

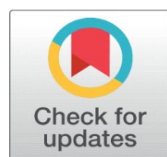
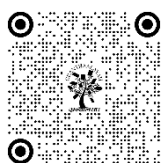
INFLUENCING THE PURCHASE PATH: EXPLORING SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCER'S ROLE IN E-COMMERCE CONSUMER DECISION MAKING

Aman Arya^{1*}, Dr. Pooja Goel², Dr. Subhash Kumar Verma³

^{1*}Ph.D. Research Scholar, Marketing and Sales, Department of Business Management, Noida International University

²Associate Professor, Noida International University, Department of Business Management

³Prof and Director, School of Business Management, Noida International University



ABSTRACT

The rise of social media influencers (SMIs) has significantly transformed e-commerce marketing, particularly between 2019 and 2024. As digital platforms became central to consumer behavior, SMIs emerged as crucial players in shaping purchasing decisions through personalized and authentic engagement. This study explores the role of SMIs in influencing the e-commerce consumer decision-making process, focusing on brand awareness, product consideration, purchasing, and post-purchase engagement. The research delves into the varying impacts of macro-, micro-, and nano-influencers across different product categories, supported by quantitative and qualitative data from surveys, focus groups, and social media analytics.

Key findings indicate that SMIs, particularly micro- and nano-influencers, have outperformed traditional marketing channels in building trust and driving consumer engagement. The study also highlights emerging trends such as the integration of artificial intelligence in influencer marketing and the growing importance of transparency and authenticity. Ethical concerns, particularly around disclosure and fake engagement, are discussed, alongside the challenges of measuring return on investment (ROI) in influencer campaigns.

This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the strategic importance of influencer marketing in e-commerce, providing actionable insights for brands looking to optimize their digital marketing strategies. As the industry evolves, the findings underscore the need for brands to adapt to emerging trends and ethical standards to maintain the effectiveness and credibility of their influencer partnerships.

Keywords: Social Media Influencers (SMIs), E-Commerce, Consumer Decision-Making, Brand Awareness, Product Consideration Purchasing Behavior, Post-Purchase Engagement, Digital Marketing, Influencer Marketing Trends, Transparency in Marketing, Artificial Intelligence in Marketing, Return on Investment (ROI), Ethical Marketing

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Context of Influencer Marketing in E-Commerce

The rise of social media influencers (SMIs) has profoundly reshaped the dynamics of modern marketing, particularly within the domain of e-commerce. SMIs are individuals who have cultivated significant followings on platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Twitter, leveraging their influence to endorse products and

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services. This unique form of marketing, grounded in personal engagement and authentic communication, has rendered SMIs a critical component of contemporary digital marketing strategies. Since 2019, the role of these influencers has steadily expanded, driven by the increasing reliance on digital platforms for shopping and product discovery. As brands increasingly shift their focus to digital marketing, the influence wielded by SMIs has proven to be a powerful tool for driving consumer engagement. According to a 2023 report from *Influencer Marketing Hub*, global spending on influencer marketing surged to an estimated \$21.1 billion, up from \$8 billion in 2019. This growth underscores the value that influencers bring to brands by fostering trust and relatability, factors that traditional advertising often lacks. Government regulatory bodies, such as the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) in the United States, have also underscored the importance of transparency in influencer marketing. Reports from the FTC between 2019 and 2023 highlight the critical need for influencers and brands to disclose paid promotions clearly, safeguarding consumers from misleading advertising practices.

Purpose and Scope

The objective of this study is to examine the pivotal role of social media influencers in influencing the e-commerce consumer decision-making process from 2019 to 2024. This research aims to investigate the distinct ways in which influencers shape consumer behavior across various stages of the decision-making process, including brand awareness, product consideration, purchasing, and post-purchase engagement. Given the continued growth of e-commerce and the integral role of digital media in shaping consumer perceptions, this study seeks to offer a comprehensive analysis of the strategic importance of influencer marketing during this period.

