are still maturing, this distinction gives both brands and platforms a practical benchmark: engagement metrics alone are an incomplete proxy for marketing effectiveness, and



campaign evaluation frameworks should be redesigned to capture credibility and authenticity alongside conventional reach-based indicators.

Managerial Implications

Brands should prioritize collaborations with influencers who show real experiences, behind-the-scenes content, and value alignment rather than scripted promotions, with particular emphasis on transparency. Marketing strategies should shift from follower counts to engagement ratios (likes/comments per post) as key performance indicators. Social media analytics tools should be used to measure trust and authenticity indices, which would improve campaign ROI. Marketers should focus on platforms where Gen Z shows emotional connection, such as Instagram, YouTube Shorts, and Reels.

Beyond platform selection, brands would benefit from co-creating content briefs with influencers rather than issuing rigid scripts, since audiences increasingly recognize and discount over-produced sponsored posts. Longer-term, retainer-based partnerships also tend to read as more credible than one-off paid placements, since repeated genuine association with a brand signals a considered endorsement rather than a transactional one. Practically, this means marketing teams should build evaluation frameworks around an influencer's historical consistency and audience sentiment, not just their reach, before allocating campaign budgets.

Theoretical Implications

This study extends persuasion theory by demonstrating that engagement cues can evolve from peripheral to central processing mechanisms in the presence of authenticity and trust. It strengthens the integration of Source Credibility Theory and ELM within digital marketing contexts, proving that emotional resonance and transparency are now as critical to persuasion as message repetition and visual appeal. Future research can explore cross-cultural comparisons and emerging digital phenomena such as AI influencers and de-influencing campaigns to understand evolving perceptions of trust and authenticity in virtual spaces. Longitudinal studies could also assess whether sustained engagement translates into lasting brand loyalty over time.

This also has implications for how persuasion theory is applied to platforms, rather than treating social media as a single, undifferentiated communication channel. Since Instagram and YouTube were shown to build trust through different mechanisms (visual immediacy in one case, longer-form narrative in the other), theoretical models of digital persuasion may need to account for platform-specific processing pathways rather than assuming a single, uniform route to attitude change across all social media contexts.



Limitations

The study has certain limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the sample size of 150 respondents, while adequate for correlational analysis, limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader Gen Z population across India. Second, the use of purposive sampling, while appropriate for reaching the target respondent profile, introduces the possibility of selection bias, as participants were drawn primarily from the researchers' social and digital networks. Third, the cross-sectional design captures consumer attitudes at a single point in time and cannot account for how engagement, trust, and purchase intention may evolve over sustained exposure to influencer content. Finally, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of social desirability bias, particularly around questions of purchase behavior.

Scope for Future Research

Future research could extend this study through a larger, stratified sample that captures regional and socio-economic diversity within India's Gen Z population more comprehensively. Longitudinal designs would help clarify whether the trust-driven persuasion pathway identified here translates into sustained brand loyalty or repeat purchase behavior over time, rather than one-off purchase intention. Comparative studies across platforms, for instance directly contrasting Instagram-based and YouTube-based influencer campaigns, could also clarify how platform affordances moderate the relationship between engagement and trust. Finally, as AI-generated virtual influencers and de-influencing content become more common, future work could examine whether the same credibility-driven mechanisms identified in this study hold for non-human or explicitly anti-consumerist influencer content.

Such research would help establish whether the credibility-first model proposed here is a durable feature of Gen Z persuasion psychology or a transitional pattern specific to the current stage of influencer marketing's evolution in India.

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Declaration of Interest Statement (Conflict of Interest)

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this research paper. The study was conducted independently, and no financial or personal relationships influenced the research process, data interpretation, or the preparation of this manuscript.

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