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SCROLL, TRUST, BUY: ROLE OF INFLUENCER MARKETING IN BUYING DECISIONS OF YOUNG ADULTS

Aadhyaa Wadhwa, Udit Pandit, Dhanveer Shah and Saransh Kanodia

John Nash Research Program Mumbai

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how influencer marketing shapes the buying behaviour of Young Adults (18-35) through netnographic observation. It examines the influence of Instagram-based micro-and macro-influencers on the buying decisions of Young Adults in the fashion domain. This study synthesises three important frameworks: Parasocial Interaction (PSI), the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), and Social Interaction Theory (SIT). It has used a secondary data approach employing netnographic analysis of 60 active micro-influencers and 60 active macro-influencers from Instagram over a period of two months. These 120 accounts were studied by analysing their Stories, Posts, Captions, Reels, Comments and Engagement patterns. The findings suggest that micro-influencers generate higher levels of purchase intent among the target group of Young Adults (18 – 35 years), largely due to perceived trust, authenticity, and relational closeness. The inferences of this study extend beyond marketing practice and delve into the sociology of digital culture, the persuasion process, and the psychology of consumer intentions and decisions.

KEYWORDS: Influencer Marketing, Digital Marketing, Online buying, Micro-influencers, Macaro-influencers, Parasocial Theory, Instagram-based marketing

1. INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of social media and its power have significantly and irreversibly transformed the landscape of marketing and consumer behaviour. Traditional advertising channels, such as television, radio and print, have gradually been replaced by digital platforms, including Instagram, YouTube, Facebook and Snapchat, where user-generated content and peer recommendations carry significant persuasive abilities. Within this transformed environment, a new domain of marketing, the social media influencers, has emerged as a significant and critical interface between the end consumers and the brands. Social media networks have led to a new marketing climate characterised by user-generated content, online communities, ongoing interaction, and closer ties between content creators and consumers. These traits have helped to shape the evolution of influencer marketing as a new niche in digital marketing.

Young adults aged 18-35 are the most digitally active and brand-conscious consumer segment worldwide. According to Statista (2023), approximately 90% of individuals in this age group in the United States use at least one social media platform daily, with average daily usage of up to 3 hours. This demographic's spending power, estimated by Nielsen & Gibson (2022), is \$143 billion in direct purchasing power in the United States alone, with additional influence over household purchasing decisions.

Influencer marketing can be considered as a form of social media marketing that involves endorsements and product placements by individuals with dedicated social followings who are viewed as experts in their niche (Trivedi, J., & Sama, R., 2020), and has grown into a multi-billion-dollar industry. According to Influencer's Market Report (2026), the influencer market size has grown exponentially in recent years. It indicates a growth from \$ 16.04 billion to \$ 19.69 billion in 2026 at a compound annual growth of 22.8%. This phenomenal, exponential growth underscores the commercial and academic significance of understanding how influencer content shapes the purchase behaviours and attitudes of targeted audiences. Despite adequate scholarly attention given to influencer marketing's specific impact, the present literature has not focused much on the 18-35 age group in the fashion domain. The literature has studied influencers' effects on specific product segments, rather than focusing on the unique behavioural characteristics of the young population. This study attempts to fill this gap in the literature through a mixed-methods approach, employing qualitative and quantitative synthesis of secondary data and a systematic review of published academic journals and articles to form a coherent understanding of influencer buying in today's digital era.

The literature review examines the existing knowledge on the role of influencer marketing in shaping adult consumers' buying decisions. This review is organised into five thematic subsections, and across each subsection, three core theoretical frameworks, Parasocial Interaction Theory (PSI), the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), and Social Identity Theory (SIT), are systematically integrated. These frameworks have guided the four key variables: Trust, Authenticity, Influencer Characteristics, and Buying Conversion, used by this study to understand the digital buying phenomenon among young adults.

The literature review builds a progressive argument that establishes the theoretical logic underpinning the identification of the research gap and the development of a conceptual framework for this study. The study addresses the following questions:

1. How do parasocial relationships between Young Adults and Instagram influencers drive the buying decisions?
2. In what ways do trust and authenticity interact within parasocial relationships to accelerate or inhibit buying conversions among young adults?

