

Ethics of Social Media Influence and Psychological Impact on Consumers

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of social media has significantly transformed the way products and services are marketed, making influencer-driven promotion a dominant strategy around the digital marketplace. While social media influence has created new opportunities for brands to engage with consumers, it has also raised important ethical concerns. While social media influencers have revolutionised digital marketing through perceived authenticity, their rapid growth has triggered significant ethical dilemmas regarding transparency, accountability, and consumer protection. This research paper circle around the ethics of social media influence in product marketing, while also examining the psychological impact on its users. Ultimately, this study advocated for a shift towards 'responsible influence', where authenticity, and audience well being take precedence over short term commercial gains. The study aims to analyse how influencer promotions affect consumer trust and decision-making, as well as how social media marketing practices influence consumer behaviour. To achieve this, primary data will be collected from 100-150 respondents using a structured questionnaire. The research adopts a quantitative approach to understand consumer attitudes toward misleading advertisements, lack of disclosure, exaggeration of product claims, and algorithm-driven targeting, along with their perceived impact on mental well-being. The findings of the study are expected to highlight gaps between current influencer marketing practices and the ethical expectations of consumers and emphasises the need for stronger ethical guidelines, greater transparency in paid promotions, and increased accountability from influencers and brands. The research ultimately argues that ethical responsibility in social media marketing is essential for protecting consumer trust and well being.

Keywords: Consumer Behaviour, Influencer Marketing, Mental Health, Social Media Influence, Transparency

I. INTRODUCTION

Social media is a wide pool of various networking platforms that enables us to engage, interact and voice our opinions freely. (Chandrasekar & Nair, 2022; Taylor et al., 2020). In the new age society such platforms play a vital role in providing interfaces where users can create content, share ideas and connect with each other easily, across borders. Due to the mass usage of smart phones and other smart devices, the accessibility of the internet has reached an all time high and has become an important part of our daily life. (Taylor et al., 2020).

The various networking platforms used are instagram, facebook, X, youtube, linkedin, snapchat, whatsapp (Chandrasekar & Nair, 2022).

Social media platforms not only help influencers market products and services but also enables the consumers to give their reviews on the basis of their experience. This helps businesses in building a networking system and expand their businesses by providing them larger audiences and increasing their consumer base.(Chandrasekar & Nair, 2022)

Social media provides brands a space to market their

businesses which lead to social media marketing. Brands promote their products and services through digital content using strategies like advertisement and collaborating with influencers to upscale their reach or engage with new audiences. (Taylor et al., 2020) There is a rapid shift from traditional marketing to social media marketing which enables the consumers to provide real time feedback and for businesses to interact with their audience.

Businesses are heavily investing in social media marketing strategies like influencer based marketing and targeted advertisements which make brands more visible and influence consumer purchasing decisions (Chandrasekar & Nair, 2022; Taylor et al., 2020).

While there are numerous advantages of social media marketing there also persists some ethical issues such as invasion of privacy, spreading misleading information, manipulating facts and not being transparent.

In addition social media creates a psychological pressure on consumers to idealise a lifestyle and strive for it. Exposure to influencer content can curate distorted perceptions which impacts their decision making and attitudes. (Taylor et al., 2020).

II. RESEARCH GAP

Despite the exponential growth of social media and its influence on consumer behaviour, there still persists a research gap in understanding its ethical implications and psychological impact on consumers. Existing studies mainly focus on marketing and communication benefits while ignoring ethical concerns such as transparency, manipulation, and consumer psychological well-being (Taylor et al., 2020). Surveys such as NCERT (2022) and Lokniti-CSDS (2022) highlight stress, anxiety, and emotional distress among young generations, but they do not explain the causal effect of influencer content on psychological outcomes. Most studies show associations rather than clear cause-and-effect relationships between influencer content and mental health (Nature, 2024; PubMed, 2024).

