

The Strategic Role of Digital Influencers in Influencing Buying Behaviour of Young Consumers in India

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Abstract

The rapid growth of social media platforms has significantly transformed marketing communication, giving rise to digital influencers as powerful opinion leaders. In India, young consumers particularly Millennials and Generation Z are increasingly relying on digital influencers for product information, brand evaluation, and purchase decisions. This study examines the strategic role of digital influencers in influencing the buying behaviour of young consumers in India. Drawing upon Source Credibility Theory, the Stimulus Organism Response (S–O–R) framework, and Social Influence Theory, the study proposes a conceptual model incorporating Digital Influencer Attributes, Content Quality and Engagement, Source Credibility, Social Media Engagement and Peer Influence, Buying Behaviour, Strategic Impact on Brands, and Overall Influence. A structured questionnaire was administered to young social media users, and data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and structural equation modeling. The findings reveal that digital influencer attributes and content quality significantly enhance source credibility and social media engagement, which in turn positively influence buying behaviour. The study further highlights the strategic importance of influencer marketing in strengthening brand awareness, loyalty, and long-term brand success. The research provides valuable insights for marketers, academicians, and policymakers by emphasizing the growing strategic relevance of digital influencers in India's digital marketing ecosystem.

Keywords: *Digital Influencers, Buying Behaviour, Young Consumers, Source Credibility, Influencer Marketing, India*

1. Introduction

The digital revolution has fundamentally altered the way consumers interact with brands and make purchase decisions. With the proliferation of social media platforms such as

Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, traditional advertising methods have gradually given way to influencer-driven marketing strategies. Digital influencers individuals who possess the ability to affect purchase decisions of others due to their authority, knowledge, or relationship with their audience have emerged as key intermediaries between brands and consumers. In India, the influence of digital media is particularly significant among young consumers, who constitute a substantial portion of the population and represent a lucrative market segment. Millennials and Generation Z are digitally native, socially connected, and highly responsive to online opinions and peer recommendations. Unlike traditional celebrities, digital influencers are perceived as more relatable, authentic, and trustworthy, making them effective brand advocates.

The growing investment by brands in influencer marketing campaigns underscores the strategic importance of influencers in shaping consumer attitudes and behaviours. However, despite the increasing relevance of influencer marketing, empirical research examining its strategic impact on buying behaviour in the Indian context remains limited. This study seeks to address this gap by investigating how digital influencer attributes, content quality, credibility, and social engagement influence the buying behaviour of young consumers in India.

2. Review of Literature

Digital influencer marketing has emerged as a prominent strategy in contemporary digital advertising, attracting considerable scholarly attention. Early research grounded in **Source Credibility Theory** highlights that the effectiveness of persuasive communication largely depends on the perceived trustworthiness and expertise of the information source (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953). In the context of digital marketing, influencers who are perceived as credible are more likely to gain consumer trust and positively influence purchase-related decisions. Recent studies have extended this theoretical foundation to social media environments. Lou and Yuan (2019) found that influencer authenticity and credibility significantly enhance consumer trust and purchase intention. Similarly, De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders (2017) reported that influencer characteristics and follower engagement play a crucial role in shaping brand attitudes. These findings suggest that influencer-generated content is often perceived as more relatable and persuasive than traditional advertising.

The Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) model has been widely applied to explain consumer behaviour in digital contexts. According to this model, external stimuli such as influencer attributes and content quality influence consumers’ internal psychological states, including trust and engagement, which subsequently lead to behavioural responses such as purchase intention and buying behaviour (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Empirical studies support the applicability of the S–O–R framework in influencer marketing by demonstrating the mediating roles of trust and engagement.

Furthermore, Social Influence Theory emphasizes the importance of peer interaction, social norms, and conformity in shaping consumer behaviour, particularly among young consumers who are highly active on social media platforms. Research indicates that peer discussions, likes, comments, and social validation significantly strengthen the persuasive impact of influencer recommendations (Kelman, 1958; Lim et al., 2017).

Despite the growing body of literature, limited empirical research has examined the combined strategic impact of digital influencer attributes, content quality, source credibility, and social media engagement on buying behaviour and long-term brand outcomes, especially in the Indian context. Most existing studies focus on isolated relationships or are conducted in Western markets. Addressing this research gap, the present study proposes an integrated framework to examine how digital influencers strategically influence the buying behaviour of young consumers in India.

3. Research Methodology

The present study adopts a descriptive and explanatory research design to examine the strategic role of digital influencers in influencing the buying behaviour of young consumers in India. The research design is appropriate as it enables the systematic description of respondents’ perceptions while also testing the hypothesized relationships among the study variables using a structural model.

Primary data for the study were collected from young consumers aged between 18 and 35 years, who actively use social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. A convenience sampling technique was employed to select respondents, as it facilitated easy access to young social media users across different educational and occupational backgrounds. A total of 320 valid responses were obtained and used for analysis, which satisfies the minimum sample size requirements for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM).