3. Which kind of Influencer and characteristics most strongly influence the buying behaviour in the 18-35 age group?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptual Definition & Understanding of Influencer Marketing

An influencer is someone whom many people in a particular interest area (like fashion, beauty, etc.) look up to and draw inspiration from. These influencers promote the products they use by providing subtle cues to their audiences, then do sponsored work with various brands.

Van der Harst & Angelopoulos, (2024) have segmented influencers by audience size and distinguished between micro- and macro- influencers. The former has an audience size of 10000 to 100000, whereas the latter has an audience size of 500000 to over 1 million. Macro-influencers provide greater reach for the brand, but on multiple occasions, their influence is overshadowed by micro-influencers who are seen as more authentic, accessible, and relatable.

One of the main theoretical perspectives used to explain the effectiveness of influencer marketing is Parasocial Interaction Theory, more commonly known as “PSI” (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Parasocial interaction refers to a one-sided relationship in which an audience member develops feelings of familiarity and trust towards a media figure, despite the absence of an actual reciprocal relationship. Through regular exposure to an influencer’s personal experiences, opinions, and daily activities, followers may develop what has been described as an “illusion of intimacy at a distance.” This can make influencers appear more familiar and trustworthy than traditional celebrities or conventional advertisements (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

2.1.1 Tracing Influencer Marketing in Young Adults

This study has considered the 18-35-year age group as Young Adults. This age group has traditionally been the most interactive segment of the social media audience and has therefore been the biggest beneficiary of the changes in consumer targeting brought about by influencer marketing. Rather than treating influencer marketing as a casual means of online marketing, it can be viewed as a contemporary form of relationship marketing. Influencers forge relationships with their audiences by creating and curating online content. This is achieved through the strategic use of engaging hooks, inclusive language, and a variety of strategies and formats to influence their followers and raise awareness of the products they promote.

For consumers aged 18–35, this perceived friend-like relationship may therefore play an important role in shaping responses to sponsored content and influencing purchasing decisions. The influence of

such mechanisms may be particularly significant among Generation Z and Millennial consumers, for whom social media is an important source of fashion inspiration and product discovery (Sharma & Agarwal, 2025; Djafarova & Bowes, 2021).

2.1.2 Fashion: One of the Popular Segments among Young Adults

Fashion purchases may involve both emotional and spontaneous decision-making, rather than being based entirely on rational evaluation. Exposure to products through influencers with whom consumers have established parasocial relationships may therefore reduce the perceived distance between advertising and personal recommendation (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

Overall, the literature indicates (Vrontis et al., 2021; Breves et al., 2019) that the effectiveness of influencer marketing is closely associated with authenticity, source credibility, brand-influencer fit, and ongoing audience interaction. Rather than functioning simply as an alternative form of advertising, influencer marketing combines principles from digital marketing and psychological theory to create promotional messages that may be perceived as personal recommendations.

2.2 Evolution of Digital Marketing & Social Media Influencers

2.2.1 From Traditional Marketing to Social Media Marketing

Marketing has historically evolved alongside changes in communication technology and consumer behaviour. Traditional marketing primarily relied on relatively one-directional communication through media such as television, radio, newspapers, magazines, billboards and direct mail. These channels enabled organisations to reach large audiences, but interaction between businesses and consumers was comparatively limited. The development of digital technologies fundamentally altered this relationship by creating new opportunities for organisations to communicate with consumers, collect information and measure responses. Zahay et al. (2022) describe digital marketing as developing from the foundations of direct and interactive marketing, while emphasising the increasing importance of customer engagement and co-creation in contemporary marketing.

2.2.2 The Rise of Social Media Platforms

Modern social media has dramatically changed how people communicate, consume information, and interact with businesses. Social media offers a more participatory medium of communication – while traditional media is a one-way broadcast, social media allows users to both consume and create content. The change has enabled consumers to become not merely recipients of marketing messages, but creators, sharers, commentators, and consumers of content. Thus, the nature of social media enables communication to be more immediate, interactive and consumer-centric (Varma, 2014).

These platforms are also becoming more popular, enabling the creation of online communities based

on interests, lifestyles, and values. Users can follow people who post content of interest to them and communicate with them frequently, forming relationships that can extend beyond the usual ways of consuming media. Social media's capacity to enable ongoing connection between content producers and audiences has led to the emergence of social media influencers, who are an ever-increasing source of information and product recommendations for consumers (Vrontis et al., 2021).

