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Role of Social Media Influencers in Fashion Purchase Decisions: A Structured Thematic Review of Global and Indian Studies

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Abstract:

Social media influencers (SMIs) have come to play crucial role in the promotion of fashion, but studies examining their impact on purchase behaviour are scattered across contexts. This paper juxtaposes international and Indian studies to identify the theoretical notions they share and the gaps they leave. The search strategy involved Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar and Shodhganga for studies published from 2015-2025. After applying the specific inclusion and exclusion criteria, we sorted the studies into groups according to the themes. Almost all international research used the same three factors explaining the intention to purchase fashion items. They are the credibility of the influencer (trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness), content quality and level of involvement, and psychological mechanisms (such as parasocial interaction). The amount of Indian research on the topic is minuscule, and it is undertaken only in the metropolises. Indian studies report more or less the same findings, while at the same time they suggest that cultural relevance, price attractiveness and language can be of additional importance. The results of the analysis lead to the conclusion that fashion marketers should consider the credibility of influencers through the connection they possess with their audience. Therefore, Indian fashion retailers may also collaborate with influencers producing content in regional languages, although this proposal has not undergone any empirical assessments.

Keywords: Social media influencers, fashion purchase intention, influencer credibility, parasocial relationship, Indian consumers, thematic review

1. Introduction

Social media marketing has completely changed how fashion companies function in the previous ten years. Today brands do not need to depend on the middlemen to market their goods. Due to face-to-face communication and product endorsements, brands can directly offer clothes, footwear and accessories to their customers which significantly improves brand image and consumer behavior (Belanche et al., 2021a; Tafesse & Wood, 2021).

Fashion is perfectly positioned to make use of this transition. Buying fashion is not about simple buying an item, but this item symbolizes certain aspects of the buyer's self and identity. The influencers do not just appeal for the purchase to be made, but they also influence their audience's lifestyle (Jin et al., 2019). Since social media is a two-way means of communication, users are able to become really involved in the process of exchanging ideas about fashion with each other, having made their contribution to the marketing process (Tafesse & Wood, 2021).

There has been quite a lot of research carried out in recent years in the area of the effect of social media influencers on consumer behavior worldwide. Nevertheless, the amount of research that has been done in India is quite small due to cultural differences in the way that technology is viewed (Gupta & Singharia, 2021; Sethi et al., 2024). With the emergence of mobile media, online fashion retailing increased significantly, as did the development of nano, micro, and macro influencers creating content that was locally relevant. Yet, no research has been done in a rural context.This paper has explored the influence of social media influencers on the buying behavior of consumers in the fashion industry both in India and all around the world. Consequently, the authors provide a

literature review in order to find the factors that affect the work of influencers regardless of the geographical locations of their activity.

The requirement for this review is due to the existing syntheses treating influencer marketing generally without focusing on fashion in particular (Hudders et al., 2021; Vrontis et al., 2021). They also rely on sample studies from high-income Western countries, which cannot be used in relation to India as the Indian studies are published in regional sources and few international journals. This review is unique because it makes three valuable contributions: it gives researchers structured literature review material written for practitioners, it provides practitioners data which helps in influencer selection process and it shows policy-makers the existing gaps in the disclosure practices today.

2. Objectives

The goals of this review include studying how social media influencers are influencing consumer choices when buying fashion products. Also, recognizing the influencer attributes influencing those decisions. In addition, the review analyzes and compares literature from around the world as well as literature from India on the subject of influencer marketing in fashion. The study will check what theories were used, what methods were applied, what platforms researched, and which consumers were surveyed. The ethical territory of influencer marketing will also be studied in this paper.

3. Scope and Methodology

The literature included in this review consists of both global and Indian literature on the role of social media influencers in clothes purchasing decisions. Only articles and book chapters published in the period of 2015-2025 were taken into account as long as they dealt with fashion, clothing, cosmetics or other lifestyle products and provided evidence on social media marketing. It is important to stress out that all studies were reviewed without any restrictions concerning the date of publication, but the final synthesis relates mainly to the materials published from 2021 to 2025 with earlier analyses being used as a theoretical basis. The review included a limited number of studies on influencer marketing, engagement and online reviews in general that were not pursuing fashion perspective.