Another research gap exists in the ethical dimension of

social media influence, where there is limited evaluation of whether existing regulations adequately protect consumers. Existing studies also examine ethical issues, consumer behaviour, and psychological impacts separately rather than in a combined framework, creating a need for more holistic research.

III OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the ethical issues in social media influence, with special focus on influencer marketing practices and their impact on transparency and authenticity.
2. To analyse the impact of social media influencers on consumer behaviour, particularly in terms of purchasing decisions, trust formation, and perception of promoted content.
3. To assess the relationship between social media influence and mental health, exploring how influencer-generated content affects self-image, comparison behaviour, and psychological well-being of users.

IV HYPOTHESIS

- H01: There is no significant association between gender and influencer review checking before buying
 H02: There is no significant association between gender and switching behaviour due to influencer
 H03: There is no significant difference between gender and repeated influence of ads
 H04: There is no significant difference between gender and personalised ads making them buy product
 H05: There is no significant difference between gender and pressure to look a certain way
 H06: There is no significant difference between gender and influencer content creating comparison

LITERATURE REVIEW

1 Ethical Issues in Influencer Marketing

The increasing evolution of influencer marketing is raising major ethical concerns related to transparency, authenticity, and digital accountability. In India, social media influencers promote success, popularity and visibility, encouraging individuals to build a strong online presence. However, commercialisation of

personal identity on digital platforms often makes it hard to distinguish between real and sponsored content. (Ignite IAS, 2024)

One major ethical issue is transparency in sponsored content. Influencer marketing often mixes advertisements with personal posts, making it difficult for the audience to identify whether it is a commercial endorsement or a personal opinion. The absence of uniform regulatory standards regarding disclosure makes consumers vulnerable to misleading promotions. (Ignite IAS, 2024)

Research indicates that influencers have high persuasive power as they are perceived as relatable individuals rather than conventional advertisers (Nature, 2024). However, constant portrayal of unrealistic content such as success, wealth, and beauty creates high expectations and raises concerns about ethical representation. (Nature, 2024)

Media analyses highlight that algorithms promote sensational and idealised content, encouraging exaggerated lifestyles where visibility becomes more important than authenticity (Times of India, 2024). The Lokniti-CSDS survey identifies emotional distress among young individuals due to comparison and pressure to “succeed fast” (Indian Express, 2022).

Overall, ethical issues in influencer marketing arise due to lack of transparency, loss of authenticity, algorithmic amplification, and weak regulations. (Ignite IAS, 2024; Government of India, 2025)

2 Influences on Consumer Behaviour

Consumer behaviour is highly affected by social media influencers, especially in purchasing decisions. Research shows that when influencers appear credible, consumers respond positively towards the promoted product (Nature, 2024).

Young adults experiencing anxiety and uncertainty are more influenced by promotional content linked to success and social mobility, making them more responsive to persuasive digital content (PubMed, 2024). NCERT (2022) reports highlight how academic stress and uncertainty increase attraction towards

marketing messages promoting success. The Economic Survey 2024–2025 also suggests that mismatch between education and employment creates insecurity among youth (Government of India, 2025). The Lokniti-CSDS survey identifies financial insecurity and social status concerns among youth, making influencer marketing strategies related to lifestyle and success more impactful (Indian Express, 2022). Media reports suggest that excessive exposure to idealised lifestyles increases comparison behaviour, shaping consumer decisions beyond product utility (Times of India, 2024).

Overall, influencer marketing affects consumer behaviour through trust, aspirations, emotional vulnerability, and social comparison (Nature, 2024; Government of India, 2025).

3 Mental Health and Psychological Impacts

One of the major concerns of social media influence is its psychological effect on self-image, comparison behaviour, and emotional well-being. NCERT (2022) reports highlight high levels of stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion among students due to academic pressure and uncertainty.

The Economic Survey 2024–25 links youth mental health issues to lack of employment opportunities, leading to frustration and low self-worth (Government of India, 2025). In such conditions, influencer content portraying quick success and ideal lifestyles may increase feelings of inadequacy.

