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SOCIAL COMMERCE AS A CATALYST FOR BRAND GROWTH: BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS AND TRUST DYNAMICS AMONG GENERATION Z DIGITAL CONSUMERS

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ABSTRACT

The rapid proliferation of social media platforms has fundamentally transformed consumer purchase pathways, giving rise to social commerce as a pivotal mechanism through which brands establish and extend their market presence. This study empirically investigates the role of social commerce in driving brand growth among Generation Z (Gen Z) digital consumers in India. Data were collected from 300 respondents aged 18–29 years through a structured online survey employing five-point Likert scale instruments. The study examines five dimensions: platform preference for brand discovery, the influence of engagement metrics on purchase intention, the efficacy of influencer marketing, trust-building mechanisms within social ecosystems, and their collective impact on brand loyalty. Multiple regression analysis reveals that trust mechanisms ($\beta = 0.412$), influencer credibility ($\beta = 0.384$), and platform engagement ($\beta = 0.291$) together account for 68.4% of the variance in Gen Z brand growth outcomes ($R^2 = 0.684$; $F = 213.42$; $p < 0.01$). Findings confirm that micro-influencer credibility, verified user-generated content, and seamless in-app transaction infrastructure are the most decisive predictors of sustainable brand preference. The study contributes actionable insights for digital marketers seeking to optimize social commerce strategies for India's largest emerging consumer cohort.

KEYWORDS: Social Commerce, Generation Z, Brand Growth, Influencer Marketing, Consumer Trust

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Social Commerce: A New Digital Marketplace

The rapid convergence of social networking platforms and electronic commerce has transformed the way consumers discover, evaluate, and purchase products. This integration has given rise to social commerce, a digital business model that combines commercial transactions with interactive social experiences. Unlike traditional e-commerce, which primarily focuses on product search and transactional efficiency, social commerce incorporates social interaction, user-generated content, peer recommendations, and real-time engagement into the purchasing process. Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and other short-video applications have evolved into integrated shopping ecosystems where consumers can explore products, seek opinions, and complete purchases without leaving the platform.

1.2. Generation Z and Social Commerce

Generation Z, comprising individuals born between 1997 and 2012, represents the first generation of true digital natives. Having grown up with smartphones, high-speed internet, and social media, they rely extensively on digital platforms for communication, entertainment, and shopping. Their purchasing behaviour is strongly influenced by online communities, influencer recommendations, reviews, and interactive content rather than traditional advertising. As this generation is expected to account for a significant share of global consumer spending by 2030, understanding their behaviour has become increasingly important for researchers and marketers (Smith, 2012 [9]; Statista, 2025 [10]).

1.3. Role of Influencers and Digital Trust

Influencer marketing has emerged as one of the most influential components of social commerce. While celebrity endorsements continue to attract attention, recent studies indicate that micro-influencers often generate greater engagement due to their perceived authenticity and closer relationships with followers (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017 [2]). Equally important is digital trust, which includes confidence in influencer credibility, user-generated content, online reviews, secure payment systems, and platform reliability. In the absence of physical product evaluation, these trust factors significantly reduce perceived risk and encourage purchase decisions. Previous research has shown that social interactions and community support play a crucial role in building consumer confidence in online shopping environments (Hajli, 2014 [3]; Visvanathan et al., 2023 [13]).

1.4. Research Gap and Significance of the Study

Although numerous international studies have examined social commerce and Generation Z, empirical evidence from the Indian context remains limited. India's rapidly expanding digital

economy, increasing smartphone penetration, widespread adoption of UPI-based digital payments, and growing social media usage create a unique environment for social commerce. Consumer behaviour in India is also shaped by cultural values, peer influence, and platform-specific engagement patterns, which may differ from those observed in Western countries. Therefore, this study investigates how social commerce dimensions—platform engagement, influencer effectiveness, and digital trust—collectively contribute to brand growth among Indian Generation Z consumers. Based on data collected from 300 valid respondents, the study provides empirical evidence to strengthen existing literature and offers practical insights for businesses in designing effective social commerce strategies and enhancing brand performance in the evolving digital marketplace.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Social commerce has emerged as a significant area of research due to the rapid integration of social networking platforms with online shopping. Unlike traditional e-commerce, social commerce emphasizes social interaction, community participation, user-generated content, and peer recommendations as key determinants of consumer purchase behaviour. Numerous studies have looked into the elements that drive social commerce adoption, emphasising the relevance of trust, influencer credibility, platform engagement, and technological convenience.

Hajli (2014) [3] provided one of the earliest comprehensive frameworks explaining the role of social support in social commerce. The study demonstrated that information sharing, online community participation, and peer referrals significantly enhance consumers' purchase intentions. More importantly, trust was identified as the mediating variable that strengthens the relationship between social interaction and buying behaviour. This finding established trust as one of the most influential constructs in social commerce research and continues to guide contemporary studies on digital consumer behaviour.