Instead of using a meta-analysis, a qualitative thematic synthesis was used (Snyder, 2019; Thomas & Harden, 2008). This is a suitable approach for such a diverse type of literature that incorporates survey employed structural equation modeling, qualitative interviews and publications of a theoretical nature since this method deals with identification of important concepts and theoretical frameworks rather than the meta-analysis of effect sizes. Moreover, the research examines different outcomes such as purchasing intention, attitude towards the brand, trust and engagement. For this reason, it would be inappropriate to apply the method that is based on the calculation of the overall effect size.

The information was gathered from a variety of sources, including Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar and Shodhganga, where ResearchGate was used primarily as a means to obtain the complete text of selected articles. It was assumed that any international databases represented international publications in Scopus or Web of Science. Additionally, Shodhganga was used to find the Indian PhD theses that may not have been listed in the databases yet, but none of them fulfilled the inclusion criteria. In order to carry out the search, the terms “social media influencers,” “fashion purchase decisions,” “influencer marketing,” “consumer behavior” and “Indian consumers” were connected by Boolean operators (such as “social media influencer*” AND “fashion” AND “purchase intention,” “influencer marketing” AND “India” AND “consumer behavior”). The research was conducted in 2025 in parts. Initially, a wide-ranging search was conducted to evaluate the amount of literature available in the world, followed by a more targeted search focusing on India because literature in this country may be often less visible in international databases (Snyder, 2019).

The duplicate records were excluded from the final database results. The articles that were left were screened by title and abstract against the inclusion criteria, and once that was done, these articles were analyzed in detail to make sure that they were relevant to both global and Indian literature on fashion influencers. Since it is more a thematic review and not a systematic review based on PRISMA, there is no record-flow diagram. In the end, the synthesis consisted of 48 sources, where at least four of them concentrated on India. The citations regarding

methodological references and FTC guidelines are included separately and are not included in the total number of references. The data related to each paper concerned the theoretical framework, context (sample and geography), constructs involved, and main findings. With the help of Thomas and Harden's (2008) method of thematic synthesis, the data were organized into the four groups.

4. Literature Review

4.1 Definition of Social Media Influencers

The influencers are seen as individuals who have big followings on social media platforms and are able to influence them through their knowledge and charisma (Hudders et al., 2021). In the fashion industry, there are macro influencers or celebrities that have a large number of followers, as well as nano and micro influencers that have fewer followers, yet they engage with their followers relatively more often (Conde & Casais, 2023). The above classification is relevant for the literature review as different spheres of research use different kinds of influencers.

As it happens with other kinds of influencers, fashion influencers have unique self-representation styles. They write thoughtful posts about clothes and their stories, which is perceived as self-expression rather than just reporting (Hudders et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2023).

It is in technology and financial spheres that influencers become specialists and not mere conformers of self-presentation strategies. One could make a case for this thesis, taking into consideration that the aforementioned assertion will be regarded as hypothesis and not an inference from the aforementioned research (Hudders et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2023). Although it has been shown by relevant studies that influencers in this field are product endorsers, it is seen by the fans as recommendations not advertisements which gives them certain power position (Jin et al., 2019).

4.2 Theoretical Approaches Adopted within the Literature

Four theories have been employed in this literature review. The credibility theory focuses on determining the capacity of the influencer in persuading through using his or her trustworthiness, expertise and attractiveness (Belanche et al., 2021a; Cheung et al., 2022). The theory of planned behavior (TPB) has been modified through incorporation of perceived trust. In this modification, attitude impacts directly and indirectly the purchasing intention (Tiwari et al., 2024). Also, TPB has been combined with the influencer persuasion theory and this was done with the inclusion of the consumer involvement (Fayyaz et al., 2025). Parasocial Interaction theory views the association between the influencer and fans in one-directional way (Aw & Chuah, 2021). Social Identity theory explains that with the followers associating with the influencer this association would be reinforced (Ki et al., 2022).

