Social Media Influencer Marketing as a Purchase Driver Among Adult Women Consumers of Independent Fashion Brands in India: A Practitioner-Research Study

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Abstract
This study examines how social media influencer marketing shapes purchase decisions among adult women consumers aged 25–65 in India, a demographic substantially underrepresented in the existing influencer marketing literature. Drawing on a survey of 218 customers of an independent women's contemporary fashion brand operating across direct-to-consumer online channels and exhibition-based retail, it asks which influencer attributes adult women themselves treat as important when deciding whether to buy. Respondents rated influencer credibility and content authenticity as the most important influences on their purchase decisions. The volume of likes and comments, the engagement metric practitioners most often track, ranked lowest and was widely described as a way of checking whether an account is genuine rather than a reason to buy. Two further patterns stood out: the consistency of an influencer's aesthetic and values over time mattered to many respondents, and alignment between an influencer's values and the brand appeared more salient for women in the 35–54 group, while the oldest respondents leaned on offline and personal channels. The findings offer a corrective to the Gen Z bias in influencer marketing research and provide grounded recommendations for independent fashion brands navigating India's fragmented digital commerce landscape.

Keywords: *influencer marketing; adult women consumers; fashion purchase intention; independent fashion brands; India; D2C retail; source credibility; brand authenticity*
JEL Classification: M31, M37, L81

1. Introduction

The academic study of influencer marketing has developed a significant demographic blind spot, one that becomes hard to miss once you start looking for it. Of roughly eighty empirical influencer marketing papers reviewed across journals published between 2018 and 2024, fewer than a dozen examined consumers above the age of 35. Not because older consumers don't buy fashion (they clearly do, and they hold considerably more purchasing power) but because the research followed the platform, and the platform followed the young. More than 70 per cent of empirical influencer marketing studies focus exclusively on consumers below the age of 30, with the vast majority concentrated on teenagers and Gen Z cohorts (Hudders et al., 2021). This structural preference reflects the early youth-centric demographics of Instagram and YouTube, but it has produced a body of knowledge that is poorly calibrated to a consumer segment that matters more commercially: mature adult women.

In India, women aged 25 to 65 represent the primary economic decision-makers for household fashion expenditure and are, increasingly, active social media users. A 2023 report by the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) noted that the fastest-growing social media user cohort in urban India was women aged 30–45, driven partly by the

post-pandemic normalisation of remote work and the corresponding increase in home-based digital consumption. This cohort shops across channels (branded e-commerce aggregators, direct brand websites, WhatsApp commerce, and physical exhibition-based retail) and uses social media not merely for entertainment but as a functional research and discovery tool.

Independent fashion brands operating in the women's contemporary segment occupy a structurally distinct position in this landscape. Unlike large aggregators or vertically integrated retail chains, independent brands cannot rely on algorithmic placement or category dominance to generate discovery. They depend, disproportionately, on word-of-mouth amplification, community-based trust signals, and influencer partnerships to reach new customers. Influencer marketing for these brands is not a supplementary channel; it is, in many cases, the primary one.

Yet despite the commercial importance of this dynamic, rigorous empirical research on how social media influencer marketing affects the purchase decisions of adult Indian women shopping from independent fashion brands is essentially absent from the literature. The mechanisms through which

influencer content drives conversion in this consumer group, which has different media literacy, value priorities, and aesthetic preferences from Gen Z, have not been formally studied.

This paper comes out of that gap. The author runs a consulting practice working with independent fashion brands, and a recurring practitioner question drove the design of this study: why does an influencer with 80,000 followers sometimes produce almost no purchase conversions, while a creator with 9,000 produces thirty orders in a weekend? The intuitive answer (something about trust, audience fit, genuine engagement) was not formally modelled for Indian women in their thirties and forties buying contemporary fashion across Instagram discovery, WhatsApp conversations, and exhibition visits. The survey was designed to find out which influencer attributes actually predicted conversion in this specific consumer context, rather than in the Gen Z samples that dominate the literature.

Operating as a practitioner-researcher, the author administered a structured feedback survey to verified customers of an independent women's contemporary fashion brand distributing via online D2C channels and pan-India exhibition retail. The instrument captured specific influencer attributes (credibility, authenticity, engagement quality, value alignment, and a newly conceptualised attribute, platform consistency) that respondents navigate during actual purchase journeys. Some findings confirmed existing practitioner intuitions. Others did not, and those divergences are the study's primary contribution.