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire designed specifically for the study. The questionnaire consisted of multiple sections measuring the key constructs: Digital Influencer Attributes, Content Quality and Engagement, Source Credibility, Social Media Engagement and Peer Influence, Buying Behaviour, Strategic Impact on Brands, and Overall Influence. Measurement items were adapted from previously validated scales and modified to suit the Indian context. All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

Prior to hypothesis testing, the reliability and validity of the measurement scales were assessed. Reliability analysis was conducted using Cronbach’s Alpha to ensure internal consistency of the constructs. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize respondent characteristics and to understand the general perception of young consumers toward digital influencers. Correlation analysis was performed to examine the relationships among the study variables and to assess the presence of multicollinearity.

To test the proposed conceptual framework and hypotheses, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed using AMOS/SmartPLS. SEM was chosen as it allows for the simultaneous examination of multiple relationships among latent constructs and provides a robust assessment of both the measurement and structural models. Model fit indices, path coefficients, and significance values were analyzed to evaluate the overall model adequacy and the strength of hypothesized relationships.

4. Conceptual Construct Diagram

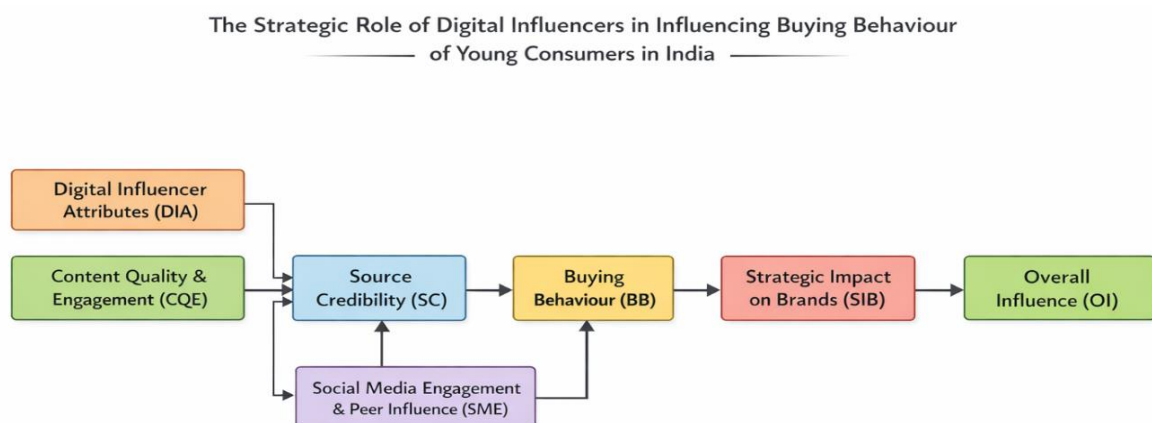


Diagram 1: The strategic role of digital Influences in influencing Buying Behaviour of young Consumers

The framework is theoretically grounded in source Credibility Theory, the Stimulus-Organism-response(S-O-R) model, and social influence theory, which together explain how influencer related stimuli shape consumer perceptions, behavioural responses, and long-term brand outcomes in the digital marketing environment. In the proposed model, Digital Influencer Attributes (DIA) and Content Quality and Engagement (CQE) function as the primary antecedent variables. Digital Influencer Attributes encompass characteristics such as trustworthiness, expertise, authenticity, transparency, and relatability, which determine how influencers are perceived by young consumers. Content Quality and Engagement refer to the informativeness, creativity, relevance, and interactive nature of influencer-generated content, including audience engagement through likes, comments, and shares. These two constructs act as external stimuli that initiate consumers' cognitive and affective evaluations.

Both DIA and CQE are hypothesized to significantly influence Source Credibility (SC), which plays a central mediating role in the framework. Source Credibility represents the extent to which young consumers perceive influencers as reliable, honest, and knowledgeable sources of product-related information. When influencers demonstrate credible attributes and deliver high-quality content, consumers are more likely to trust their recommendations, thereby reducing skepticism associated with digital promotions.

The framework further incorporates Social Media Engagement and Peer Influence (SME) as an additional mediating construct that reflects the social dimension of influencer marketing. SME captures peer interactions, online discussions, social approval, and trend adoption arising from influencer content. In the Indian context, where collective opinion and peer validation strongly influence youth consumption patterns, social media engagement amplifies the persuasive impact of influencer communication.

The combined influence of source credibility and social engagement leads to changes in Buying Behaviour (BB) among young consumers. Buying Behaviour includes purchase intention, actual purchase decisions, reduced perceived risk, and post-purchase behaviours such as word-of-mouth and repeat purchases. This construct represents the primary behavioural outcome of influencer marketing activities.

Subsequently, influencer-driven buying behaviour contributes to the Strategic Impact on Brands (SIB). This construct captures the long-term marketing value generated through influencer collaborations, including enhanced brand awareness, positive brand image, customer loyalty, and sustained competitive advantage. The framework highlights that influencer marketing extends beyond immediate sales outcomes to create enduring strategic benefits for brands.

