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INFLUENCE BY DESIGN: HOW CONTENT FORMAT AFFECTS CONSUMER PERCEPTION AND BEHAVIOR ON INDIAN SOCIAL MEDIA

Dr. S. Anitha Bose, M.Com., M.Phil., SET, Ph.D.

Independent Researcher

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ABSTRACT

In the digital era, content format has become a pivotal factor influencing consumer engagement, particularly among Generation Z users in India who are highly active on social media platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat. This study explores how different content formats, such as videos, carousels, reels, and text posts, shape consumer perception and influence subsequent consumer behaviors, including liking, sharing, commenting, and purchase intention. Drawing on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), the research conceptualizes content format as a peripheral cue that influences consumer attitudes and decisions through affective engagement and visual appeal, especially when consumers are not engaging in deep cognitive processing. A quantitative research design was employed, with data collected via a structured questionnaire from 400 Gen Z respondents aged 18–25 who regularly use social media. Constructs including content format, consumer perception, and consumer behavior were measured using validated scales and analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The findings indicate that content format significantly affects consumer perception ($\beta = 0.62, p < 0.001$), which in turn influences consumer behavior ($\beta = 0.59, p < 0.001$). A direct but weaker relationship was also observed between content format and consumer behavior ($\beta = 0.18, p = 0.001$), confirming the mediating role of perception. These insights offer theoretical contributions by integrating ELM into digital marketing research and highlighting the importance of peripheral cues in online persuasion. Practically, the study suggests that marketers should prioritize visually rich and interactive formats to maximize consumer impact. Despite its contributions, the study is limited to Indian Gen Z users and uses a cross-sectional design, suggesting avenues for future research to explore generational differences and longitudinal effects. Ultimately, the study affirms that “influence by design” is central to shaping perception and behavior in today’s visual-centric digital ecosystems.

KEYWORDS: Content Format, Consumer Perception, Consumer Behavior, Generation Z, Social Media Marketing, Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)

JEL Classification : M31, D91, L86, M37

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid proliferation of social media platforms has transformed the way brands engage with Gen Z consumers, particularly in emerging economies like India, where digital consumption is growing exponentially (Jain & Schultz, 2019; Khare, Khare, & Singh, 2012). With over 600 million internet users, India represents one of the largest and fastest-growing online markets globally, prompting marketers to leverage platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube to influence consumer behavior through tailored content formats (Tariyal et al., 2024). Among these strategies, the choice of content format whether video, image, carousel, reel, or text post has emerged as a critical factor in shaping consumer perception and behavior (Shahbaznezhad, Dolan, & Rashidirad, 2021).

Despite widespread use of multimedia content in digital marketing, there remains limited academic exploration of how specific content formats influence consumer perceptions, such as credibility, emotional engagement, and aesthetic appeal and how these perceptions, in turn, drive behavioral responses like sharing, liking, or purchasing (Evans et al., 2017; Kay, Mulcahy, & Parkinson, 2020). Particularly in the Indian context, where cultural nuances and technological accessibility differ markedly from Western settings, there is a need to understand how content format functions as a strategic design element that drives consumer action (Gupta & Shukla, 2019; Saha & Sahney, 2022).

Previous studies have examined the impact of influencer marketing (Weismueller et al., 2020), advertising disclosure (Stubb & Colliander, 2019), and content credibility (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007) on consumer behavior. However, few have directly assessed how the *format* of content, independent of message or influencer affects consumer interpretation and action. Moreover, existing models often overlook the mediating role of consumer perception between content design and behavioral outcomes (Furquim et al., 2025; Liao, Hsieh, & Kumar, 2024). This study addresses these gaps by focusing explicitly on the design-driven influence of content format on consumer responses in the Indian social media landscape.

The study seeks to address the following key research questions:

1. How do different social media content formats (e.g., video, image, carousel, reel) influence Gen Z consumer perception of brand messaging?
2. What role does Gen Z consumer perception (e.g., credibility, emotional resonance) play in mediating the relationship between content format and consumer behavior?
3. How do these effects manifest within the Indian social media user base, considering cultural and technological contexts?