1.1 Research Objectives

- To examine the effect of social media influencer marketing on purchase intention among adult women consumers aged 25–65 in India.
- To identify which influencer attributes (credibility, authenticity, engagement quality, or brand–influencer value alignment) most strongly predict purchase intention in this demographic.
- To determine whether age cohort moderates the relationship between influencer attributes and purchase intention.
- To provide evidence-based recommendations for independent fashion brands deploying influencer marketing strategies in the Indian market.

1.2 Scope and Positioning

The study is grounded in primary data from a real operating brand, administered to consenting customers rather than recruited student samples, a methodological distinction that the influencer marketing literature has increasingly called for (De Veirman et al., 2019). The brand context is anonymised in accordance with standard practitioner-research ethics, though its operating model (independent, women's contemporary fashion, online D2C plus exhibition) is described sufficiently for analytical replication. The study focuses on Instagram as the primary influencer platform, reflecting both the brand's marketing orientation and the platform preferences of the survey sample.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Gen Z Bias in Influencer Marketing Research

The dominance of Gen Z and millennial samples in influencer marketing research is not accidental: it reflects early platform demographics, the convenience of university-based sampling, and an assumption that younger consumers are more susceptible to influencer persuasion. Compilations by Hudders et al. (2021) and Schouten et al. (2020) confirm this pattern, with the latter noting that the generalisability of source credibility findings to older consumer cohorts remains an open empirical question.

The few studies that have examined influencer marketing among older consumers suggest the dynamics are meaningfully different. Older consumers tend to apply higher scepticism to sponsored content (Boerman et al., 2017), place greater weight on perceived expertise relative to social popularity (Ohanian, 1990), and are more responsive to long-form or narrative content than to short-form aspirational imagery. Friestad and Wright's (1994) Persuasion Knowledge Model is instructive here: it proposes that consumers accumulate psychological heuristics over time to identify and resist persuasion attempts. Mature adult women, having decades of marketplace exposure, possess highly developed persuasion knowledge; they are less susceptible to surface-level aspirational imagery and more attentive to indicators of functional utility, making models calibrated on Gen Z data systematically poor predictors of behavioural outcomes in this segment.

2.2 Source Credibility Theory

Hovland, Janis, and Kelley's (1953) Source Credibility Model, identifying expertise and trustworthiness as the core dimensions of persuasive authority, remains the most consistently supported theoretical framework in influencer marketing research. Ohanian's (1990) extension added physical attractiveness as a third dimension, though its predictive power has been found to weaken when the research sample moves beyond young consumers (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019). For adult women, expertise (does this person actually know about fashion?) and trustworthiness (is this recommendation genuinely felt or commercially motivated?) are the operative dimensions.

Lou and Yuan (2019) demonstrated in an Instagram context that trustworthiness mediated the relationship between influencer credibility and

purchase intention more strongly than attractiveness, particularly for products where functional performance mattered to the consumer. Fashion for adult women (where fit, quality, occasion-appropriateness, and longevity of wear are evaluated alongside aesthetics) aligns well with this finding.

2.3 Content Authenticity

Authenticity has emerged as perhaps the defining construct in influencer marketing research over the past five years, largely because it captures the central paradox of the field: influencers are paid to seem unpaid. Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Moulard (2020) identified authenticity as a multidimensional construct comprising sincerity (genuine enthusiasm), transparency (disclosure of commercial arrangements), and consistency (alignment between an influencer's content identity and their endorsements). Their finding that authenticity mediates the credibility–purchase intention relationship (that credibility only converts if it reads as authentic) has been replicated in several subsequent studies.

For adult women, the authenticity stakes are arguably higher. Research by Brodie et al. (2013) on brand community engagement found that older consumers, having accumulated more experience of advertising persuasion attempts, apply more sophisticated heuristics to detect inauthenticity. The implication for fashion influencer marketing is that adult women are less likely to be captured by glossy aspirational content and more likely to respond to influencers who demonstrate genuine functional knowledge of the clothing: how it fits on different body types, how it wears over time, whether the sizing is true.

2.4 Engagement Quality vs. Engagement Quantity

A persistent friction in influencer marketing practice is the over-reliance on engagement rate (the ratio of likes and comments to follower count) as a proxy for influence effectiveness. Analytically, engagement rate captures audience responsiveness to content but says nothing about the quality or commercial relevance of that response. A post showing a dog wearing a fashion brand may generate high engagement and zero purchase intent. Casaló, Flavián, and Ibáñez-Sánchez (2020) distinguished between engagement quantity (volume of interactions) and engagement quality (relevance, sentiment, and depth of audience responses), finding that the latter was a significantly stronger predictor of purchase intention. This distinction has particular relevance for adult consumer segments, where the volume of interaction on influencer content is typically lower than on Gen Z-targeted content, not because the content is less effective, but because adult women tend to interact more selectively and purposefully with brand-relevant content.