So, the advent of social media has been an ideal opportunity for influencer marketing. By consistently creating content, influencers can gain a large number of followers and build relationships with their audience before introducing commercial relationships. The role of social media allows them to incorporate promotional content into the broader flow of social media content, thereby avoiding the typical advertising format. As a result, the use of social media influencers has become a more common practice in businesses' marketing strategies, and aspects such as credibility, authenticity, engagement, and influencers' relationships with their followers have emerged as potential research interests (Vrontis et al., 2021).

2.3 Digital Marketing & Social Media Platforms: Instagram a Powerful medium

Instagram allows influencers to address followers directly, respond to comments, conduct live sessions and acknowledge questions or reactions. These features can create a stronger perception that the influencer is socially present and accessible. Conde & Casais (2023) suggest that parasocial relationships moderate the effects of perceived popularity and perceived opinion leadership. Also, Instagram-based micro- and macro-influencers are both influenced by the parasocial moderation effect.

2.4 Impulse Buying: A Growing Consumer Phenomenon

2.4.1 Emergence of Young Adult Consumers (18-35): A Key Audience for Fashion Influencer Marketing

Young adults have become an increasingly important population for digital and influencer marketing because social media has become closely integrated into their processes of information search, communication and consumption. Instagram is particularly relevant to this group because its visually oriented format allows consumers to encounter products through images, short-form videos, recommendations and influencer-generated content. Data Reportal (2025) reported that Instagram had approximately 414 million users in India in early 2025, with its advertising reach equivalent to 37.6% of India's adult population. This scale illustrates the importance of Instagram in the Indian digital landscape and provides relevant context for examining the behaviour of young adult consumers.

The importance of young consumers is particularly evident in fashion, where purchasing is closely connected to visual trends, identity and self-expression. Djafarova and Bowes's (2021) study of

Generation Z consumers in the UK found that Instagram marketing stimuli, including advertisements, opinion leaders, and user-generated content, could encourage impulse purchases, with emotional responses acting as an important mechanism linking exposure to purchasing behaviour. Young adults are therefore not important merely because they constitute a large social-media audience. The age range of 18–35 is therefore useful for the present study because it captures young adults who are sufficiently integrated into digital and social-media environments while also representing consumers who can make independent purchasing decisions. However, the category should not be treated as a homogeneous group. Consumers aged 18 and 35 differ in income, lifestyle, employment, fashion preferences, and social media habits. Treating all individuals within the age range as identical would therefore risk overlooking meaningful differences in consumer behaviour. This is especially important when interpreting influencer effects, as purchasing decisions may be shaped by factors such as disposable income, brand familiarity, social identity, and personal involvement with fashion.

2.4.2 Impulse Buying: A Rapidly Growing Phenomenon Among Young Adults

Impulse buying is a situation where a spontaneous decision is made without any research. According to Rook, Dennis W. (1987), it is a choice made by relying more on the emotional and vulnerable parts of the human body than on rational thinking/analytical research, which is why it is done as quickly as possible. Over the past decades, this kind of buying has evidently increased due to the expansion of the social media market, where consumers are constantly exposed to content that persuades them to buy the advertised product. Monisha & Chellamuthu (2026) discuss which psychological mechanisms lead to impulse buying of advertised products. The results suggest that influencer-created content clearly and positively impacts consumers' impulse buying behaviour, mainly due to terms such as promo codes, discounts, and links in bio. This makes it very easy and quick for the consumer to purchase the product, and it minimises the time they have to wait, which in turn leads them to want the product as quickly as possible.

2.5 One-Sided Emotional Bond Between the Influencer & The Buyer: Parasocial Interaction

The rise of influencer marketing has transformed the relationship between consumers and promotional communicators. Unlike traditional advertising, in which consumers primarily encounter brands through controlled commercial messages, social media influencers communicate through seemingly personal and continuous interactions. A central concept for understanding this relationship is parasocial interaction (PSI), originally developed by Horton and Wohl (1956) to describe the illusion of a face-to-face relationship between an audience member and a media personality. Although the relationship is fundamentally one-sided, audiences may experience feelings of familiarity, intimacy and personal connection with the media figure. Social media has substantially expanded this phenomenon because platforms allow influencers to communicate frequently, disclose aspects of their personal lives and create the perception of direct interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Trust and credibility provide another important mechanism through which parasocial interaction can affect purchasing behaviour. When consumers perceive an influencer as knowledgeable, honest, and authentic, recommendations may be interpreted less as conventional advertising and more as advice from a trusted acquaintance.