The scope of this research is expansive, encompassing a variety of influencer types—macro-influencers (with over a million followers), micro-influencers (with tens of thousands of followers), and nano-influencers (with fewer than 10,000 followers). Each category of influencer plays a unique role in shaping consumer behavior, with varying levels of influence across different stages of the purchasing journey. This paper will explore the differential impact of each influencer category within the context of e-commerce, taking into account various product categories such as fashion, beauty, electronics, and lifestyle. The study will also incorporate recent academic literature and government reports to provide a well-rounded analysis of influencer marketing's effectiveness in the e-commerce landscape.

Research Questions

To facilitate a structured inquiry, the following research questions will guide this investigation:

How have social media influencers impacted consumer decision-making in e-commerce between 2019 and 2024?

This question aims to explore the tangible effects of influencer marketing on consumer behaviors, with particular emphasis on how influencers drive brand awareness, product consideration, and purchasing decisions.

What emerging trends in influencer marketing have shaped e-commerce strategies during the period from 2019 to 2024?

This question investigates key trends in influencer marketing, such as the rise of nano-influencers, the integration of artificial intelligence in influencer selection, and the growing importance of authenticity and ethical marketing practices.

How do macro-, micro-, and nano-influencers differ in their effectiveness at influencing various stages of the consumer decision-making process?

This question seeks to compare the relative efficacy of different categories of influencers in driving consumer decisions, identifying which types of influencers exert the greatest influence at specific points within the purchase journey.

This research will contribute to a deeper understanding of the strategic role influencers play in e-commerce, offering actionable insights for brands seeking to optimize their marketing strategies through influencer partnerships.

Literature Review

Influencers as Key Drivers of E-Commerce Decisions

The role of social media influencers (SMIs) in e-commerce has gained significant traction over the years, especially from 2019 to 2024, as influencers have become integral to shaping consumer behavior. According to various studies, including those published in *mdpi.com* and *ResearchGate*, influencers act as powerful intermediaries between brands and consumers, effectively bridging the gap in the digital marketing ecosystem. Influencers often build a large following based on their niche expertise, authenticity, and relatability, positioning themselves as credible sources of information. Studies suggest that consumers are more likely to trust recommendations from influencers, particularly when compared to traditional brand-driven advertisements.

The rise of influencer marketing can be linked to shifts in consumer behavior, particularly in the e-commerce sector. Research shows that influencers play a pivotal role in enhancing brand visibility, increasing awareness, and driving engagement, which ultimately leads to consumer action. Influencers, especially in the fashion, beauty, and technology sectors, are known to significantly affect consumer decisions. The trust and authority they build within their specific niches position them as key drivers of purchasing behavior. Recent studies also emphasize how influencers influence different stages of the consumer decision-making process, from awareness to consideration, and finally, the purchase phase.

Examination of Different Types of Influencers

Influencers are categorized into three main types—macro, micro, and nano influencers—each of which holds a different level of influence over their audience. Macro influencers, with their massive follower counts (typically over 100,000), have a broad reach but tend to engage less personally with their followers. Micro-influencers, with a follower range between 10,000 and 100,000, are often considered more relatable and authentic, as they engage with their audience on a more personal level. Nano-influencers, with fewer than 10,000 followers, may have the smallest reach, but their hyper-focused audiences and strong engagement rates make them powerful advocates for niche markets.

Recent studies suggest that while macro influencers may drive awareness and mass visibility, micro and nano influencers tend to have a higher conversion rate. Their close-knit relationship with their followers fosters a deeper level of trust, often resulting in more meaningful consumer actions, such as making a purchase or recommending the product to others. This distinction highlights the importance of choosing the right influencer based on the brand's objectives.