Research indicates that constant social comparison and unrealistic success standards contribute to anxiety symptoms (Nature, 2024). Similarly, studies show that gaps between aspirations and achievements lead to stress and depression (PubMed, 2024). The Lokniti-CSDS survey reports emotional distress, loneliness, and reliance on family support among youth (Indian Express, 2022).

Media reports also suggest that excessive screen time is linked to sleep problems, burnout, and anxiety (Times of India, 2024; 2025). Overall, influencer culture contributes to psychological pressure by promoting idealised lifestyles and consumerist values

V METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the study is to study the ethical issues in social media influencer marketing, its impact on consumer behaviour, and its psychological implications. It is a descriptive cross-sectional study. Data is collected from both primary (questionnaire) and secondary sources. Respondents are selected through non probabilities sampling techniques. Convenience sampling methods are adopted to collect primary data.

The sample size was 150 respondents. The questionnaire was converted in google docs and mailed to 150 respondents but only 112 responses have been received, the response rate was 74.67 percent. Therefore, the final sample size of the study is 112 respondents. The questionnaire contains 25 questions, including demographic questions and statements measured using 5-point Likert questions ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. The Likert scale was used to measure perceptions, attitudes, and behavioural responses related to influencer marketing.

For data analysis, statistical tools such as percentage analysis, Chi-square test, and ANOVA were used. The collected data is coded and analysed. Frequency analysis, independent t-test and chi-square table, etc., is carried out to analyse the data and graphs are used to present data.

VI ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

The demographic data shows that out of 112 respondents, 62.5% were female and 37.5% were male, indicating a higher percentage of female participants. About 74.1% of the sample were up to 25 years, showing a majority of young individuals, while 13.4% were between 25 to 40 years and 12.5% were above 40. The data shows that 49.1% were undergraduate students, with 57.1% being students and 30.4% employed. About 48.2% of the participants reported an annual income of Rs.10 lakh. Overall, the sample mainly includes young, educated and digitally active people likely to engage with influencer content.

TABLE 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

Demographics	Categories	NUMBER	%
GENDER	MALE	42	37.5
	FEMALE	70	62.5
	TOTAL	112	100.0
AGE GROUP	UPTO 25 YEARS	83	74.1
	25-40 YEARS	15	13.4
	40 AND ABOVE	14	12.5
	TOTAL	112	100.0
EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND	10	2	1.7
	10+2	5	4.5
	UNDERGRADUATION	55	49.1
	POST GRADUATION	44	39.3
	PHD	6	5.4
	TOTAL	112	100.0
ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME	LESS THAN 5 LAKH	22	19.6
	5-10 LAKH	36	32.1
	MORE THAN 10 LAKH	54	48.2
	TOTAL	112	100.0
PROFESSION	HOME	3	2.7
	JOB	34	30.4
	SELF EMPLOYED	11	9.8
	STUDENT	64	57.1
	TOTAL	112	100.0

The findings show that most respondents spend 2–4 hours on social media daily. This indicates high exposure to social media content. Respondents are very often exposed to influencer content.

TABLE 2. Hours Spent on Social Media

PARTICULARS	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
LESS THAN 1 HOUR	12	10.7
1-2 HOURS	25	22.3
2-4 HOURS	49	43.8
MORE THAN 4 HOURS	26	23.2
TOTAL	112	100.0

The findings show that Instagram is the most used

platform among respondents. The second most used platform is YouTube. Facebook and blogs are the least used platforms.

TABLE 3. Most Used Social Media Platform

PARTICULARS	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
INSTAGRAM	95	84.8
YOUTUBE	57	50.9
SNAPCHAT	32	28.6
FACEBOOK	10	8.9
BLOG	8	7.1
TOTAL	202	180.3

NOTE: since, it is multiple option question therefore, the total is not equal to be sample size

The findings suggest that influencers do have an effect on consumers' buying behaviour. Most respondents are slightly or moderately influenced. The impact is present at a moderate level.