Overall, the literature establishes parasocial interaction as a significant psychological mechanism within influencer marketing. Influencers can become more than advertising intermediaries: through repeated communication and perceived similarity, they may become psychologically meaningful figures whose recommendations carry relational as well as informational value.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is conceptually based on three theories: Parasocial Interaction Theory (PSI), Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and the Social Identity Theory (SIT).

3.1 How Parasocial Interaction Develops in Influencer Marketing

Parasocial interaction (PSI) is based on relationships and connections, conceptualised by Horton and Wohl (1956), refers to the illusion of face-to-face interaction that subscribers experience with media personalities.

Although Parasocial Interaction (PSI) describes a one-sided relationship between an audience member and a media figure, its development on social media is not instantaneous. Instead, the literature suggests that PSI develops through repeated exposure, perceived social presence, self-disclosure, interaction and perceived similarity between the influencer and follower. These factors can gradually make an influencer appear more familiar and socially accessible, allowing followers to perceive the influencer as someone they know rather than simply as an advertising source. This process is particularly relevant on Instagram because influencers can continuously communicate with followers through posts, Stories, Reels, comments and live sessions. Kim (2021), for example, found that social presence in Instagram influencer content can contribute to PSI, which subsequently influences consumer responses.

3.2 Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) & Influencer Marketing Effectiveness

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986) distinguishes between two routes of persuasion: the central route, which involves careful evaluation of the quality of the argument, and the peripheral route, which relies on heuristic cues such as source attractiveness, credibility, or social proof. The route taken depends on the audience's motivation and ability to process the message.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986) explains persuasion as a function of

how much cognitive effort a receiver invests in a message rather than the content of the message alone. Elaboration is treated as a continuum, and a receiver's position on it is set by two conditions: motivation to process, which derives from personal relevance, involvement and need for cognition, and ability to process, which derives from prior knowledge and freedom.

Applied to influencer marketing, the framework separates the informational substance of a post, including product demonstration, comparison against alternatives and disclosed limitations, from attributes of the influencer that sit outside the argument, including physical attractiveness, follower count, engagement volume and perceived similarity to the viewer.

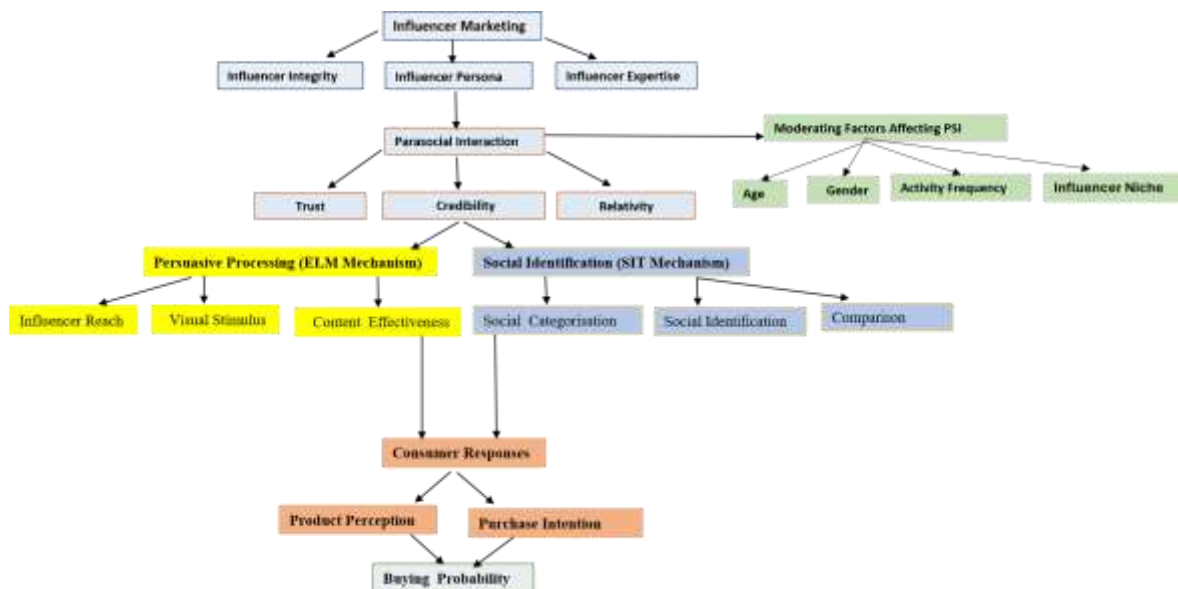
3.3 Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) suggests that self-concept comes from social groups. People sort themselves and others into groups; they compare groups; they feel a sense of belonging and identity based on their association with groups. The theory is based on three main processes: social categorisation, social identification, and social comparison. Social categorisation involves placing oneself and others into groups based on shared characteristics, while social identification occurs when individuals adopt the identity and behaviours associated with a group. Social comparison then involves evaluating one's own group against other groups, which can strengthen feelings of belonging and distinction.

