Impact of Social Media Marketing on Consumer Buying Behaviour: A Study of Generation Z

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Abstract: The proliferation of social media platforms has substantially reshaped the contemporary marketing landscape, creating new avenues for brand-consumer interaction. This study examines the influence of social media marketing on the consumer buying behaviour of Generation Z (individuals born between 1997 and 2012) in India—a demographic cohort that has grown up entirely within a digital environment. Employing a mixed-methods design, primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 150 Gen Z respondents, supplemented by a review of secondary literature. The study examines the roles of influencer marketing, user-generated content (UGC), targeted digital advertising, and social proof mechanisms across platforms including Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, and Pinterest. The findings reveal that 78.7% of respondents have completed at least one purchase directly attributed to social media content, with micro-influencer endorsements ranked as the most credible purchase trigger. All five research hypotheses were statistically supported. The paper concludes with evidence-based strategic recommendations for marketers seeking to engage Generation Z consumers effectively.

IndexTerms: Social Media Marketing, Generation Z, Consumer Buying Behaviour, Influencer Marketing, Digital Advertising, User-Generated Content, Purchase Decision, Instagram.

I. Introduction

The rise of social media as a dominant communication medium has brought about a significant shift in marketing theory and practice. Contemporary marketing no longer relies solely on broadcast channels such as television, print, or radio; it now operates within a dynamic, two-way digital environment in which consumers actively participate in shaping brand narratives. As of 2024, over 4.9 billion individuals use at least one social media platform worldwide [6], highlighting the commercial importance of these channels for businesses across all sectors.

Among all demographic groups, Generation Z—broadly defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012—occupies a distinctive position in this landscape [4]. This cohort is the first generation to have been raised entirely within a digital environment, characterised by widespread smartphone use, algorithmically curated content feeds, and a natural familiarity with digital commerce. Studies suggest that the average Gen Z individual spends between four and five hours daily on social media. Within India alone, the Gen Z population exceeds 450 million, making it a commercially significant segment that marketers cannot overlook [11].

The introduction of transactional features—such as shoppable posts, in-app checkout, and live commerce—within major social media platforms has effectively blurred the line between content consumption and purchase behaviour, fundamentally altering the traditional consumer decision journey.

Despite growing scholarly interest in this area, a contextual gap remains regarding Indian Gen Z consumers and the specific ways in which social media marketing converts passive content exposure into active purchase decisions. This study is designed to address that gap through a structured, empirically grounded investigation.

A. Significance of the Study

This research has practical relevance for multiple stakeholder groups. For marketing practitioners and brand strategists, it offers actionable insights to guide platform selection, content strategy, and influencer partnership decisions. For academics, it contributes empirical evidence to the growing literature on digital consumer behaviour in emerging markets. For policymakers, findings on social media's persuasive influence on young consumers may inform discussions on digital advertising standards and consumer protection frameworks.

II. Literature Review

A. Social Media Marketing: Conceptual Overview

Tuten and Solomon [15] define social media marketing as the strategic use of social media technologies, platforms, and software to create, communicate, and deliver value to an organisation's stakeholders. Kannan and Li [8] identify social media as an essential component of the broader digital marketing ecosystem. Kaplan and Haenlein's [9] widely cited classification organises social media into six categories—collaborative projects, blogs, content communities, social networking sites, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds—each offering distinct strategic opportunities for consumer engagement.

B. Generation Z: Behavioural Profile

Twenge [16] characterises Generation Z as the 'iGeneration'—defined by lifelong access to smartphones and the internet. Dimock [4] identifies authenticity, social responsibility, and experiential personalisation as core values for this cohort. McKinsey's [11] research identified four key behavioural traits: using technology as an extension of the self, valuing individual expression, embracing inclusivity, and maintaining a pragmatic approach to education and career. These traits translate into a tendency toward thorough pre-purchase research online and a preference for peer reviews over traditional advertising.