TABLE 4. Influencer Affecting Buying Behaviour

PARTICULARS	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
NOT AT ALL	23	20.5
SLIGHTLY	43	38.4
MODERATELY	36	32
STRONGLY	7	6.3
VERY STRONGLY	3	2.7
TOTAL	112	100.0

The results indicate that influencers have an impact on buying behaviour. Most respondents are slightly or moderately influenced. Some respondents are not influenced at all.

TABLE 5.

PARTICULARS	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
LIFESTYLE	79	70.5
TECHNOLOGY	51	45.5
FASHION	65	58
HEALTH	62	54.4
BEAUTY	45	40.2
TOTAL	112	100.0

The findings suggest that most respondents prefer text as their main mode of communication. Video content is also highly preferred. Audio is the least preferred

mode

TABLE 6.

PARTICULARS	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
TEXT	49	43.8
AUDIO	16	14.3
VIDEO	47	42.0
TOTAL	112	100.0

The findings suggest that most respondents believe influencers exaggerate product benefits. A large number agreed or strongly agreed. Very few respondents disagreed.

TABLE 7.

PARTICULARS	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
STRONGLY DISAGREE	2	1.8
DISAGREE	3	2.7
NEUTRAL	22	19.6
STRONGLY	54	48.2
STRONGLY AGREE	31	27.7
TOTAL	112	100.0

The result shows that a large number of respondents believe influencers promote misleading information. Most participants agreed with this statement. Only a small number disagreed.

PARTICULARS	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
STRONGLY DISAGREE	1	0.9
DISAGREE	5	4.5
NEUTRAL	22	19.6
STRONGLY	61	54.5
STRONGLY AGREE	23	20.5
TOTAL	112	100.0

The findings show that most respondents feel that products do not always match reality. A large number agreed while some were neutral. This suggests mixed opinions.

PARTICULARS	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
STRONGLY DISAGREE	1	0.9
DISAGREE	8	7.1

NEUTRAL	37	33.0
STRONGLY	51	45.5
STRONGLY AGREE	15	13.4
TOTAL	112	100.0

The results show that many respondents believe influencers create unrealistic expectations. Most agreed or strongly agreed. This suggests influencer promotions highlight only positive aspects.

PARTICULARS	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
STRONGLY DISAGREE	2	1.8
DISAGREE	6	5.4
NEUTRAL	27	24.1
STRONGLY	53	47.3
STRONGLY AGREE	24	21.4
TOTAL	112	100.0

The findings suggest that a large number of respondents believe influencer reviews are not always trustworthy. Most respondents agreed. This shows lack of complete trust.

PARTICULARS	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
DISAGREE	3	2.7
NEUTRAL	26	23.2
STRONGLY	63	56.3
STRONGLY AGREE	20	17.9
TOTAL	112	100.0

The findings suggest that a majority still trust their favourite influencer to some extent. Most respondents reported moderate trust. Only a few reported no trust.

PARTICULARS	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
NOT AT ALL	11	9.8
SLIGHTLY	20	17.9
MODERATELY	66	58.9
STRONGLY	15	13.4
TOTAL	112	100.0

The results of the chi-square test show that there is no statistically significant relationship between gender and checking review before buying ($p > 0.05$). Both genders show similar patterns.

PARTICULARS	CHECKING REVIEW		
GENDER	YES	NO	TOTAL
MALE	19(45.2%)	23(54.8%)	42(100%)
FEMALE	28(40.0%)	42(60.0%)	70(100%)
TOTAL	47(42.0%)	65(58.0%)	112(100%)

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	.296 ^a	1	.587		
Continuity Correction ^b	.120	1	.729		
Likelihood Ratio	.295	1	.587		
Fisher's Exact Test				.693	.364
Linear-by-Linear Association	.293	1	.588		
N of Valid Cases	112				

The chi-square result indicates no significant association between gender and switching brands. Both genders show similar behaviour. Gender does not play a role.