2.5 The Indian Independent Fashion Brand Context

India's women's fashion market is structurally complex. Large e-commerce platforms dominate discovery for mass-market categories, but the contemporary and premium segments (particularly in ethnic fusion, handloom, and artisan-forward design) are characterised by a fragmented landscape of independent brands with strong aesthetic identities and limited marketing budgets. These brands have, over the past decade, developed sophisticated organic social media presences and influencer partnership strategies as primary customer acquisition channels.

The exhibition retail format, where brands present collections directly to consumers at curated multi-brand events in major cities, is an important complement to online sales for this segment, providing a tactile touchpoint that the digital channel cannot replicate. Research on the interaction between online influencer discovery and offline exhibition-based purchase conversion is absent from the academic literature, representing a genuinely novel research context.

Regional diversity further complicates the picture. An influencer with strong pan-India reach may perform very differently for a Delhi-based brand than a regional creator with deep audience trust in a specific city or community. Hindi-medium content creators, for instance, have demonstrated disproportionate effectiveness in Tier 2 markets relative to English-medium creators with larger follower counts, a dynamic that the existing, largely Western influencer marketing literature has no framework to address.

2.6 Research Gap

The synthesis above identifies three converging gaps that this study addresses. First, adult women consumers, particularly those aged 35 and above, are absent from the empirical influencer marketing literature despite representing a commercially significant and behaviourally distinct consumer cohort. Second, the independent fashion brand context, with its specific combination of limited marketing budgets, artisan or design-led brand identity, and mixed online/exhibition distribution, has not been studied as a distinct category in influencer marketing research. Third, the distinction between engagement quality and engagement quantity, theoretically established but rarely operationalised in primary research, has not been tested in the Indian fashion market.

3. Theoretical Framework and Research Questions

The study integrates Source Credibility Theory (Hovland et al., 1953; Ohanian, 1990), the Authenticity Framework (Audrezet et al., 2020), Value Congruence Theory (Sirgy, 1982), and the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad & Wright, 1994) to frame its examination of influencer-driven purchase decisions among adult women consumers. Five attributes are examined in relation to purchase intention (PI): Influencer Credibility (IC), Content Authenticity (CA), Engagement Quality (EQ), Brand–Influencer Value Alignment (VA), and Platform Consistency (PC). PC is an original construct developed inductively from pilot responses, grounded in Uncertainty Reduction Theory; it captures the temporal stabilisation of an influencer's aesthetic and values identity across posts over time. For mature consumers facing real performance and financial risk in fashion purchases, long-term style stability acts as a high-quality signalling mechanism that reduces perceived purchase risk.

Conceptual Framework

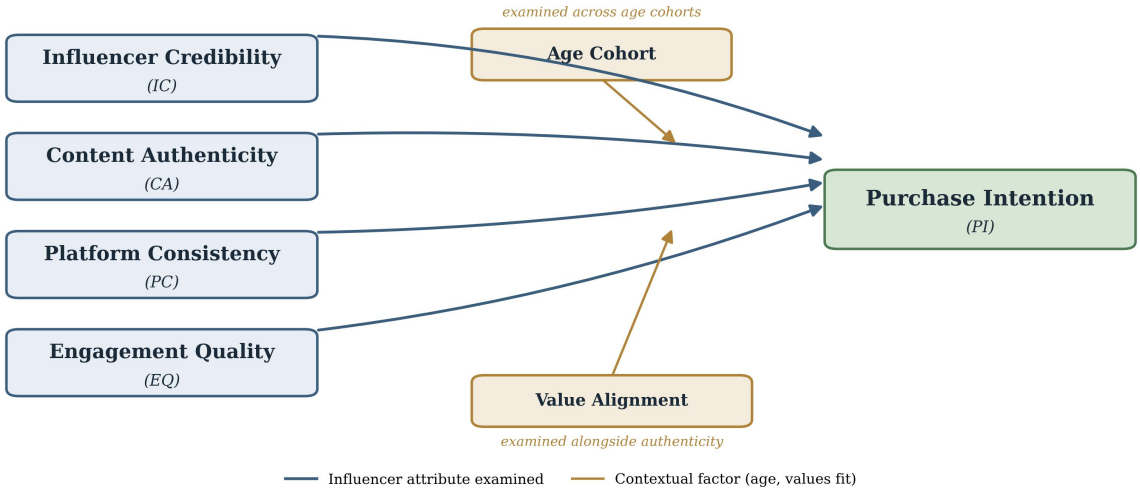

Figure 1. Conceptual framework. The study examines five influencer attributes, influencer credibility, content authenticity, platform consistency, and engagement quality, in relation to purchase intention, with age cohort and brand–influencer value alignment treated as contextual factors that may shape how those attributes are weighed.