4.3 Influencer Credibility and Source Characteristics

Research conducted in various settings, for example, Jordan, connects influencer attributes such as information quality and credibility to consumer purchase intention (Al-Sous et al., 2023). Source attributes are studied as well, such as expertise, credibility, authenticity, similarity and physical attractiveness, and the findings about attractiveness are contradictory: it failed to establish follower trust in Kim and Kim (2021b), and credibility in urban Indian Gen Z consumers (Vilas Chavare et al., 2025). On Instagram, the perception of congruency between the influencer and the product enhances the perception of influencer credibility, which, in turn, fosters positive attitude towards the influencer and actions like following, imitation and recommendation (Belanche et al., 2021a). Trust seems to be the key variable. It mediated the influence of expertise, authenticity and homophily on loyalty, product attitude and purchase intention (Kim & Kim, 2021b), and a theory of planned behavior model expanded with perceived trust establishes a direct and indirect link between attitude and purchase intention (Tiwari et al., 2024).Credibility is not the only factor that explains influence in such a situation. In a survey of more than 7,500 participants about one influencer, congruence between the influencer and his followers increased the impact of expertise and content usefulness of the influencer on purchasing behavior (Venciute et al., 2023).

4.4 Content Quality and Engagement

Quality content in the field of fashion communications is a common theme to be found in the relevant literature. Stories that engage the user are more likely to earn the like, share, comment, and save (Vrontis et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2023). Short video content and live streaming allow direct interaction between the audience and the influencer which makes him/her more believable and emotional for the followers (Lacap et al., 2025). Engaged users can distribute the content of the influencer further than the content posted by them and increase audience engagement (Lee & Fiore, 2024). Outside of the fashion industry, the social media engagement is described as a combination of cognitive activities, emotions and behavior elicited by the posts of the brand (Cao et al., 2021; Ooi et al., 2023). The scientific works dedicated to online reviews and opinion sharing provide information on negative effects of the activity since poor quality or even misleading information results in the loss of trust of the audience, which is the modern issue associated with inability to discern reliable posts from those that are not real (Kim et al., 2023; Onofrei et al., 2022).

4.5 Psychological Mechanisms

Theory of planned behavior, social identity theory, and parasocial theory can be called the key principles of the theory that is used for analysis of the effect of influencer marketing on consumers' decisions. The attitudes towards influencers, influence of peers' social and perceived behavioral control affect the purchase intention at once (Ki et al., 2022; Tiwari et al., 2024). Parasocial interaction is a special connection between the follower and the influencer, and it helps influence decision-making process (Agnihotri et al., 2023; Aw & Chuah, 2021). The closeness of the influencers and followers and the feeling of social presence from friends of Instagram may help form stronger parasocial connections and influence behavior (Farivar et al., 2021; H. Kim, 2022). Factors like informative messages, authenticity, and similarity or homophily between the influencer and the follower increase parasocial relationships. This will result in an increase in purchasing intentions, and in addition, the influencer’s evaluation of the brand (Liu & Zheng, 2024). Authenticity operates through the same channel as well. In a study conducted among 458 followers of Instagram, attributes like sincerity, truthful endorsement, and visibility of the authentic attributes were found to be related to buying actions. Parasocial interaction mediated the relationship while expertise and uniqueness had no effect (Agnihotri et al., 2023). Persuasive features like the attraction of the individual and homophily of attitudes along with parasocial interaction and defense of the influencer have also been explored (Wong & Wei, 2023).

4.6 Ethical Issues and Sponsorship Disclosure

Fewer literature has been written about influencer marketing ethics with most focusing on sponsorship disclosure. Disclosure impacts the consumer attitude towards the sponsored products by informing the consumer that the content is in reality an advertisement. Based on disclosure type and audience, it could either increase or reduce the consumers' attitude towards the influencer as well as the sponsored product (Karagür et al., 2022; Kim & Kim, 2021a). FTC guidelines play a great role in the development of the sponsored advertisement by both the influencer and the company (Federal Trade Commission, 2019). The integrity of the influencers in relation to their advertisement could be appreciated by the consumers (Zhou et al., 2021). Transparency in the disclosure does not impact the endorsement unless it contradicts the influencer's image.