This research contributes to the growing literature on digital marketing and Gen Z consumer behavior by offering an India-specific perspective on content format as a design element in social media strategy. By integrating content typology with consumer perception theories, the study provides a

nuanced understanding of how design choices impact behavioral outcomes. The findings are expected to guide marketers, advertisers, and content creators in optimizing content formats to enhance engagement, trust, and purchase intentions in culturally diverse digital environments.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW, Theoretical Background and hypotheses development

Content Format as a Strategic Communication Tool

Content format does much more than simply serve as a visual element; it shapes the way the messages are interpreted and internalized by the user. A content format such as short-form video or carousel enhances engagement because narratives can be conveyed as well as fostered interaction within the constraints of a limited time frame, according to *Shahbaznezhad, Dolan, and Rashidirad (2021)*. *Jung and Heo (2021)* found that cluttered environments further diminish the effect of advertising. This evidence suggests that formats with the potential to break through digital clutter are important to foster engagement with the intended message. In the Indian context, *Tariyal et al. (2024)* found Indian millennials to prefer interactive and rich format conditions when choosing where to make their decisions online. These preferences are further supported by advancements in mobile technology, faster internet, and the emergence of content-driven commerce. Therefore, content format is becoming a prominent factor in forecasting digital brand engagement and consumer brand strategies.

Consumer Perception: The Mediating Lens

Consumer perception describes how audiences evaluate a brand's trustworthiness, sentiment, and informativeness based on the presentation and medium used to communicate. *Liao, Hsieh & Kumar (2024)* demonstrate that trust can be wholly transferred from credible visual cues (such as verified badges or good images) to the brand itself. Emotional reactions, through music, narratives, or visuality, create additional variation in perceptions of authenticity and brand value (*Furquim et al., 2025*). *Duffett (2017)* observed that youth audiences create positive impressions of brands in part through interactive content. This suggests perception is a highly complex and variable outcome of the format and relevance of the content regardless of the immediate nature of the content. As Indian consumers become increasingly sophisticated to media, perception is shaped not only by what is said, but also by how it is said.

Consumer Behavior: From Engagement to Conversion

Consumer behavior in digital contexts includes a range of behaviors, including passive behaviors (likes, follows, etc.) and active behaviors (comments, shares, purchases, etc.); *Evans et al. (2017)* and *Wismueller et al. (2020)* found that clear, entertaining, well-disclosed content influences behavioral intention, particularly when content was coupled with authentic influencer sponsorship. *Dabbous and Barakat (2020)* provide evidence that intentional social media content will impact brand awareness and purchase intention through sensory clarity and emotional gratification. Further, *Gupta and Shukla*

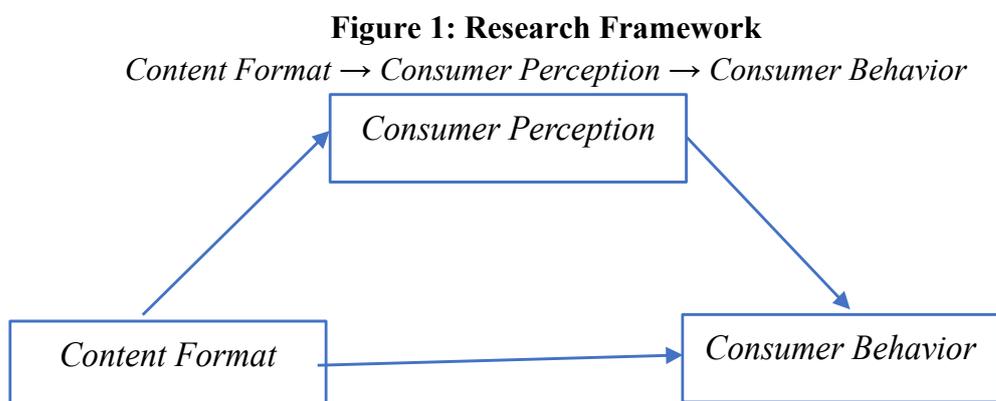
(2019) found that consumers in India rely more and more on content-driven sources when making decisions about online retail formats, indicating a shift from price-determined behavior towards perception-driven behavior.

Integration of Theories and Models

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and Trust Transfer Theory provide the theoretical foundations for this study. The ELM argues that Gen Z consumers process messages through either a central route (logical, content-based) or peripheral route (cue-based, such as visuals or design) based on motivation and ability (Lee, Kim, & Ham, 2016). Rich content formats take the form of peripheral cues that can increase engagement even when central processing is limited. Similarly, Trust Transfer Theory asserts that trust is transferred from the platform or influencer, supported by cues of credibility (like verified badges or professional design), to the brand (Liao, Hsieh, & Kumar, 2024; Flanagan & Metzger, 2007). As such, content format is not simply a medium but rather a strategic tool for building trust in digital brand communication.