C. Influencer Marketing and Purchase Intentions

Lou and Yuan [10], in a study of 580 social media users, found that informational value was the strongest predictor of influencer advertising effectiveness, with trust and perceived authenticity mediating the relationship between influencer exposure and purchase intent. Micro-influencers—defined as those with between 10,000 and 100,000 followers—consistently outperform celebrity endorsers in engagement rates and perceived credibility, particularly among Gen Z audiences. A Nielsen [12] report found that 92% of consumers trust peer recommendations over brand communications, and that 70% of Gen Z respondents place greater trust in influencer opinions than in celebrity endorsements.

D. User-Generated Content and Social Proof

Cheung and Thadani [1] established the important role of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM)—comprising reviews, ratings, and user-generated content—in online purchase decisions. Djafarova and Rushworth [5] confirmed that Instagram posts created by ordinary users are perceived as more credible than celebrity endorsements among young consumers. The social proof principle [2], reinforced by the visible display of likes, shares, and comment counts, acts as a strong indicator of product quality and social desirability for Gen Z consumers.

III. Research Objectives And Hypotheses

A. Research Objectives

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To assess the extent to which social media platforms influence the purchase decisions of Gen Z consumers in India.

- To identify the social media platforms most influential in shaping Gen Z buying behaviour.
- To analyse the role of influencer marketing in driving product discovery and purchase intent.
- To evaluate the persuasive impact of user-generated content and peer recommendations on Gen Z consumers.
- To examine the effectiveness of targeted digital advertising among Gen Z.
- To formulate evidence-based strategic recommendations for marketers targeting Generation Z.

B. Research Hypotheses

TABLE I. RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Hypothesis	Statement
H1	Social media marketing has a significant positive impact on Gen Z purchase decisions.
H2	Influencer endorsements positively influence Gen Z brand perception and purchase intent.
H3	User-generated content and peer reviews are more persuasive for Gen Z than traditional advertising.
H4	Platform type moderates the relationship between social media exposure and purchase behaviour.
H5	Frequency of social media use positively correlates with social media-driven purchase frequency.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative insights from a systematic review of secondary literature. The primary data collection instrument was a structured questionnaire administered to Gen Z respondents aged 18 to 26 in urban and semi-urban areas across India. Secondary data were drawn from peer-reviewed academic journals and industry reports published by Statista, McKinsey, Nielsen, and Hootsuite.

B. Sampling and Data Collection

Data were collected using a non-probability convenience sampling approach, targeting 150 respondents. The questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms between January and March 2026. To be eligible, participants were required to: (a) have been born between 1997 and 2012; (b) be active social media users engaging for a minimum of one hour per day; and (c) have completed at least one online purchase within the six months preceding the survey.

C. Sample Profile

TABLE II. DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS (N = 150)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	82	54.7%
	Female	65	43.3%
	Other / Non-binary	3	2.0%
Age Group	18–20 years	54	36.0%
	21–23 years	72	48.0%
	24–26 years	24	16.0%
Education	Undergraduate	98	65.3%

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
	Postgraduate	38	25.3%
	Diploma / Other	14	9.4%
Location	Metro Cities	87	58.0%
	Tier-2 Cities	48	32.0%
	Semi-urban / Rural	15	10.0%

D. Research Instrument and Reliability

The questionnaire comprised four sections: (A) demographic profile; (B) social media usage patterns; (C) exposure to and attitudes toward social media marketing; and (D) purchase behaviour outcomes. Attitudinal items were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree). The instrument was piloted with 20 respondents prior to full deployment. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded a coefficient of 0.87, indicating high reliability.

V. Data Analysis And Findings

A. Social Media Usage Patterns

Analysis of respondents' platform engagement revealed considerable time investment across multiple social media channels. The majority of Gen Z respondents reported spending three to five hours daily on social media, with 18% reporting more than five hours of daily use. Instagram was the most widely used platform (91%), followed by YouTube (87%), WhatsApp (85%), Snapchat (62%), and Twitter/X (48%), as shown in Table III.