When it comes to influencer marketing, followers may feel that an influencer is a member of a group they identify with or wish to join. If followers feel that the influencer shares their values, lifestyle, interests, or desired identity, they may feel more identified with the influencer. This can enhance trust and perceived authenticity, making followers more receptive to the products the influencer promotes. High level of social identification with an influencer may, therefore, lead to higher engagement and purchase intention; consumers may see buying the promoted product as a means of expressing or reinforcing their identity. Influencers can therefore function as representatives of particular social groups or lifestyles, with their content providing followers with cues about the behaviours, products, and values associated with that identity.

Figure I is a conceptual map of the study, linking the study's variables to the guiding theories.

Figure I: Conceptual Representation of the Study



METHODOLOGY

The present study examines the increasingly growing phenomenon of digital marketing using secondary research. Secondary research involves the collection, analysis, and synthesis of data gathered by others for different primary purposes. Further, it has employed mixed methods, i.e. Quantitative and Qualitative analysis (Creswell, 1999) to understand the relationship of consumer psychology with influencer marketing. The central theme of this methodology is that no single method can be relied upon to study all the aspects of complex social phenomena. While the qualitative method provides an in-depth contextual understanding of the phenomenon, the quantitative method provides a broader analytical tool for interpreting the depth of patterns in a social phenomenon/process. The social media platform Instagram is selected because it combines visual content, reels, collaborations, and call-to-action indicators. These features provide observable evidence of both influencer communication strategies and follower responses.

SAMPLING TECHNIQUE

The primary unit of analysis is an individual Instagram post or reel, and the study employs purposive sampling to identify Instagram-based macro- and micro-influencers. According to Patton (2015), Purposive sampling is a non-probability method used to select information-rich cases for in-depth qualitative analysis. This sampling strategy helped identify influencers who actively produced content targeted at, or likely to be consumed by, college-age audiences.

For this study, 60 active micro-influencers and 60 active macro-influencers were identified under the fashion niche. For micro-influencers, the subscriber range was between 10,000k and 100,000k; for macro-influencers, it was between 500,000k and 1 million. Criterion-based purposive sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015) was used to identify these accounts. These accounts were carefully selected on parameters such as niche specialisation, number of subscribers, posting frequency, interaction level, and content quality. Stories, Posts, Captions, Reels and Comments and Engagement patterns of these active 120 accounts were analysed on four main variables. The variables considered were: Trust, Authenticity, Influencer Characteristics and Buying Conversion Indicators.

DATA COLLECTION

For this study, we systematically analysed the stories, posts, captions, reels, comments, and engagement patterns of 60 active micro-influencers and 60 active macro-influencers across the fashion domain, following Kozinets's (2015) netnographic method. We collected data over 2 months using non-intrusive observations of these 120 Instagram accounts. To collect the relevant data, we carefully analysed captions, post content, engagement patterns, collaborations, sponsorships, subscribers' responses, and engagement behaviour, drawing on the comments section, tags, and hashtags. We carefully analysed their product demonstrations, fashion expertise & advice, personal storytelling, reviews, and discussions of the latest trends.

The observations were manually and systematically recorded in Excel sheets for each type of influencer. A separate Excel sheet was maintained to record the initial details and selection criteria for these influencers. All the data collected was publicly available and did not require any access to private content. Also, any changes to post frequency or content strategy were reviewed weekly. The selection criterion on the basis of which Influencers were selected is presented in Table I.

Table I: Selection Criterion for Instagram-based Influencers.