4.7 Synthesis and Link to the Current Review

Taken together, these studies show that influencer effectiveness in fashion cannot be explained by a single factor. Credibility sets the minimum level of believability for a message (Belanche et al., 2021a). Content quality and form decide whether that credibility is noticed (Sardar et al., 2024; Vrontis et al., 2021). The workings of influence marketing are based on identification and parasocial interaction (Aw & Chuah, 2021; Farivar & Wang, 2022), which affect purchase intentions (Agnihotri et al., 2023; Liu & Zheng, 2024). Nevertheless, this is not an invariant connection, as the nature of the influencers themselves could change because of their sponsored posts (Karagür et al., 2022), and a sense of betrayal could affect the perception of the parasocial relation (Reinikainen et al., 2021). These are briefly outlined in Table 1 below.

Table I. Key global research on SMIs and fashion purchase behavior

Author(s) / Year	Theoretical perspective	Key result
Sardar et al. (2024)	Source and content-factor interaction	Source credibility and content factors jointly predict engagement and purchase intentions
Tiwari et al. (2024)	Elaborated TPB including trust	Attitude partially mediates the effect of influencers on purchase intention
Vrontis et al. (2021)	Integrative framework	Integrative model of influencers' antecedents, mechanisms and outcomes
Aw & Chuah (2021)	Self-discrepancy theory / parasocial theory	Self-discrepancy promotes parasocial relations that intensify influencers' impact
Xie et al. (2023)	Aesthetic labor / homophily	Visual display of effort by an influencer affects brand purchase intentions
Liu & Zheng (2024)	Elaboration likelihood model	Content informativeness and authenticity lead to parasocial relationships and purchase intentions
Lacap et al. (2025)	Attitude-trust mediation	TikTok brand videos affect Gen Z purchase intention through attitude and trust

5. Result and Discussion

There are various roles played by influencers in the fashion buying process. An influencer can be able to produce content, be an opinion leader, and conduct direct selling (Farivar et al., 2021; Shuqair et al., 2024). Effectiveness of an influencer is greatly determined by the interdependence of credibility, content, features of the used platform, and consumer psychology. Therefore, an influencer who is able to produce good content but has no credibility will probably not be as effective as an influencer who has credibility, produces good content, and has parasocial relationships with followers (Onofrei et al., 2022; Sardar et al., 2024). However, it is important to note that having credibility and good amounts of information alone is not enough since the credibility of the information is equally important. In Malaysia where people were interviewed about the intentions to purchase clothing and footwear, the following factors were found to be important influencers, types of brands, influencer's credibility, AR/VR use, and sponsor disclosure being irrelevant (Madhavedi et al, 2025).

The majority of the existing studies adopt the cross-sectional research design, and there is a lack of attention paid to the comparison of various platforms and study of the evolution of the relationship between influencers and followers (Vrontis et al., 2021). As far as the main determinants of the studied relationship both in international and Indian literature are concerned, they are mainly linked to trustworthiness, authenticity, engagement, and the level of parasocial relationships (Agnihotri et al., 2023; Tiwari et al., 2024). It is worth noticing that there was no opportunity for scholars investigating fashion influencer marketing in India to learn anything about how it operates in practice. The sphere of sponsor disclosure, long-term influence of marketing campaign on its audience and the differences of platforms have still been under-researched. It makes us think that future research in these areas would be quite useful (Gupta & Singharia, 2021; Sethi et al., 2024; Vilas Chavare et al., 2025).

There is a great need for better methodologies of research which include the use of representative samples, mixed-methods, and longitudinal designs. In addition, any future research should incorporate the study of ethical endorsements as well as nano- and micro-influencers (Conde & Casais, 2023; Karagür et al., 2022). To date, all

researches reviewed in this study have failed to assess the sustainable fashion consumption which means that the research on the use of influencers in sustainable fashion marketing has not been done yet. It would seem that the literature globally has passed through different stages. First, it focused on the functions of engagement and credibility, then moved to their psychology and, finally, ethics, disclosure, and platforms (Hudders et al., 2021; Vrontis et al., 2021).