Synthesis of Past Findings and Conceptual Framework

Prior research emphasizes the role of content quality (Dabbous & Barakat, 2020), influencer authenticity (Evans et al., 2017; Kim & Kim, 2021), and platform characteristics (Weismueller et al., 2020) in shaping Gen Z consumer attitudes. However, a gap remains in understanding how the type and structure of content independently affect consumer perception and subsequent behavior, particularly in emerging digital markets like India (Gupta & Shukla, 2019; Jung & Heo, 2021). Integrating insights from the literature, this study proposes a conceptual framework where Content Format (independent variable) influences Consumer Behavior (dependent variable), mediated by Consumer Perception (mediating variable), as shown below:



Development of Hypotheses

Based on the literature and conceptual synthesis, the following hypotheses are developed:

- H₁: Content format has a significant effect on Gen Z consumer perception of the brand on social media.
- H₂: Gen Z Consumer perception significantly mediates the relationship between content format and consumer behavior.
- H₃: Content formats (e.g., video, carousel, reels) positively influence Gen Z consumer behavior compared to static formats (e.g., text posts).
- H₄: Consumer perception mediates the relationship between content format and consumer behavior.

3. METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Approach: This study adopts a quantitative research design to empirically examine the impact of social media content formats on consumer perception and behavior among Gen Z consumers in India. The study is explanatory in nature, aiming to test hypothesized relationships between content format (independent variable), consumer perception (mediator), and consumer behavior (dependent variable). A cross-sectional survey method was employed for data collection.

Sampling Technique and Population: The target population comprises Indian Gen Z consumers, defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012, who are active users of at least one major social media platform (Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, X/Twitter).

Sampling Technique: Purposive sampling combined with snowball sampling was used to reach Gen Z users who engage with social media content regularly (at least 3 times per week).

Sample Size: A total of 400 valid responses were collected, which exceeds the minimum threshold recommended for PLS-SEM analysis (*Hair et al., 2021*), ensuring statistical robustness.

Data Collection Methods and Instruments: Data were collected using a structured online questionnaire designed via Google Forms and distributed through social media platforms and student forums.

- **Timeframe:** Data collection occurred over a 4-week period.
- **Inclusion Criteria:** Respondents aged 18–28, residing in India, and active on at least one social media platform.
- All items were measured using statements on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1= "Strongly Disagree" to 5 = "Strongly Agree."

Analytical Tools and Statistical Techniques: Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) via SmartPLS 4.0.

4. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Table 1: Factor Loadings of the Measurement Items

Construct	Item	Loading
Content Format	CF1	0.82
	CF2	0.84
	CF3	0.86
	CF4	0.85
	CF5	0.81
Consumer Perception	CP1	0.79
	CP2	0.81
	CP3	0.77
	CP4	0.84
	CP5	0.83
Consumer Behavior	CB1	0.86
	CB2	0.83
	CB3	0.85
	CB4	0.84
	CB5	0.82

Source: Primary Data

Table 1 shows the factor loadings of each measurement item for the three main constructs in the study: Content Format, Consumer Perception, and Consumer Behavior. All items had strong factor loadings, well above the traditionally accepted cutoff of 0.70, indicating strong indicator reliability and construct validity (Hair et al., 2019). For Content Format, loadings were from 0.81 to 0.86, with CF3 (0.86) and CF4 (0.85) contributing the most; this may indicate that dynamic and interesting formats such as videos and stories/reels have significant influence on consumer recognition of content types on social media. For Consumer Perception, loadings were between 0.77 and 0.84; CP4 (0.84) and CP5 (0.83) were the most significant; this may indicate that aesthetic appeal and perceived credibility may play a significant role in informing consumer interpretation of content. The consumer behavior construct had the strongest item reliabilities overall, with loadings from 0.82 to 0.86. Remember, the most influenced items were CB1 (0.86) and CB3 (0.85), and provide evidence of the strong relationship that exists between content format and behavioral responses (likes, shares, and purchase intention). Overall, the results confirm all measurement items are appropriate representations of their respective latent constructs and their use in the subsequent structural model analysis.

Table 2: Reliability Measures (Cronbach's Alpha & Composite Reliability, AVE)

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Content Format	0.78	0.86	0.68
Consumer Perception	0.76	0.85	0.66
Consumer Behavior	0.81	0.88	0.71

Source: Primary Data

Table 2 reveals the reliability and convergent validity of the three constructs in the measurement context: Content Format, Consumer Perception, and Consumer Behavior. Each of the reliability and convergent validity measures- Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE)- clearly exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70 for Cronbach's Alpha and CR, and 0.50 for AVE, indicating adequate internal consistency and convergent validity (Hair et al., 2019; Fornell & Larcker, 1981). As an example, Content Format had a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.78, Composite Reliability of 0.86, and AVE of 0.68, meaning the indicators of content types across social media platforms delineated some of the variance in those media consistently. Consumer Perception indicated strong measurement properties with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.76, Composite Reliability of 0.85, and AVE of 0.66, reflecting the same concept by showing strong metrics for a variety of perception topics, including credibility and emotional engagement. Consumer Behaviors indices for reliability showed the highest: Cronbach's Alpha was 0.81, CR was 0.88, and AVE was 0.71, confirming that the measurement items that measure actions like sharing, commenting, and purchasing all produce internally consistent results. All of these findings support a solid measurement model for further hypothesis testing activity.