The effectiveness of influencers in shaping consumer decisions is strongly supported by Source Credibility Theory proposed by Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953). According to this theory, the persuasive power of communication depends on the perceived expertise and trustworthiness of the information source. Extending this concept to social media, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) [4] observed that digital platforms have transformed ordinary users into influential content creators whose opinions often carry greater credibility than traditional advertisements. Their work highlighted the growing importance of authentic communication in online marketing.

Focusing specifically on Generation Z, Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) [2] compared the influence of celebrities and ordinary Instagram users on purchase intentions. Their findings revealed that micro-influencers and relatable content creators generate higher levels of trust and engagement

because they appear more authentic and accessible than celebrities. This research suggests that younger consumers value honesty, transparency, and personal connection over status and popularity when making purchasing decisions.

Within the Indian context, Visvanathan (2021) [12] examined the adoption of digital marketing strategies among small and medium enterprises and reported that interactive social media engagement was one of the most effective methods for creating brand awareness among young consumers. The study further indicated that Indian Generation Z consumers are more responsive to peer recommendations and user-generated content than conventional promotional messages, highlighting the growing importance of social commerce in India's digital economy.

Consumer trust in online transactions has also received considerable scholarly attention. Maheskumar and Ramesh (2022) [7] found that system quality, payment security, and vendor transparency significantly influence consumers' confidence in mobile commerce. Their research concluded that secure payment systems play a critical role in encouraging first-time online purchases, making digital trust an essential factor for successful social commerce platforms.

Several studies have emphasized the importance of platform engagement and user-generated content in influencing consumer behaviour. Liang and Turban (2011) [5] argued that likes, comments, shares, and reviews function as social proof, reducing uncertainty and increasing purchase confidence. Similarly, Cheung and Lee (2012) [1] reported that the credibility of user-generated content depends on review quality, source reliability, and platform reputation. Furthermore, Liu, Li, and Hu (2013) [6] integrated Social Support Theory with the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and demonstrated that both perceived usefulness and social interaction significantly influence continuous platform usage.

Overall, the existing literature identifies three dominant themes relevant to the present study: digital trust, influencer credibility, and platform engagement. These factors collectively shape Generation Z consumers' purchasing decisions and contribute significantly to brand growth through social commerce. Building upon these theoretical insights, the present study examines the combined influence of these dimensions on brand growth among Indian Generation Z consumers using empirical evidence from 300 respondents.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To assess how engagement metrics influence purchase intention and brand loyalty.
2. To examine influencer marketing effectiveness within the social commerce ecosystem.
3. To identify the primary platforms used by Gen Z for brand discovery and commerce.

4. To explore trust-building mechanisms and their structural relationship with brand preference.

4. RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

H1: Social commerce engagement has a significant positive impact on Gen Z brand loyalty.

H2: Influencer credibility positively and significantly influences purchase intention among Gen Z consumers.

H3: Trust mechanisms (verified reviews, secure checkout) significantly predict brand preference among Gen Z.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive and analytical research design to investigate the relationship between social commerce dimensions and brand growth among Generation Z digital consumers in India. The mixed quantitative approach ensures that both descriptive profiling and inferential statistical relationships are captured within a unified empirical framework.

5.1 Research Design

A cross-sectional survey design was adopted to collect primary data from Gen Z respondents. This design is appropriate given the study's focus on examining attitudinal and behavioural variables at a single point in time across a large and geographically distributed sample. The survey instrument was developed on the basis of validated scales from prior social commerce, consumer behaviour, and digital marketing research literature, subsequently adapted for the Indian Gen Z context through expert panel review.

5.2 Population and Sampling

The target population comprised active social media users aged 18 to 29 years residing in India who had engaged in at least one social commerce transaction (i.e., discovered and purchased a product via a social media platform) within the preceding six months. This criterion was established to ensure respondent familiarity with the study constructs. A convenience sampling method was employed to recruit respondents through digital survey distribution on Instagram, WhatsApp, and university academic networks. A total of 347 responses were received, of which 47 were excluded due to incomplete data or failure of internal consistency checks, yielding a final analytical sample of $N = 300$ valid, fully verified responses.

5.3 Data Collection Instrument

The survey instrument comprised four structural sections: (a) demographic and digital usage profiling questions, including platform usage frequency, device preference, and transaction history; (b) categorical selection items identifying primary brand discovery platforms; (c) five-point Likert scale items (5 = Strongly Agree, 1 = Strongly Disagree) measuring four latent constructs—

engagement metric salience, influencer credibility, trust mechanism efficacy, and brand loyalty intention; and (d) an open-format field capturing respondent recommendations for brands on social platforms. The instrument achieved a Cronbach's Alpha of $\alpha = 0.87$ across all scale items, confirming satisfactory internal reliability. Face and content validity were established through pre-testing with 30 respondents and review by three subject matter experts.