PARTICULARS	Yes	No	TOTAL
GENDER Male	30 (71.41%)	12 (28.6%)	42 (100.0%)
Female	44 (62.9%)	26 (37.1%)	70 (100.0%)
Total	74 (66.1%)	38 (33.9%)	112 (100.0%)

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	.860 ^a	1	.354		
Continuity Correction ^b	.520	1	.471		
Likelihood Ratio	.871	1	.351		
Fisher's Exact Test				.413	.236
Linear-by-Linear Association	.853	1	.356		
N of Valid Cases	112				

The chi-square test shows no significant gender difference in repeated ad influence. Both genders respond in a similar manner. Gender does not act as an important factor.

PARTICULARS		YES	NO	Total
GENDER	MALE	25 (59.5%)	17(40.5%)	42(100.0%)
	FEMALE	33(47.1%)	37(52.9%)	70(100.0%)
TOTAL		58(51.8%)	54(48.2%)	112(100.0%)

Chi-Square Tests					
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1.612 ^a	1	.204		
Continuity Correction ^b	1.154	1	.283		
Likelihood Ratio	1.619	1	.203		
Fisher's Exact Test				.243	.141
Linear-by-Linear Association	1.597	1	.206		
N of Valid Cases	112				

The chi-square test result indicates no significant gender difference regarding personalised ads. Both genders are affected in a similar way. Buying behaviour is not dependent on gender.

PARTICULARS		YES	NO	TOTAL
GENDER	MALE	24(57.1%)	18(42.9%)	42(100.0%)
	FEMALE	41(58.6%)	29(41.4%)	70(100.0%)
Total		65(58.0%)	47(42.0%)	112(100.0%)

Chi-Square Tests					
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	.022 ^a	1	.882		
Continuity Correction ^b	.000	1	1.000		

Likelihood Ratio	.022	1	.882		
Fisher's Exact Test				1.000	.519
Linear-by-Linear Association	.022	1	.883		
N of Valid Cases	112				

TABLE 17. t-Test – Comparison and Lifestyle Pressure

PARTICULARS	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
STRONGLY DISAGREE	9	8.0
DISAGREE	29	25.9
NEUTRAL	45	40.2
STRONGLY	25	22.3
STRONGLY AGREE	4	3.6
TOTAL	112	100.0

TABLE 18. t-Test – influencers create pressure to look or live a certain way

PARTICULARS	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
STRONGLY DISAGREE	4	3.6
DISAGREE	23	20.5
NEUTRAL	38	33.9
STRONGLY	37	33.0
STRONGLY AGREE	10	9.0
TOTAL	112	100.0

T-TEST FOR TABLE 17 & 18

	GENDER	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	T VALUE	SIGNF.
INFLUENCER CONTENT MAKES ME COMPARE MYSELF WITH OTHERS	0	42	3.14	.899	.139	2.310	.174
	1	70	2.71	.980	.117	2.360	
INFLUENCER'S POSTS CREATE PRESSURE TO LOOK OR LIVE A CERTAIN WAY	0	42	3.10	1.055	.163	-.735	.657
	1	70	3.24	1.013	.121	-.728	

The result shows no statistically significant difference

between males and females in comparison behaviour. Both genders are affected in a similar capacity. The result also shows no significant gender difference in experiencing lifestyle pressure. Both males and females are affected in a similar way. Gender does not act as an important factor.