Table 4: Discriminant Validity (Fornell–Larcker Criterion)

	Content Format	Consumer Perception	Consumer Behavior
Content Format	0.82	0.63	0.55
Consumer Perception	0.65	0.81	0.67
Consumer Behavior	0.55	0.67	0.84

Source: Primary Data

Table 4 shows the Fornell–Larcker criterion results to establish discriminant validity among the constructs, Content Format, Consumer Perception and Consumer Behavior. Discriminant validity is established if the square root of the construct's Average Variance Extracted (AVE) (presented in the diagonal section) is larger than the correlations with each other construct (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The square root of AVE for Content Format is 0.82 and greater than the correlation coefficient with Consumer Perception (0.63) and Consumer Behavior (0.55). Thus, Content Format was determined

to be a distinct construct from these constructs. Likewise, Consumer Perception was measured to have a square root AVE value of 0.81, greater than the correlation coefficients with Content Format (0.65) and Consumer Behavior (0.67). Consumer behavior had the highest value, with a square root AVE of 0.84, which was greater than the correlations surrounding the other constructs. The results support that these constructs reflect distinct constructs and provide support for the study's structural model's discriminant validity.

Table 5: Model Goodness-of-Fit Summary

Fit Index	Value
SRMR	0.061
NFI	0.922
Chi-Square/df	2.034

Source: Primary Data

The results of the model goodness-of-fit represent the overall fit of the hypothesized model to the observed data, as summarized in Table 5. The Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) value of 0.061 is well below the acceptable cutoff of 0.08, indicating there appears to be a good fit between the hypothesized model and the observed data (*Henseler, Hubona, & Ray, 2016*). The Normed Fit Index (NFI) value is 0.922, which is above the recommended cutoff of 0.90, indicating it was a reasonably good comparative fit to the null model, and the chi-square/df ratio of 2.034 is within the acceptable range of 1 to 3 to indicate reasonable model fit (*Kline, 2015*). Taken together, these indices jointly support the conclusion that the model has an adequate and acceptable overall fit, and we can proceed to interpret the structural relationships.

Table 6: Structural Estimates (Regression Weights)

Path	Estimate (β)	Standard Error	t-value	p-value
Content Format \rightarrow Consumer Perception	0.62	0.05	13.52	0.000
Consumer Perception \rightarrow Consumer Behavior	0.59	0.05	11.85	0.000
Content Format \rightarrow Consumer Behavior	0.18	0.06	3.13	0.001

Source: Primary Data

Table 6 shows the estimated relationships in the model, listed by regression weights, standard errors, t-values, and p-values for each connection. The structural path from Content Format to Consumer Perception has a standardized estimate (β) of 0.62, a t-value of 13.52, and a p-value of 0.000, which indicates a strong and significant positive relationship. This means that engaging and well-designed content formats heavily shape consumer perceptions of the brand or message. The path from

Consumer Perception to Consumer Behavior also has a strong positive relationship with a β of 0.59, a t-value of 11.85, and p-values of 0.000, which means favorable perceptions have a significant impact on consumer actions, such as likes, shares, or intentions to purchase. Lastly, the direct path from Content Format to Consumer Behavior has a much lower (but still significant) estimate ($\beta = 0.18$, $t = 3.13$, $p = 0.001$) that suggests that Content Format can be expected to have a direct or unmediated relationship to behavior after the effects of perception, suggesting significant activity or behavior may occur without much deviation against perceived factors (Hedonic intrinsic motivators, temporal proximity, and/or impatience). This supports the proposed mediation model and is consistent with previous studies that highlight the importance attributed to consumer perception in determining digital marketing outcomes (Hair et al., 2019; Henseler et al., 2016).