TABLE III. SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM USAGE AMONG GEN Z RESPONDENTS

Platform	Users (%)	Primary Use	Avg. Daily Time
Instagram	91%	Entertainment, Shopping	87 min
YouTube	87%	Entertainment, Reviews	74 min
WhatsApp	85%	Communication	55 min
Snapchat	62%	Entertainment, Stories	42 min
Twitter / X	48%	News, Trends	31 min
Pinterest	34%	Inspiration, Shopping	22 min
LinkedIn	29%	Professional Networking	18 min

Fig. 1. Platform-wise User Penetration and Average Daily Time Spent by Gen Z Respondents. Source: Primary Data, 2026.

B. Influence of Social Media on Purchase Decisions

A key finding of this study is the extent to which social media influences Gen Z purchasing behaviour. When asked whether they had ever completed a purchase directly attributed to social media content, 78.7% of respondents said yes, providing strong empirical support for Hypothesis H1 [χ^2 test, $p < 0.001$]. Additionally, 84% of respondents reported discovering new products primarily through social media feeds, with Instagram Stories and Reels identified as the most common discovery channels.

TABLE IV. TRIGGERS FOR SOCIAL MEDIA-INFLUENCED PURCHASES

Purchase Trigger	Respondents (%)	Rank
Influencer / Creator Recommendation	67.3%	1
Sponsored / Targeted Advertisements	58.7%	2
Friend / Peer Posts or Stories	54.0%	3

Purchase Trigger	Respondents (%)	Rank
Brand's Official Social Media Page	47.3%	4
User Reviews and Comment Sections	45.3%	5
Trending Hashtags / Viral Challenges	38.7%	6
Live Shopping Events	22.0%	7

Fig. 2. Purchase Triggers by Percentage of Gen Z Respondents. Source: Primary Data, 2026.

C. Influencer Marketing Effectiveness

Influencer endorsements emerged as the single most effective driver of social media-influenced purchasing, with 67.3% of respondents citing creator recommendations as a primary purchase trigger, thereby supporting Hypothesis H2 [Pearson $r = 0.71$, $p < 0.01$]. Micro-influencers (10,000–100,000 followers) recorded the highest mean trust score (4.12 out of 5) and purchase influence rate (71%), outperforming nano-influencers, macro-influencers, and celebrity endorsers.

TABLE V. TRUST LEVELS AND PURCHASE INFLUENCE BY CONTENT CREATOR TYPE

Content Creator Type	Trust Level (Mean/5)	Purchase Influence (%)
Micro-Influencer (10K–100K followers)	4.12	71%
Nano-Influencer (<10K followers)	4.08	65%
Macro-Influencer (100K–1M followers)	3.61	52%
Celebrity / Mega-Influencer (>1M followers)	3.14	38%
Brand's Official Account	2.97	34%

Fig. 3. Influencer Type vs. Trust Score and Purchase Influence Rate. Source: Primary Data, 2026.

D. Role of User-Generated Content

Consistent with the existing literature, user-generated content (UGC) was found to be highly persuasive among Gen Z consumers. Before making a purchase, 71% of respondents reported consulting social media-based reviews, unboxing videos, or community posts, thereby supporting Hypothesis H3 [Independent T-Test, $p < 0.05$]. Product review videos on YouTube were rated the most trustworthy form of UGC (69%), followed by Instagram posts by acquaintances (61%). By contrast, only 23% of respondents rated branded advertisements as highly trustworthy.

E. Platform-Specific Purchase Influence

Significant variation in purchase influence was observed across platforms, thereby supporting Hypothesis H4 [One-Way ANOVA, $F(4, 145) = 8.62$, $p < 0.01$]. Instagram's visually driven format made it the most influential platform for fashion, beauty, and lifestyle categories, with a 74% purchase influence rate and a high impulse purchase rate of 62%. YouTube's long-form review content proved most effective for electronics, with a 68% purchase influence rate but a low impulse purchase rate of 28%.