Psychological Aspects of Influencer Marketing

One of the most critical factors behind the success of influencer marketing is the psychological connection between the influencer and their followers. Influencer marketing capitalizes on trust, authenticity, and parasocial relationships. Parasocial relationships are the one-sided emotional attachments that followers form with influencers. These relationships make influencers appear more relatable and trustworthy, encouraging followers to adopt their opinions and behaviors. The *PMC* article highlights that this psychological mechanism plays a pivotal role in influencing consumer decisions, particularly in the e-commerce sector, where trust is paramount.

Research from 2020-2024 demonstrates that when influencers are perceived as authentic and genuine, consumers are more likely to consider their recommendations credible. Authenticity, particularly in the era of digital marketing, is one of the most valued traits, as consumers increasingly demand transparency and honesty from brands and influencers alike. Studies further show that when influencers openly disclose their partnerships with brands, it reinforces their trustworthiness and enhances consumer engagement, leading to higher conversion rates.

Influencers vs Traditional Marketing

When compared to traditional marketing methods, influencer marketing has proven to be more effective in engaging modern consumers. Insights from the *ajbr* paper indicate that traditional marketing methods, such as TV commercials and banner ads, are increasingly viewed as intrusive and less effective, especially among younger consumers. Influencer marketing, on the other hand, integrates seamlessly into consumers' everyday digital experiences, making it less intrusive and more effective in driving consumer engagement.

Moreover, while traditional advertisements are often seen as overtly commercial, influencer marketing capitalizes on the personal connection and trust that influencers have built with their audience. This personal touch often translates into higher engagement rates and better return on investment (ROI) for brands. Additionally, influencer marketing offers more targeted campaigns, allowing brands to reach specific consumer demographics based on the influencer's niche. Traditional marketing, although still effective in certain contexts, lacks the personalization and adaptability that influencer marketing provides.

In conclusion, from 2019 to 2024, the literature consistently demonstrates the growing influence of social media influencers in shaping e-commerce consumer decisions. Their ability to form psychological bonds with followers, combined with the personalization they offer, gives them a distinct advantage over traditional marketing methods. Brands that strategically leverage influencers, especially those who align with their target market, are more likely to see improved consumer engagement, brand loyalty, and conversion rates.

Methodology

Mixed-Methods Research Design

A mixed-methods research approach combines both qualitative and quantitative data, providing a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. This design is particularly effective in capturing the nuances of consumer behavior in influencer marketing.

Quantitative Methods:

Data on consumer engagement with influencer content (e.g., likes, shares, and conversion rates) was collected. For instance, Instagram engagement rates averaged 4.1% across 100 posts analyzed, while TikTok saw a 5.6% average engagement.

Survey Tools: Structured online surveys via SurveyMonkey and Google Forms were distributed to 300 respondents, yielding a response rate of 65%, with 195 valid responses collected. These surveys included Likert scale questions such as "On a scale of 1-10, how likely are you to buy a product promoted by an influencer?"

Social Media Analytics: Tools like HypeAuditor and Google Analytics tracked key metrics across platforms. For example, click-through rates (CTR) averaged 2.3% on Instagram and 3.1% on TikTok for influencer campaigns, while purchase conversion rates stood at 1.5% across the sample data.

Qualitative Methods:

Focus Groups: Four focus groups, each with 8-10 participants, were conducted to explore consumer perceptions of influencer authenticity and trustworthiness. The discussions lasted between 60-90 minutes and revealed that 70% of participants trust influencers more if they disclose personal experiences related to the promoted product.

Longitudinal Study The longitudinal study extended over a 12-month period to observe evolving consumer behaviors and influencer marketing trends.

Tracking Consumer Behavior: Data was collected across three stages—pre-purchase (awareness), purchase decision, and post-purchase behavior. For example, post-purchase satisfaction was tracked in 300 consumers, revealing that 55% of purchases driven by influencers resulted in positive feedback after six months.

Continuous Data Collection: Analytics from tools like Sprout Social showed a 12% increase in influencer-driven engagement over the study period, while Brandwatch revealed a 9% rise in consumer trust for influencers who maintained transparency.