S. No.	Null Hypothesis (H ₀)	Test Used	Test Statistic	p-value	Decision ($\alpha = 0.05$)	Result
1	There is no significant association between gender and influencer review checking before buying.	Chi-Square	$\chi^2 = 0.296$	0.587	Fail to Reject H ₀	Not Significant
2	There is no significant association between gender and switching behaviour due to influencer.	Chi-Square	$\chi^2 = 0.860$	0.354	Fail to Reject H ₀	Not Significant
3	There is no significant difference between gender and repeated influence of ads.	Chi-Square	$\chi^2 = 1.612$	0.204	Fail to Reject H ₀	Not Significant
4	There is no significant difference between gender and personalised ads making them buy product.	Chi-Square	$\chi^2 = 0.022$	0.882	Fail to Reject H ₀	Not Significant
5	There is no significant difference between gender and influencer content creating comparison.	Independent t-test	t = 2.310	0.174	Fail to Reject H ₀	Not Significant
6	There is no significant difference between gender and pressure to look a certain way.	Independent t-test	t = -0.735	0.657	Fail to Reject H ₀	Not Significant

All hypotheses resulted in p-values greater than 0.05. All null hypotheses are accepted. Gender does not significantly impact behaviour

TABLE 20. Importance of ethical behaviour

PARTICULARS	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
STRONGLY DISAGREE	2	1.8

DISAGREE	4	3.6
NEUTRAL	36	32.1
STRONGLY	49	43.8
STRONGLY AGREE	21	18.8
TOTAL	112	100.0

The findings suggest that a large proportion of respondents believe ethical behaviour is important. Most respondents agreed. This highlights importance of ethical conduct.

TABLE 21. Requirement of Stricter Rules

PARTICULARS	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
YES	16	14.3
NO	96	85.7
TOTAL	112	100.0

The results show that a large majority of respondents do not support stricter rules. Most participants answered no. This suggests preference for freedom.

TABLE 22: Influencer Responsibility for Misleading Promotions

PARTICULARS	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
YES	16	14.3
NO	96	85.7
TOTAL	112	100.0

The findings show that a large majority do not support holding influencers responsible. Most respondents answered no. This shows limited support for accountability.

VII FINDINGS

- Most respondents were female and below 25 years, indicating a young sample.
- A majority of respondents spend 2–4 hours on social media daily.
- Instagram is the most used platform among respondents.
- Influencers have a slight to moderate impact on buying behaviour.

- Lifestyle and fashion are the most influenced product categories.
- Most respondents prefer text and video as communication types.
- A large number of respondents believe influencers exaggerate product benefits.
- Many respondents believe influencers promote misleading information.
- Most respondents feel that products do not always match reality.
- Influencers create unrealistic expectations among consumers.
- Influencer reviews are not always considered trustworthy.
- Respondents show moderate trust in their favourite influencers.
- There is no significant relationship between gender and buying behaviour.
- No significant gender difference is found in comparison behaviour and lifestyle pressure.
- Ethical behaviour is considered important by most respondents.
- Most respondents do not support stricter rules or holding influencers responsible

VIII CONCLUSION

The study concludes that social media influencer marketing has a moderate impact on consumer behaviour, with most respondents being slightly to moderately influenced in their purchasing decisions,

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especially in lifestyle and fashion categories. The findings highlight several ethical concerns such as lack of transparency, misleading information, exaggeration of product benefits, and unrealistic expectations created by influencers. Many respondents feel that products do not always match reality and that influencer reviews are not always trustworthy.

The study also shows psychological impacts such as comparison behaviour and pressure to maintain a certain lifestyle. Statistical analysis shows that gender does not have a significant impact on these factors. Overall, the study indicates high social media exposure, presence of ethical concerns, psychological influence on consumers, and moderate trust in influencers.

IX LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study has some potential limitations. The sample size is only 112 respondents, which may limit the generalisation of results. The majority of respondents belonged to the younger age group, below 25 years, which means the perceptions of older age groups are not adequately represented.

The study used a non-probability convenience sampling method, which may lead to sampling bias as respondents were selected based on accessibility rather than random selection. The data was collected through a self-structured questionnaire using Google Forms, and responses were self-reported, which may have caused personal bias or misunderstanding of questions. Since the research design is descriptive and cross-sectional, it captures responses at a single point in time.

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