5.4 Statistical Tools and Analysis

Data were coded and entered into IBM SPSS Statistics 26.0 for processing. The following analytical techniques were applied sequentially: (i) Descriptive statistics including frequency distributions and percentage analysis for socio-demographic and platform preference data; (ii) Mean score analysis using weighted Likert scales to evaluate construct-level respondent attitudes; (iii) Pearson's correlation analysis to assess bivariate relationships among predictor variables; and (iv) Multiple Linear Regression analysis using the Enter method to determine the collective and individual predictive contributions of the three primary social commerce dimensions on the dependent variable (Gen Z brand growth and brand preference). Statistical significance was evaluated at $p < 0.05$ and $p < 0.01$ levels throughout the analysis.

6. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N=300)

Variable	Category	N	%
Gender	Male	162	54.0
	Female	132	44.0
	Prefer not to say	6	2.0
Age Group	18–21 years	108	36.0
	22–25 years	132	44.0
	26–29 years	60	20.0
Education	Undergraduate	138	46.0
	Postgraduate	114	38.0
	Employed / Professional	48	16.0
Daily Social Media Usage	Less than 2 hours	42	14.0

	2–4 hours	126	42.0
	More than 4 hours	132	44.0
Social Commerce Experience	Less than 6 months	54	18.0
	6 months – 1 year	96	32.0
	More than 1 year	150	50.0

Source: Primary Data

The respondent profile indicates a near-balanced gender distribution with a slight male preponderance (54.0%). The 22–25 age group constitutes the largest segment (44.0%), reflecting the digitally active early-career cohort central to social commerce adoption. Over 86% report using social media for more than two hours daily, confirming deep platform embeddedness, and 50.0% have engaged in social commerce for over one year, establishing experiential familiarity with the study constructs.

Table 2: Primary Social Media Platforms for Brand Discovery (N=300)

Preferred Discovery Platform	Respondents (N=300)	Percentage (%)
Instagram	144	48.0
YouTube	96	32.0
Short-Form Video / Reels	42	14.0
Others (X, Pinterest, Facebook)	18	6.0
Total	300	100.0

Source: Primary Data

Instagram (48.0%) and YouTube (32.0%) together command 80.0% of brand discovery activity among Gen Z respondents, confirming that visual-first, video-integrated platforms constitute the primary commercial discovery infrastructure for this cohort. The 14.0% preference for short-form video platforms underscores the accelerating role of Reels-style content in enabling rapid discovery-to-conversion pathways. Brands absent from these visual platforms are effectively invisible to the Gen Z discovery process.

Table 3: Impact of Engagement Metrics on Purchase Intention and Brand Loyalty (N=300)

Measurement Statement	SA (5)	A (4)	N (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Total	Mean Score
High likes/comments make a brand appear reliable	126	114	42	12	6	300	4.14
Saving or sharing posts increases my intent to purchase	108	132	36	18	6	300	4.06
Active brand responses to comments build my loyalty	138	102	48	9	3	300	4.21
I am more likely to revisit brands that engage actively with their audience	120	120	42	12	6	300	4.12
Composite Mean Score							4.13

Source: Primary Data

Note: SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; N = Neutral; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree

The composite mean of 4.13 indicates strong agreement across all engagement metric statements. Active brand responsiveness scored the highest mean (4.21), confirming that Gen Z consumers perceive dialogue—not broadcast—as the foundation of digital brand loyalty. The finding that saving and sharing posts achieves a mean of 4.06 demonstrates that social content curation is a substantive purchase facilitation behaviour rather than a passive engagement signal.

Table 4: Influencer Credibility and Marketing Effectiveness (N=300)

Influencer Variables Evaluated	Respondents (N=300)	Percentage (%)
Preferred Influencer Tier		
Micro-Influencers (Niche, highly interactive)	174	58.0
Mega-Influencers / Celebrities	72	24.0
Peer Networks / Friends	54	18.0

Core Value Driving Conversion		
Perceived Honesty / Unfiltered Product Reviews	162	54.0
Aesthetic Appeal / Aspirational Lifestyle	78	26.0
Promo Codes / Direct Discounts	60	20.0
Total	300	100.0

Source: Primary Data

A decisive majority of 58.0% of Gen Z respondents favour micro-influencers over celebrities (24.0%) and peer networks (18.0%). This preference is structurally aligned with the finding that unfiltered product honesty (54.0%) is the primary conversion driver, substantially outperforming aspirational aesthetics (26.0%) and price incentives (20.0%). These results collectively suggest that influencer ROI for Gen Z audiences is fundamentally a function of authenticity and category congruence rather than follower magnitude.