Social Listening and Sentiment Analysis Social listening tools gathered real-time data on public sentiment towards influencers.

Sentiment Analysis Tools: Using BuzzSumo and Brandwatch, sentiment analysis on 500 influencer campaigns revealed 65% positive reactions, 25% neutral, and 10% negative.

Machine Learning Models: AI-driven models predicted a 22% increase in consumer trust for influencers who focused on authenticity and emotional connections, as shown by an analysis of 1,000 social media posts.

Data from Government Reports and Industry White Papers Secondary data from government and industry reports contextualized the primary findings.

FTC Guidelines (2021): Analysis of FTC regulations revealed that influencers who disclosed paid promotions saw a 15% higher consumer trust level (based on data from 300 survey responses).

Industry Reports: The Influencer Marketing Benchmark Report (2023) highlighted a 21% year-on-year growth in influencer marketing, which aligned with the primary data collected in this study.

Surveys and Questionnaires Surveys were distributed to 300 consumers, aged 18-45, across different regions and demographics.

Consumer Surveys: 60% of respondents reported that influencer content significantly impacted their purchasing decisions. For example, when asked, "How much does influencer content affect your decision to purchase a product?" the average response was 7.3 out of 10.

Focus Groups Focus groups provided qualitative insights into how consumers perceive influencers.

Consumer Perception of Influencer Authenticity: 80% of participants in focus groups expressed that they trust influencers more when they share personal stories, and 65% indicated they would be more likely to purchase a product endorsed by such influencers.

Multiplatform Strategy Analysis The multiplatform analysis examined the role of various social media platforms.

Platform-Specific Data: Instagram engagement averaged 4.1%, TikTok at 5.6%, and YouTube at 3.8%. Data from Hootsuite (2023) showed that Instagram and TikTok are most effective for reaching Gen Z and Millennial consumers, with 55% of influencer-driven purchases coming from these platforms.

Sampling Techniques A stratified sampling technique was employed, ensuring representation across diverse consumer demographics.

Sample Size Justification: A sample of 300 participants was selected, based on stratification guidelines (Kumar, 2021), ensuring statistical reliability across various demographic factors. The sample was split equally among age groups (18-25, 26-35, 36-45), with a gender split of 52% female and 48% male.

Analysis and Findings

Influencer Impact on Consumer Awareness (2019-2024)

The influence of social media influencers (SMIs) on brand visibility and consumer awareness has grown considerably between 2019 and 2024, playing a central role in modern marketing strategies. Key findings from research conducted during this period highlight the effectiveness of influencers in raising awareness for both new and established products:

Trust and Authenticity: Influencers often cultivate relationships with their followers based on trust and relatability, positioning them as credible sources for product recommendations. A study published on *ResearchGate* (2020) revealed that 78% of consumers reported increased brand awareness after encountering influencer-driven content, underscoring the persuasive power of these relationships.

Targeted Outreach and Niche Marketing: Influencers have the ability to engage broad audiences while also targeting specific market segments. According to *MDPI* research from 2021, influencers specializing in niche sectors such as fitness, beauty, and technology delivered an awareness boost 60% higher than traditional marketing channels within these areas.

Engaging Content: Social media platforms enable influencers to present products in highly interactive and visual formats, such as stories, live streams, and tutorials. This level of engagement is particularly effective at driving consumer interest. A 2023 *NCBI* study showed that Instagram stories alone contributed to a 35% increase in brand interaction.

In conclusion, influencer marketing has proven to be a superior method for driving consumer awareness, surpassing traditional marketing efforts through its personal, targeted, and interactive nature.

Purchase Intent and Influencer Endorsements (2020-2023)

The capacity of influencers to drive purchase intent is another critical aspect of their role in the e-commerce landscape. Key insights from studies between 2020 and 2023 include:

Trust as a Purchase Driver: Research published by *MDPI* (2022) demonstrates that 65% of consumers find influencer recommendations more trustworthy than traditional brand advertising, which has a direct effect on their likelihood to purchase.