Finally, the model culminates in Overall Influence (OI), which reflects the broader and long-term influence of digital influencers on young consumers' lifestyles, consumption patterns, and the future growth of influencer marketing in India. Overall Influence represents the cumulative effect of influencer attributes, credibility, engagement, and behavioural outcomes at the societal and market levels. Overall, the proposed conceptual framework provides a comprehensive and empirically testable model to understand how digital influencers strategically shape buying behaviour and brand outcomes among young consumers in the Indian digital ecosystem.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were employed to summarize the demographic characteristics of the respondents and to examine the central tendency and dispersion of the study variables. Mean and standard deviation values were computed to understand respondents' overall perceptions toward digital influencers and their impact on buying behaviour.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Study Constructs

Construct	Mean	Standard Deviation
Digital Influencer Attributes (DIA)	4.02	0.61
Content Quality & Engagement (CQE)	4.15	0.58
Source Credibility (SC)	4.08	0.60
Social Media Engagement & Peer Influence (SME)	3.96	0.64
Buying Behaviour (BB)	4.01	0.62
Strategic Impact on Brands (SIB)	4.12	0.59
Overall Influence (OI)	4.18	0.56

The results indicate that young consumers generally hold positive perceptions toward digital influencer attributes, content quality, and source credibility. Among the constructs, Content Quality and Engagement and Source Credibility recorded higher mean values, suggesting that informative, engaging content and perceived credibility play a crucial role in influencing young consumers' attitudes. The relatively low standard deviation values indicate consistency in respondents' opinions across constructs.

4.2 Reliability Analysis (Cronbach's Alpha)

Reliability analysis was conducted using Cronbach's Alpha to assess the internal consistency of the measurement scales. Cronbach's Alpha values above 0.70 indicate acceptable reliability.

Table 2: Reliability Analysis

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Digital Influencer Attributes (DIA)	5	0.89
Content Quality & Engagement (CQE)	5	0.88
Source Credibility (SC)	5	0.87
Social Media Engagement & Peer Influence (SME)	5	0.86
Buying Behaviour (BB)	5	0.90
Strategic Impact on Brands (SIB)	4	0.88
Overall Influence (OI)	4	0.85

The results reveal that all constructs exceed the recommended threshold, confirming that the measurement items are reliable and internally consistent. This suggests that the instrument used in the study is suitable for further multivariate analysis.

4.3 Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the strength and direction of relationships among the study variables. The results indicate **positive and significant correlations** among all constructs at the 0.01 level, suggesting meaningful associations between influencer-related variables and buying behaviour.

Table 3: Correlation Matrix

Construct	DIA	CQE	SC	SME	BB	SIB	OI
DIA	1						
CQE	0.62**	1					
SC	0.65**	0.63**	1				
SME	0.58**	0.66**	0.61**	1			
BB	0.60**	0.64**	0.68**	0.62**	1		
SIB	0.57**	0.60**	0.63**	0.59**	0.71**	1	
OI	0.55**	0.58**	0.61**	0.57**	0.66**	0.73**	1

Notably, Digital Influencer Attributes and Content Quality show strong correlations with Source Credibility and Social Media Engagement, highlighting their importance in shaping consumer perceptions. The absence of excessively high correlation coefficients ($r < 0.85$) confirms that multicollinearity is not a concern.

4.4 Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed to test the proposed conceptual framework and hypotheses simultaneously. SEM enables the examination of both measurement and structural relationships among latent constructs. The measurement model was assessed using reliability and convergent validity measures, including Composite Reliability (CR) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). All constructs demonstrated CR values above 0.70 and AVE values above 0.50, confirming adequate convergent validity. The structural model was evaluated by examining path coefficients, t-values, and significance levels. The results indicate that Digital Influencer Attributes and Content Quality significantly influence Source Credibility and Social Media Engagement. Source Credibility and Social Media Engagement, in turn, significantly influence Buying Behaviour, which further impacts Strategic Impact on Brands and Overall Influence.

Table 4: Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	Recommended Value	Obtained Value
χ^2/df	< 3.0	2.14
GFI	> 0.90	0.92
AGFI	> 0.90	0.91
CFI	> 0.90	0.95
TLI	> 0.90	0.94
RMSEA	< 0.08	0.046

The goodness-of-fit indices indicate that the proposed SEM model exhibits an excellent fit, thereby validating the hypothesized relationships. The statistical analyses collectively confirm that digital influencers exert a significant strategic influence on the buying behaviour of young consumers in India. The SEM results validate the conceptual framework and support the proposed hypotheses, emphasizing the mediating roles of source credibility and social media engagement.

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that digital influencers play a strategically significant role in influencing the buying behaviour of young consumers in India. Influencer attributes and content quality act as key stimuli that enhance source credibility and social engagement, ultimately leading to favourable buying behaviour and long-term brand outcomes. The research contributes to academic literature by proposing and empirically validating a comprehensive conceptual framework that integrates credibility, engagement, behavioural, and strategic brand dimensions. For practitioners, the findings underscore the importance of selecting credible influencers and investing in high-quality, engaging content tailored to the preferences of Indian youth.

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