S. No	Selection Criterion for Instagram based Influencers
1.	Verified Public Instagram Profile
1.	Age of the Influencer
2.	Type of Influencer (Macro/ Micro)
3.	Niche Focus – Fashion – product category
4.	Active posting during the defined study period
5	Age Group of the Subscribers
6.	Number of Subscribers

7.	Relevance and Content of the delivery
8.	Collaborations/Sponsorships posts
9.	Subscribers' comments
10.	Conversion Indicators
10.	Engagement Pattern of the Influencer

The selected accounts were further reviewed on the basis of their content activity, post frequency and engagement with the subscribers. Following the principle of thematic saturation, each of us decided to analyse 15 posts by micro- and macro-influencers. Our study sample included both male and female influencers in the Fashion domain, related to both men's and women's clothing and accessories.

DATA ANALYSIS

The recorded data were analysed using a mixed-methods research design. The mixed-method approach combines qualitative and quantitative techniques to provide a more comprehensive understanding of influencer effectiveness than either approach could provide independently. Each selected post was examined at two levels: first, influencer-generated content was qualitatively analysed for evidence of trust, authenticity and influencer characteristics. Second, observable buying conversion-related factors and follower responses were quantitatively coded.

Qualitative data recorded from the analysis of the stories, posts, and reels were systematically coded. Data analysis was guided by a few questions, such as: “Do subscribers believe that the influencer is honest and reliable?”, “Does the content feel genuine, unscripted and personally motivated?”, “What qualities does the influencer possess expertise, niche focus, relatability or the subscribers' size?”, “Are subscribers showing their intent to purchase the item as a result of the influencer’s content?” These codes were then grouped into a master code sheet consisting of four main variables: Trust, Authenticity, Influencer Characteristics and Indicators for buying conversion.

For Quantitative analysis, 60 micro-influencer accounts and 60 macro-influencer accounts were considered. Using the average method for buying indicators from both micro- and macro-influencers, the result was obtained. Five buying conversion indicators were analysed: Purchase intention indicators, Impulse purchase indicators, Engagement-to-purchase indicator, Repeat purchase intention and Brand loyalty score. Overall, the composite simple average method yielded a score of 8.03 out of 10 for micro-influencers, compared with 6.28 out of 10 for macro-influencers. This gives a difference of +1.75, which is 27.8% higher for micro-influencers. This result shows that, using the simple average method across 120 influencers, micro-influencers have greater consumer influence than macro-influencers on buying conversion indicators among young adults aged 18-35.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Conducting a study on influencer marketing through netnographic observation of Instagram accounts of micro and macro influencers requires careful attention to ethical principles because the research involves observing digital interactions, user-generated content, influencers, and potentially identifiable followers. Although Instagram content was publicly accessible, the availability does not automatically mean it can be freely collected, reproduced, or reported for academic purposes. We ensured that our study protects participants' privacy, dignity, autonomy, and interests throughout the research process. Also, we made no attempts to intervene in these accounts while collecting the data.

RESULTS

This section presents our qualitative and quantitative findings on the influence of Instagram-based micro- and macro-influencers on the buying decisions of Young Adults aged 18 to 35 years. These influencers were selected using Purposive sampling, with 60 active micro-influencer accounts and 60 active macro-influencer accounts analysed through netnographic observation of their publicly available Instagram accounts. The key findings of the data analysis across four variables of the study: Trust, Authenticity, Influencer characteristics and Buying conversions indicators are as follows:

Finding 1: Trust - Micro-Influencers generate Trust while Macro-Influencers earn Aspirations

One of the most significant findings of this study is the qualitative and quantitative distinction between different formats of parasocial relationships that Young Adults form with influencers. Micro-influencers followers' relationship leans more towards trust and personal familiarity: 'I feel like I genuinely know her', 'I can trust his advice'. While macro-influencers followers' relationship is more inclined towards aspiration: 'I admire her', 'I like his content but not sure, if it is promotion or genuine.' This finding extends Horton and Wohl's (1956) original PSI framework in a theoretically significant direction.

The micro-influencers were found to be highly effective at encouraging purchase intentions, particularly due to the direct interaction they had with their followers. Across the posts, micro-influencers used personal recommendations and explained 'why they liked the products', such as mentioning that certain clothes were 'super comfortable', 'had good fabrics, colours and patterns. This made the recommendations appear more personal and relatable rather than simply presenting a product to the audience. Micro-influencers audiences felt that their content felt more personal and approachable, as followers frequently interacted with their posts.