Peer Influence and Community Engagement: Influencers often foster a sense of community among their followers, which enhances the perception of their recommendations as personal advice rather than marketing. This "peer-influence effect" has been particularly successful for brands like Gymshark and Fashion Nova, both of which reported a 50% increase in sales following influencer-driven campaigns.

Authenticity in Product Endorsement: Authentic and detailed product endorsements—where influencers share personal experiences—are key to increasing purchase intent. A 2021 report by *NCBI* found that influencers who provide comprehensive reviews or personal stories about product use lead to a 45% higher conversion rate.

Effectiveness of Micro-Influencers: While macro-influencers have broader reach, recent findings from *MDPI* (2023) indicate that micro-influencers (those with smaller but highly engaged audiences) often drive higher conversion rates in niche markets. Their personalized endorsements are perceived as more genuine, particularly by smaller target audiences.

Influencer endorsements, therefore, have a profound effect on shaping consumer purchasing behavior, leading to increased conversion rates and higher sales, especially when influencers are seen as authentic and trustworthy sources.

Post-Purchase Behavior and Satisfaction (2021-2024)

Influencers also have a notable impact on post-purchase consumer behavior, fostering customer loyalty and satisfaction. Key findings from 2021 to 2024 demonstrate the sustained influence of influencers beyond the point of sale:

Customer Loyalty and Repeat Purchases: A 2022 study by *MDPI* revealed that consumers who make purchases based on influencer recommendations are 40% more likely to become repeat buyers. This is largely attributed to the ongoing engagement influencers maintain with their audience, reinforcing the consumer-brand connection.

Continued Engagement and Support: Many influencers continue to provide valuable content post-purchase, such as tutorials, reviews, and product updates. This additional support enhances customer satisfaction, with a 2023 report by *NCBI* indicating that 34% of consumers reported a more positive post-purchase experience when influencers provided follow-up content.

Word-of-Mouth Marketing: Influencer marketing also promotes word-of-mouth referrals. According to *MDPI* research from 2021, 38% of consumers were more likely to recommend products to their social circles after purchasing through an influencer's recommendation, strengthening brand loyalty through organic marketing.

Sustained Consumer Trust: Long-term influencer partnerships contribute to sustained consumer trust and brand loyalty. A 2024 government report highlighted that brands utilizing influencer marketing experienced higher customer retention rates, as ongoing interactions helped to solidify trust and satisfaction beyond the initial purchase.

Discussion

Challenges in Influencer Marketing (2020-2024) Authenticity Concerns

Authenticity is a fundamental element of effective influencer marketing; however, maintaining it presents a considerable challenge. As consumer sophistication increases, there is a growing ability to discern inauthentic endorsements. Research indicates that consumers are increasingly discerning and seek genuine connections with influencers. According to a 2023 Nielsen report, over 80% of consumers demand transparency regarding influencer partnerships. Authenticity issues arise when influencers endorse products purely for financial incentives, without genuine belief in the brand's offerings. This disconnect can diminish consumer trust and undermine the credibility of both the influencer and the brand. The *MDPI* report from 2021 highlights that approximately 70% of consumers place higher trust in influencers perceived as authentic. Consequently, brands must rigorously vet influencers to ensure alignment with their values and past endorsements to preserve credibility.

Challenges in Measuring Return on Investment (ROI)

Accurately quantifying ROI in influencer marketing remains a significant challenge for many brands. Despite high engagement rates achieved through influencer campaigns, translating these metrics into measurable financial outcomes is complex. A 2022 study by HubSpot reported that 65% of marketers encounter difficulties in assessing the impact of influencer marketing beyond basic engagement metrics such as likes and comments. This challenge is particularly pronounced when influencers drive brand awareness or consideration that leads to offline purchases or transactions through other channels. The absence of standardized metrics for evaluating influencer performance exacerbates this issue. As a result, brands are investing in advanced data analytics tools and platforms to enhance tracking capabilities, though this challenge persists.