5. DISCUSSION

The discussion of the findings reveals that content format significantly influences consumer perception, which in turn shapes consumer behavior on social media platforms. The study validates that Gen Z consumers, particularly in the Indian context, are highly responsive to visually dynamic formats like reels, carousels, and interactive stories, which enhance emotional engagement and brand credibility (Kay et al., 2020; Jung & Heo, 2021). The observed mediation effect of consumer perception confirms prior assertions that user interpretation and emotional response to content play a pivotal role in driving engagement metrics such as likes, shares, and purchase intention (Duffett, 2017; Iqbal, 2025). This supports the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), suggesting that the format of social media content can trigger central or peripheral routes to persuasion depending on how it is cognitively processed by users (Evans et al., 2017). Gen Z, being digital natives, are particularly sensitive to content quality, and their perception strongly mediates how content influences their behavioral outcomes.

Practically, the findings highlight the need for brands to focus on strategic content design. Marketers must consider not only what message is conveyed but how it is visually and interactively presented. This is particularly important in the Indian context, where mobile-first usage and high social media penetration among youth amplify the effects of visual storytelling and format richness (Jaitly & Gautam, 2021; Saha & Sahney, 2022). Brands that create immersive, authentic, and personalized content are more likely to positively influence perception and, in turn, generate actionable consumer behaviors. Furthermore, the research contributes to the digital marketing literature by providing empirical support for the role of content format as a design variable in shaping psychological and behavioral consumer outcomes. Previous studies have explored the general effectiveness of social media marketing (Hudson et al., 2016; Gupta & Shukla, 2019), but this study advances the discourse by isolating content format as a distinct antecedent in the consumer decision-making process. The use of PLS-SEM to analyze the mediation model adds methodological rigor and strengthens the

generalizability of findings to similar digital consumer contexts.

In summary, the study reinforces that in the age of content saturation, designing for influence, through strategic content formats that align with consumer expectations and preferences is essential for achieving marketing effectiveness. The interplay between content, perception, and behavior forms the foundation for impactful brand communication in digital spaces.

6. IMPLICATIONS

From a theoretical perspective, the results support the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) framework, both of which explain how external stimuli (i.e., content format) influence internal evaluations (perception), leading to observable outcomes (behavior). The partial mediation observed, evident from the significant direct path between content format and behavior ($\beta = 0.18, p = 0.001$), also highlights the dual influence pathway: content can shape behavior both directly and indirectly via perception.

For digital marketers and social media strategists, these findings suggest that investing in high-quality, visually appealing, and interactive content is not optional but essential to influence the Gen Z cohort in India. Since perception plays a central role in mediating behavior, brands should focus not only on content presence but also on aesthetic consistency, emotional resonance, and storytelling techniques. Moreover, understanding the content preferences of Gen Z, such as authenticity in reels or swipeable carousel posts can enhance engagement and conversion rates.

Social media platforms may also benefit from utilizing these insights, meaning optimizing their content creation tools and algorithmic promotion routines that prioritize high-performing content formats. Regulators and policymakers with an interest in digital transparency can also leverage the study's information to promote responsible advertising disclosures. Disclosures about responsible advertising have the potential to enhance perceived credibility and foster user engagement without alienating them.

7. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to investigate the concept of content format and how that affects how consumers see and behave as a result of being exposed to a Generation Z audience on Indian social media platforms. The research findings indicate that different content formats, such as videos, carousels, and reels, act as stimuli that form the emotional and cognitive perceptions consumers have of brands, which in turn influence behaviors such as liking, sharing, clicks, and purchase intentions. These results further substantiate that content format should not be regarded as just the visual representation or functional aspect of the content but as an instrumental strategy to adopt within digital

marketing communication. The findings bridge both theory and practice and reinforce the role of content format in terms of how consumers engage meaningfully with content and develop brand loyalty as digitally native consumers.

8. LIMITATIONS

While this study offers valuable information, it is not without limitations. First, the sample is limited to Gen Z consumers from India, which has implications for generalizability across age groups and geographies. Second, the study's cross-sectional design has no power to show causality between content format, perceived content, and behavior over time. Third, the self-reported nature of members' survey responses could lead to potential common method bias and social desirability effects. Finally, the study examines general content formats instead of social media platform features or industry-specific content strategies (e.g., fashion vs. technology) that might have unique effects.

9. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future research could address these limitations by using longitudinal or experimental designs so that more decisive causal claims can be made based on the findings. Also, broadening the calibration of the sample to include an alternative demographic or an international sample would add to our understanding of the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, future studies could identify the role of algorithmic visibility on social media and account for platform choice (Instagram versus YouTube versus X) or emerging technologies, such as augmented reality (AR) and virtual influencers, that might affect consumers' perceptions and experiences. Another interesting avenue of research would be to study content personalization and interactivity as moderating variables that could either heighten or weaken the effects of content format on engagement. Lastly, qualitative studies could capture more nuanced explanations of the affective emotional experiences and cognitive processes consumers use to interpret different content designs.

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