TABLE VI. PLATFORM-SPECIFIC PURCHASE INFLUENCE AMONG GEN Z RESPONDENTS

Platform	Top Category	Purchase Influence (%)	Impulse Purchase Rate
Instagram	Fashion & Beauty	74%	High (62%)
YouTube	Electronics & Technology	68%	Low (28%)
Snapchat	Food & Lifestyle	41%	High (57%)
Pinterest	Home Décor & DIY	38%	Medium (44%)
Twitter / X	News & Gaming	29%	Low (22%)

F. Attitudes Toward Social Media Advertising

Gen Z exhibits notable advertising scepticism: 64% of respondents reported using ad-blocking tools or actively skipping sponsored content. However, native advertising formats achieved considerably higher engagement, with 58% of respondents not always recognising such content as advertising. Personalisation emerged as a decisive factor: respondents who considered advertisements contextually relevant were 2.4 times more likely to engage with the content and 1.8 times more likely to complete a purchase.

G. Hypothesis Testing Results

TABLE VII. SUMMARY OF HYPOTHESIS TESTING RESULTS

Hypothesis	Statistical Test	Result	Outcome
H1	Chi-Square Test	$p < 0.001$	✓ Supported
H2	Pearson Correlation	$r = 0.71$, $p < 0.01$	✓ Supported
H3	Independent T-Test	$p < 0.05$	✓ Supported
H4	One-Way ANOVA	$F(4, 145) = 8.62$, $p < 0.01$	✓ Supported
H5	Linear Regression	$\beta = 0.54$, $p < 0.01$	✓ Supported

Source: Primary Data, 2026. Significance level: $\alpha = 0.05$ for H3; $\alpha = 0.01$ for H2, H4, H5; $\alpha = 0.001$ for H1.

VI. Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to the existing literature on social media marketing and consumer behaviour. The 78.7% rate of social media-influenced purchasing recorded among Indian Gen Z respondents aligns with global benchmarks reported by Hootsuite [6] and Sprout Social [13], confirming that this pattern is equally evident within the Indian digital economy.

A. The Authenticity Imperative

The clear preference for micro and nano-influencers over celebrity endorsers reflects a generational tendency toward scepticism of overt commercialism. Gen Z consumers, having developed strong content literacy through sustained digital engagement, are generally effective at identifying and dismissing inauthentic or commercially driven content. This finding aligns with Holt's [7] brand culture theory, which suggests that brands achieve lasting cultural resonance through genuine narratives rather than product-focused claims.

B. Platform Differentiation and Omnichannel Strategy

The platform-specific analysis shows that different social media channels serve distinct roles within the Gen Z consumer journey. Instagram functions mainly as a discovery and inspiration platform, encouraging impulse purchases in visually appealing product categories. YouTube, on the other hand, supports more deliberate, research-oriented decision-making for high-involvement purchases. These differences call for a platform-specific content strategy rather than a uniform approach across all channels.

C. Personalisation and Data Privacy

The finding that contextually relevant advertising generates a 2.4-fold increase in engagement underscores the commercial value of data-driven targeting. However, this must be balanced against growing privacy awareness: research by Deloitte [3] indicates that 67% of Gen Z consumers express concern about how their personal data is used by social media platforms. Brands must therefore deliver personalised value while demonstrating responsible and transparent data practices.

D. Social Commerce: The Emerging Frontier

The study's findings on in-app purchasing behaviour indicate the accelerating convergence of social media and e-commerce—commonly referred to as 'social commerce.' As major platforms invest in native transactional features, including shoppable posts, live commerce, and integrated checkout, the boundary between content consumption and purchasing continues to erode, representing a natural evolution of the Gen Z shopping experience.