There is one more drawback to the findings presented above. All of the literature analyzed above has been cross-sectional in nature, and does not provide any information on changes in attitude and behavior through time (Vrontis et al., 2021).

6. Findings

6.1 Global Literature Insights

The above three factors have an essential influence on the process of decision-making of purchase by consumers. These factors are the credibility of the influencer, the interactivity of the content, and the theory of parasocial relationships. The first factor is more influential than the latter two because of the high correlation with the perception of the product by the consumers (Sardar et al., 2024; Tiwari et al., 2024). The second factor is also highly influential because it stimulates consumers' interaction and purchase (Lacap et al., 2025; Vrontis et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2023). With respect to the third factor involving parasocial relationships, the consumers develop emotional attachment to the influencers online (Agnihotri et al., 2023; Aw & Chuah, 2021; Liu & Zheng, 2024).

A similar trend can be observed in the global literature in relation to influencer tier. Endorsements have been found to depend on the influencer's macro or mega status (Borges-Tiago et al., 2023). A different study also indicates that persuasion through parasocial relationship varies across micro, macro and mega influencers on Instagram (Conde & Casais, 2023). Additional findings in the context of luxury fashion suggest that motivations for engaging with luxury brands on social media are not similar to those in the mass market and are related to status (Bazi et al., 2020; Pangarkar & Rathee, 2023). Counterfeit luxury studies reveal that consumer generation is important in fashion decisions (Khan et al., 2022). It is thus possible that the proposed pathway differs according to fashion type and price.

The platform level research will contribute to the formation of the picture of the marketer's overall view. Most of the above-listed research papers deal with Instagram. Only the papers that are concerned about YouTube and TikTok have become relevant recently. Some of the studies are devoted to the abilities of the platform in understanding their actions, such as entertaining nature of videos made by TikTok influencers (Barta et al., 2023), and the influence of the credibility of the influencer on purchasing the product (Alcántara-Pilar et al., 2024; Lacap et al., 2025). In addition, there are also generation-related issues, which state that younger customers prefer social media to professionals while purchasing something (Stoica & Hickman, 2024).

6.2 The Indian Case and Early Research

There is an absence of studies on influencer marketing in India and particularly the application of influencer marketing in fashion (Gupta & Singharia, 2021; Sethi et al., 2024; Vilas Chavare et al., 2025).

6.3 Influencer Marketing and Indian Consumers

In the research that was done in India in the main metropolitan cities, it was seen how social media influences affect the behavior of the consumers of fashion and beauty products (Gupta & Singharia, 2021; Sethi et al., 2024).Credibility, trustworthiness, and similarity of the influencer and consumer are seen to matter. For example, in the case of urban Gen Z consumers, trustworthiness, expertise, and similarity were predictors of credibility of the influencer, whereas attractiveness was not (Vilas Chavare et al., 2025). Besides, there is a study in India that shows that culture and language should be considered in the investigation of the shopping behaviors of Indians (Gupta & Singharia, 2021). There are differences in the use of social media: Vilas Chavare et al. (2025) applied urban sample since rural Indians use social media much less frequently.

6.4 Regional and Demographic Variables

Most of the studies on influence marketing in the above mentioned case studies relate to big cities and urban consumers (Sethi et al., 2024). There is no research in relation to influence marketing with respect to regional and demographic variables such as rural and semi-urban consumers, senior age and people who speak in regional languages.

6.5 Comparison with Global Literature

When looking through literature across the globe, one may say that literature review conducted in the chapter in relation to India is mostly related to such issues as trust, similarity, cost efficiency, etc. When reviewing literature worldwide, major issues considered in the literature relate to such issues as reach through algorithm, brand fit of the influencer and performance assessment (please refer to Table II below). Ethical issues might be another issue when it comes to literature on Indian studies which may not be as advanced compared to the literature worldwide. The reason for it might be the development levels of both types of literature (Karagür et al., 2022; Kim & Kim, 2021a; Zhou et al., 2021).