Finding 2: Authenticity - ELM Peripheral prominent in Micro influencer content and not in Macro Influencer The second finding concerns authenticity and its role in maintaining the peripheral processing state, through which influencer content drives purchase conversions. This study's analysis

finds that micro-influencer content maintains ELM peripheral conditions that enable low-effort buying conversions, whereas macro-influencer content activates the central route more. From the ELM perspective (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), the peripheral route to buying is maintained when two conditions are simultaneously met: the source is perceived as likeable and trustworthy, the content is perceived as authentic and personally motivated. Posts and stories depicting: self-disclosure, casual and conversational presentation, candid videos without editing, product demonstration without heavy editing, natural language and lifestyle content, natural travel setting, genuine recommendation, personal styling tips, genuine photos, honest reviews, brand sponsorship disclosure, Experience sharing “I personally love their vitamin C serum”, “I do not use any editing tools”. Personal try-on, natural posing, close-up shots of outfits and jewellery, with a conversational caption: “What do we think?” Spontaneous, natural script. While Macro-influencers' scripts looked more practised and tutored, product demonstrations were done with heavy editing and camera tools. Also, they talked more about their collaborations, sponsored products, and promotions, but they didn't provide genuine feedback. These posts indicated a lack of authenticity vis-à-vis micro-influencers. The presence of #ad in this post also made the content's commercial nature transparent.

This study's analysis finds that micro-influencer content maintains ELM peripheral conditions that enable low-effort buying conversions, whereas macro-influencer content activates the central route more.

Finding 3: Influencer Characteristics – Three Theory Convergence Advantage to Micro-influencers

The third finding indicates that the influencer characteristics variable for micro-influencers shows a significant advantage over that for macro-influencers across all three theoretical instruments. The study found that micro-influencers generate stronger PSI through personalised interactions and honest self-disclosure, and they seem to provide more effective ELM cues by using their expertise and credible signalling. Also, they have exhibited stronger SIT alignment through close affinity and homogeneity, rooted in community identity and mirroring.

Posts indicating an influencer's expertise, genuineness, relatability, and honesty were considered here. Their relatable lifestyle and content, aesthetic content, product-focused approach, sustainable fashion, honest demonstration and disclosure of brand deals and collaborations.

Macro-influencers seem to have big setups, styled lighting, mock DM graphics, cinematic shoot locations, and the use of licensed audio (*Michael Jackson - Don't Stop till you get enough*), reflecting high-value aesthetics in the video compared to micro-influencers. However, micro-influencers earned more across the studied variables, as they focused more on genuine product demonstrations, descriptions, reviews, and feedback. They also gave honest reviews of their collaborative products,

which were a mix of both good and bad. Influencer telling “*this shirt is from my sponsor’s brand, but the quality does not feel good, it’s not worth the price*” or “*although this moisturiser is a sponsored product, and it genuinely does give skin a good lift and shine*”. Thus, analysis indicates that micro-influencers’ characteristics have a greater influence on the buying patterns of the young adult population.

Finding 4: Buying conversion indicators

Quantitative analysis was used to draw inferences about buying conversions. The commercially inclined findings indicate that all three theoretical conversion pathways: PSI mediated Trust Purchase indicator, ELM mediated impulse purchase indicator and SIT mediated identity affiliation purchase indicator converge more powerfully in the case of micro-influencer influence than in macro-influencer influence.

In several micro-influencers’ posts, the influencers specifically asked followers to comment “LINK” to receive product links directly via DMs. This was followed by multiple comments from followers asking for the links, such as “Link”, “Link pls” and “Dress link”. This provides stronger evidence of buying interest than comments that only compliment the influencer's appearance. A few of them also provided discount codes, “SHYAMA20”, “Mitali45”, “Taybaa18” and encouraged followers to try the product. The presence of #ad in this post also made the content's commercial nature transparent. Therefore, our findings suggest that the micro-influencer was able to create buying intentions through direct calls to action, personal recommendations, and interactions with her followers.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide a significant inference that micro-influencer content creators with follower counts between 10,000 and 100,000 have a substantially greater influence on the purchasing decisions of young adults than their macro-influencer counterparts. Although the latter has a fraction of the audience reach and subscribers. This conclusion, which extends the emerging 'less is more' thesis in the influencer marketing literature (Weismueller et al., 2020), is explained by the integrated application of three theoretical frameworks: Parasocial Interaction Theory (PSI), the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), and Social Identity Theory (SIT), which was studied across the four key variables of this study. The variables considered in this study are: Trust, Authenticity, Influencer Characteristics, and Buying Conversion indicators. This section synthesises the study's findings against the existing literature, grounds them in the three theoretical frameworks, and derives practical implications for digital marketers targeting Young adults as their customers.