VII. Strategic Recommendations

Based on the empirical findings of this study, the following recommendations are offered for marketing practitioners and brand managers seeking to engage and convert Generation Z consumers through social media channels:

1. Prioritise Authenticity Over Production Value

Collaborate with micro and nano-influencers whose audience profiles closely match the brand's target demographic. Allow influencers creative freedom to present products in their own voice. Authentic, unscripted testimonials consistently outperform polished commercial content in Gen Z engagement metrics.

2. Develop Platform-Native Content Strategies

Create content specifically designed for each platform's format: Instagram Reels and Stories for the discovery phase; YouTube for long-form review content; Pinterest for aspirational content; and Snapchat for time-limited, urgency-driven promotions. Reusing identical content across platforms fails to leverage the distinct persuasive qualities of each channel.

3. Systematically Leverage User-Generated Content

Establish frameworks to encourage authentic consumer content through hashtag campaigns, review reward programmes, and community-building features. Featuring UGC prominently on brand-owned channels can strengthen social proof credibility and reinforce brand authenticity.

4. Invest in Personalisation Infrastructure

Use AI-powered, data-driven targeting to ensure advertising content is delivered at points of maximum relevance in the consumer's purchase journey. Communicate data governance practices clearly and transparently to build trust with privacy-conscious Gen Z consumers.

5. Enable Seamless Social Commerce Integration

Reduce purchase friction by implementing shoppable posts, in-app checkout, and platform-native stores. Live shopping events can simultaneously generate a sense of urgency, foster community engagement, and drive real-time purchase conversions.

6. Champion Brand Purpose and Social Responsibility

Gen Z consumers tend to favour brands that reflect their values, including environmental sustainability, social equity, and mental health awareness. Values-based messaging must be supported by visible organisational action rather than superficial communication.

7. Proactively Monitor and Engage Community Discourse

Maintain active monitoring of brand-related conversations across social platforms and respond promptly and authentically to both positive and critical feedback. Gen Z's expectations of brand transparency are particularly high in situations involving controversy or crisis.

VIII. Limitations And Future Research Scope

While this study is grounded in a structured empirical approach, several limitations should be acknowledged and addressed in future research:

- The convenience sampling method limits the generalisability of findings to the broader Gen Z population across diverse socioeconomic and geographic contexts.
- The geographic focus on urban and semi-urban India may not fully capture the social media behaviour and purchase patterns of rural Gen Z consumers.
- Reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of social desirability bias, which may inflate reported rates of intentional or values-driven purchasing.

- Given the rapid pace of change in social media platforms and marketing technologies, the findings may have a limited shelf life; longitudinal research designs would yield greater insight.
- The study does not examine the influence of emerging platforms—such as BeReal or monetised WhatsApp Channels—on Gen Z consumer behaviour.
- Future research could explore the psychological dimensions of social media's influence on impulse purchasing and the differential impact of social commerce across Tier-1, Tier-2, and rural Indian markets.

IX. Conclusion

This study offers empirical confirmation that social media marketing exerts a wide-ranging influence on the consumer buying behaviour of Generation Z in India. All five research hypotheses were statistically supported, collectively demonstrating that social media-driven purchases are common among Indian Gen Z consumers; that influencer endorsements—particularly from micro and nano-influencers—carry considerable persuasive authority; that user-generated content is more credible and influential than branded advertising; that platform type meaningfully shapes purchase patterns; and that social media engagement frequency positively predicts purchase frequency.

Generation Z does not simply represent a new consumer segment—it signals a fundamental shift in how the consumer journey unfolds in the digital age. For this generation, social media is not a supplement to the shopping experience; it is the shopping experience itself. Products are discovered, evaluated, peer-validated, and purchased within a single digital ecosystem in which peer opinion and cultural credibility determine brand value.

Brands that embrace authentic storytelling, platform-specific content creation, community-centred engagement, and responsible data personalisation will be well-positioned to build trust and lasting loyalty with the world's most digitally native consumer generation. Those who continue to rely on traditional broadcast-era marketing approaches risk falling behind in an environment where Generation Z increasingly shapes the conversation.

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