Table II. Comparative overview of global and Indian research

Dimension	Global literature	Indian literature
Main theory	TPB, Social Identity Theory, Parasocial Interaction Theory	Trust- and similarity-based explanations; TPB (Tiwari et al., 2024)
Main platform	Instagram, YouTube, TikTok	Mainly Instagram (Gupta & Singharia, 2021); platform comparisons are rare
Main influencing factor	Credibility, content, reach	Trust, cultural relevance, cost, language
Maturity of methodology	Mostly cross-sectional; limited comparison across platforms and few long-term studies; convenience sampling and self-reported intention	Primarily cross-sectional; smaller, city-focused samples
Disclosures/Ethics	A rising body of literature (FTC-related studies)	Limited; pointed out as one of the key research areas

Source: Authors' compilation.

7. Limitations and Research Gaps

This is the same case with any other qualitative review. In this particular research, reliance on English journals and book sections means there is less likelihood of representation of Indian literature in regional languages, especially where the material is not indexed. The fact that there was no use of meta-analysis techniques implies that it would not be possible to compare the strengths of the various constructs used. The strength of some constructs being observed as strong depends on the subjective observation as to their frequency in studies (Snyder, 2019). There is publication bias, meaning that studies with results are likely to get published rather than the ones without results. This means that the strength of consistency of the results shown might have been overstated.

The following are some gaps which have been identified in the course of the literature review (Hudders et al., 2021; Vrontis et al., 2021). There has not been much study on how effective the marketing campaigns launched by the influencer is over a longer period of time. There have not been any studies conducted on the effect of influencer marketing campaigns in the rural and semi-urban regions and also targeting the older consumers. The comparison between the social media platforms has not been done, especially Instagram, YouTube and short

videos.

Table III. Research gaps and corresponding future research priorities

Research gap	Future research priority
Absence of longitudinal research designs	Monitor influencer-mediated purchase behavior over time
Under-representation of non-urban / semi-urban populations	Conduct research outside metro India to ensure external validity
Weaknesses in platform comparison	Direct comparison of Instagram, YouTube and short video impacts
Lack of ethics-related research	Analyze adherence to disclosure policies and impact on consumer trust
Absence of sustainable development-related research	Investigate role of influencers in sustainable fashion consumption
Tier comparison	Comparison of different influencer tiers

The limitations can be overcome through the application of mixed methods and an increased sample size that includes participants from diverse ages and geographic locations within India. This will allow the study to pay more attention to the aspects of disclosure and sustainability in the phenomenon of influencer marketing.

8. Conclusion

According to the thematic analysis, social media influencers affect the purchasing decision of the consumer by a combination of factors which interact with each other and not operate independently. Credibility, content quality and parasocial attachment appear to be the driving forces behind influencing consumers from exposure to the influencer to the intention to make a purchase (Agnihotri et al., 2023; Belanche et al., 2021a; Tiwari et al., 2024). Source credibility, theory of planned behavior, parasocial interaction and social identity are the theories providing a proper explanation of the process.

The evidence base in India is modest. At least four of the 48 references relate specifically to India, and all of them use metropolitan samples and cross-sectional surveys. The Indian evidence suggests that culture, price and language might be relevant variables (Gupta & Singharia, 2021), but the results require validation in future research.

Fashion marketers should select influencers based on their authenticity and fit with the audience, rather than on their number of followers (Belanche et al., 2021b; Conde & Casais, 2023). It is possible that region-specific and language-specific influencers could be used in India, but this hypothesis requires empirical verification. Brands and influencers should disclose sponsorship because it protects their credibility (Karagür et al., 2022; Kim & Kim, 2021a). Researchers should give preference to longitudinal and comparative studies as well as sampling in rural and semi-urban India. Researchers and policymakers should pay more attention to the topic of sponsorship disclosure and consumer protection, because few publications exist on this topic in the Indian fashion context (Gupta & Singharia, 2021; Sethi et al., 2024; Vilas Chavare et al., 2025).

In a qualitative synthesis such as this one, interpretive and correlational results are provided rather than causal results. Due to the small body of Indian literature on the issue, the results should be taken to be suggestive rather than conclusive and tested using separate research (see Limitations and Research Gaps). Table III identifies the research gaps and priorities.

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