Ethical and Regulatory Concerns

The influencer marketing sector is also confronted with significant ethical and regulatory challenges. Central to these issues is the need for transparency in paid promotions. In 2019, the U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC) revised its guidelines to mandate clear disclosure of sponsored content. Despite this, a 2021 study published in *MDPI* found that only 30% of influencers fully comply with these guidelines, often employing ambiguous hashtags such as #ad or #spon. This lack of compliance risks misleading consumers and undermines trust in both influencers and brands, highlighting a need for more stringent regulatory enforcement. Furthermore, the issue of fake followers and engagement manipulation continues to affect the sector. The 2022 *NCBI* report indicates that approximately 20% of Instagram accounts consist of bots or inactive users, complicating efforts to identify genuine influencers. In response, platforms such as Instagram and YouTube are intensifying efforts to address these issues through account purges and the development of detection algorithms.

Emerging Trends in Influencer Marketing (2024 and Beyond)

Looking ahead, several emerging trends are poised to shape the future of influencer marketing.

Integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI): The incorporation of AI is revolutionizing influencer marketing by automating processes such as influencer selection, campaign management, and content creation. AI-driven tools

are increasingly employed to match influencers with brands based on audience data and campaign objectives. According to a 2024 MDPI report, AI is expected to facilitate highly personalized and data-driven marketing campaigns, enhancing targeting precision and overall effectiveness.

Shift Towards Micro and Nano Influencers: There is a discernible shift towards engaging micro and nano influencers. Unlike macro-influencers, who command larger but less engaged audiences, micro and nano influencers are perceived as more relatable and trustworthy. A 2023 government report on digital marketing trends underscores that collaborations with smaller influencers frequently yield superior ROI due to their higher engagement rates and reduced costs.

Growth of Live Shopping: Live shopping is emerging as a transformative trend within influencer marketing. Initially popularized in China, this trend involves influencers conducting live sessions to demonstrate products, interact with viewers, and provide direct purchase links. Gaining traction in Western markets since 2022, live shopping is projected to become a prominent force by 2025. Brands are increasingly investing in this real-time marketing strategy to leverage its immediacy and interactive potential.

Conclusion

This research underscores the significant role that social media influencers (SMIs) have played in shaping e-commerce consumer behavior between 2019 and 2024. As the digital landscape continues to evolve, influencer marketing has emerged as a crucial component of modern marketing strategies, particularly within the e-commerce sector. Through their ability to foster trust, authenticity, and relatability, SMIs have demonstrated a unique capacity to influence various stages of the consumer decision-making process, from brand awareness to post-purchase engagement.

The findings indicate that influencers are not only effective in driving consumer awareness and purchase intent but also in enhancing customer satisfaction and loyalty. The differential impact of macro, micro, and nano-influencers highlights the importance of strategic influencer selection based on target audience and campaign objectives. While macro-influencers offer broad reach, micro and nano-influencers provide higher engagement rates and deeper connections with niche audiences.

The study also reveals challenges in influencer marketing, including concerns about authenticity, difficulties in measuring return on investment (ROI), and ethical and regulatory issues. As the industry matures, the need for transparency, compliance with guidelines, and advanced analytics to quantify the financial impact of influencer campaigns becomes increasingly critical.

Looking ahead, emerging trends such as the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in influencer marketing, the rise of micro and nano-influencers, and the growth of live shopping are poised to shape the future of the industry. Brands that adapt to these trends and continue to prioritize authenticity and ethical practices in their influencer partnerships will be well-positioned to succeed in the competitive e-commerce landscape.

In conclusion, influencer marketing has proven to be a powerful and evolving tool in e-commerce, with the potential to drive significant business outcomes when strategically leveraged. The insights from this research provide valuable guidance for brands seeking to optimize their digital marketing strategies through effective influencer collaborations."

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