Table 5: Trust-Building Components in Social Commerce Environments (N=300)

Trust Factor	Critical Factor (N)	Moderate Factor (N)	Minimal Factor (N)	Total (N=300)	Weighted Index
Verified Buyer Reviews / Authentic Images	192	84	24	300	85.3%
Secure, Integrated In-App Checkout	168	96	36	300	81.3%
Brand Transparency (Behind-the-scenes Content)	120	132	48	300	74.0%
Consistent Brand Response to Negative Reviews	90	138	72	300	66.0%

Source: Primary Data

Verified buyer reviews accompanied by authentic purchaser images emerge as the pre-eminent trust vector (weighted index 85.3%), with 192 of 300 respondents rating it a critical trust factor. Secure in-app checkout (81.3%) confirms that transaction-level security remains non-negotiable for social

commerce conversion. Brand transparency through behind-the-scenes content (74.0%) demonstrates that process visibility is an emerging trust-building mechanism that brands should actively incorporate into their social media content strategy.

Table 6: Multiple Regression Model Summary — Predictors of Gen Z Brand Growth (N=300)

Predictor Variable	Unstandardised β	Std. Error	t-value	p-value	Sig.
Constant	0.612	0.145	4.220	< 0.01	Yes
Influencer Credibility (X_1)	0.384	0.052	7.384	< 0.01	Yes
Platform Engagement (X_2)	0.291	0.048	6.062	< 0.01	Yes
Trust Mechanisms (X_3)	0.412	0.061	6.754	< 0.01	Yes

Model Statistics: $R^2 = 0.684$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.678$; F-Statistic = 213.42 ($p < 0.01$)

The regression model demonstrates strong explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.684$), indicating that 68.4% of variance in Gen Z brand growth is collectively accounted for by the three predictors ($F = 213.42$, $p < 0.01$). Trust Mechanisms emerge as the strongest individual predictor ($\beta = 0.412$, $p < 0.01$), followed by Influencer Credibility ($\beta = 0.384$, $p < 0.01$) and Platform Engagement ($\beta = 0.291$, $p < 0.01$). All four hypotheses are therefore fully supported at the 1% level of significance. The primacy of trust mechanisms confirms that credibility infrastructure is the decisive long-run driver of Gen Z commercial loyalty.

7. DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study provide valuable insights into the factors influencing brand growth through social commerce among Indian Generation Z consumers. The regression analysis reveals that digital trust is the strongest predictor of brand growth ($\beta = 0.412$), confirming earlier studies that identified trust as the foundation of successful social commerce. The results indicate that Indian Gen Z consumers rely heavily on secure payment systems, authentic reviews, transparent brand communication, and reliable platform features before making purchase decisions. This suggests that brands should prioritize building trust before investing extensively in promotional activities.

Influencer credibility emerged as the second most significant predictor ($\beta = 0.384$). A majority of respondents (58%) preferred recommendations from micro-influencers over celebrities, highlighting the growing importance of authenticity, relatability, and audience engagement. This finding supports previous research indicating that consumers value genuine product experiences more

than promotional endorsements from highly popular influencers. Consequently, brands can achieve better marketing outcomes by collaborating with credible niche influencers who maintain strong relationships with their followers.

Although platform engagement recorded the lowest regression coefficient ($\beta = 0.291$), it remained statistically significant in influencing brand growth. High engagement through likes, comments, shares, and interactive communication strengthens consumer confidence and enhances brand loyalty. The highest mean score for active brand responsiveness further demonstrates that consumers appreciate brands that actively engage with their audience.

Finally, Instagram (48%) and YouTube (32%) together accounted for nearly 80% of product discovery among respondents, indicating that these platforms dominate the social commerce ecosystem for Indian Generation Z consumers. Overall, the findings emphasize that trust, authentic influencer partnerships, and meaningful platform engagement collectively contribute to sustainable brand growth in the evolving social commerce environment.

8. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study confirms that social commerce has become a primary platform for brand engagement among Generation Z consumers. Based on data collected from 300 respondents, the findings reveal that digital trust, influencer credibility, and platform engagement significantly influence brand growth, jointly explaining 68.4% of its variation. Among these factors, trust emerged as the strongest predictor, highlighting the importance of secure transactions, authentic user-generated content, and transparent brand communication. The study also emphasizes the effectiveness of micro-influencers in creating meaningful consumer engagement and strengthening brand relationships.

From a managerial perspective, brands should prioritize trust-building initiatives, collaborate with credible micro-influencers, and maintain active interactions with consumers across social media platforms. These strategies can enhance customer loyalty and sustainable brand growth. Future research may extend the study by examining other demographic segments, comparing different social commerce platforms, and incorporating additional behavioural and psychographic variables to provide a broader understanding of consumer engagement in the evolving digital marketplace.

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