The findings of this study extend Horton and Wohl's (1956) original PSI framework in a theoretically significant direction. Horton and Wohl described PSI as a single phenomenon, the illusion of intimacy

at a distance. This PSI-based trust distinction aligns closely with Alzubaidi's (2026) qualitative findings across Saudi and Spanish social media users, who described trusted micro-influencers as 'like family members or close colleagues' and mega-influencers as 'admired from a great distance.'

Authenticity finding directly confirms and contextualises the findings of Djafarova and Bowes (2021), whose S-O-R analysis of Generation Z Instagram users demonstrated that micro influencers' content evokes positive emotional reactions (pleasure, arousal, aspiration) that trigger impulse buying responses, whereas over-commercialised content evokes negative states (scepticism, discomfort, irritation) that block the purchase pathway. The mechanism they identify, authentic content as a positive emotional stimulus that bypasses rational evaluation, is precisely the ELM peripheral route. The Authenticity variable also reveals an important nuance concerning the role of sponsorship disclosure. Consistent with Subitha et al.'s (2024) findings among Indian college students.

The buying-conversion indicators, notably engagement and purchase conversions, appeared much higher for posts where micro-influencers advocated a product and mentioned the sponsorship without using the “Paid Partnership” feature on Instagram. In these posts, the followers explicitly asked for more details regarding the product, whereas in posts where the influencer used the “paid partnerships” feature, which allows the tagged business to look at the overall performance of the post, the buying conversions turned out to be a lot less, indicating that there is a higher level of trust for micro-influencers when they appear to be independently advocating a product.

The inferences derived from the data analysis indicate that macro-influencers definitely have a wider audience for their content; however, the trust factor and the commercial indicators lean heavily towards micro-influencers. Their conversion rates are higher on average than those of macro-influencers, implying that a relatively larger proportion of micro-influencers' followers will trust their recommendations. They view it through peripheral channels, experience it as a part of their own identity and then exhibit buying intentions.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The study's most significant contribution is the articulation of parasocial trust and admiration as two qualitatively distinct PSI factors that influence behavioural and psychological variables in digital marketing among young adults. This study has also attempted to develop a conceptual map to help understand how this research was structured and the influence of three theories on the buying behaviour among Young adults. This study also emphasises that micro-influencers' influence is not attributed to a single mechanism but to a cumulative convergence of PSI (trust & self-disclosure), ELM (peripheral processing) and SIT (community homogeneity). This three-theory convergence establishes a more complete explanation than any single theory.

PRACTICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The findings of this study can be utilised by digital marketers and companies to prioritise micro-influencer partnerships over macro-influencers, especially for campaigns involving young Adults in the fashion niche. Further, long-term exclusive micro-influencer relationships can be focused on more than a one-off campaign. To capture the Young adult population, natural and proactive sponsorship disclosure can be made in micro-influencer content. Advertising campaigns can be designed around community activation rather than on the basis of broadcast reach. Macro-influencers can be strategically approached to build awareness, but not to drive purchase conversions.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate how influencer marketing drives the buying decisions of college students aged 18–25, with a specific focus on how micro-influencers and macro-influencers differ in their commercial effectiveness, and how three established theoretical frameworks: Parasocial Interaction Theory (PSI), the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), and Social Identity Theory (SIT), together explain the psychological and behavioural mechanisms through which influencer content translates into purchasing behaviour. Employing a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, the study generated findings from both qualitative netnographic observation of Instagram influencer content and quantitative survey analysis of college student follower behaviour, integrating the two phases through instrument development, triangulation, and joint display strategies.

The central conclusion is both theoretically significant and practically consequential: micro-influencers exert substantially greater influence over the purchasing decisions of college students than their macro-influencer counterparts, not because they reach more people, which they demonstrably do not, but because the depth, quality, and psychological character of the influence they exert per follower is disproportionately superior. These differences are not accidental but are structurally determined by the conditions of micro-influencer content creation, conditions that are simultaneously more favourable to PSI bond formation, ELM peripheral processing maintenance, and SIT community alignment than the conditions of macro-influencer content production at scale.

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