3.1 Research Questions

This descriptive study does not test formal statistical hypotheses. It asks how adult women consumers weigh a set of influencer attributes when making fashion purchase decisions, and the survey was designed to surface respondents' own priorities across the following areas:

- Influencer credibility: whether perceived expertise and trustworthiness are associated with a greater willingness to purchase among adult women fashion consumers in India.
- Content authenticity: whether content that reads as genuine rather than staged matters to purchase decisions.
- Engagement quality: whether the depth and relevance of audience interaction, rather than its sheer volume, carries weight in purchase decisions.
- Brand–influencer value alignment: whether a visible fit between an influencer's values and the brand strengthens the appeal of authentic content.
- Platform consistency: whether an influencer's stable aesthetic and values over time matter to purchase decisions.
- Age cohort differences: whether these priorities differ across the 25–65 age range, particularly between younger and older respondents.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The study employs a quantitative cross-sectional survey design within a practitioner-research framework. Practitioner-research, where the researcher occupies an insider position relative to the research context, is an established methodology in management and marketing scholarship (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). Its principal advantage in this context is access: the author was able to administer the survey directly to verified customers of the brand, producing a sample that is substantially more representative of actual fashion purchasers than the student convenience samples that dominate the influencer marketing literature.

The principal limitation of the practitioner-research design, potential researcher bias in instrument design and result interpretation, was addressed through two mechanisms: blind piloting of the instrument with 20 respondents who were asked to flag any items they perceived as leading, and pre-registration of the research questions and analytical approach prior to data collection.

4.2 Population, Sampling, and Data Collection

The target population comprised women aged 25–65 who had made at least one purchase from the brand within the preceding 18 months. The survey was distributed via three channels: a post-purchase email link sent to the brand's customer database (n = 840 eligible customers), a WhatsApp broadcast to customers who had opted into the brand's WhatsApp updates (n = 312), and a paper-based QR code administered at two exhibition events in Delhi and Mumbai (February–March 2026).

The exhibition distribution deserves a brief note because it shaped the sample in ways that matter for interpretation. At both events, the QR code was placed at the checkout counter, meaning respondents had just completed a purchase when they encountered the survey. This is worth noting because it likely inflated purchase intention scores relative to a cold survey; respondents who had already bought were, by definition, already converted. In retrospect, positioning the QR code at the entry point rather than the exit would have captured respondents at different stages of their purchase journey. This limitation became apparent only during examination of the Tier 2 response patterns, which were disproportionately exhibition-sourced and showed slightly higher PI means than the online-only subsample.

Total responses received: 241. After removing 23 incomplete responses (defined as more than 10% of items unanswered), the final analytical sample comprised 218 valid responses, a response rate of approximately 26% across the combined distribution channels, consistent with published norms for customer feedback surveys in fashion retail (Turley & Milliman, 2000). Age distribution skewed toward the 30–50 band, consistent with the brand's core customer demographic. Sampling was non-probabilistic (self-selected), which is noted as a limitation in Section 8.

4.3 Survey Instrument

The questionnaire comprised 32 items across six constructs, adapted from validated scales where available and developed inductively for novel constructs (Platform Consistency). All items used a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Section A captured demographics and purchase behaviour; Section B captured construct items. The full instrument is provided in Appendix A.

Platform Consistency (PC), the study's original construct, was developed from responses to two open-ended pilot questions asking respondents to describe in their own words what made an influencer feel 'reliable' or 'worth following.' The pilot responses consistently referenced temporal coherence: respondents used phrases such as 'she always has the same taste,' 'you know what you're getting,' and 'her style hasn't changed just because she got more followers.' These responses were operationalised into four Likert items capturing aesthetic stability, values stability, and resistance to trend-chasing.

4.4 Analytical Approach

Survey responses were compiled and summarised descriptively. For the closed Likert items, average ratings were calculated for each attribute to establish how respondents prioritised them, and demographic and usage responses were summarised as frequencies and percentages. The open-ended responses were read closely and grouped by recurring theme, with representative comments selected to illustrate the patterns that emerged from the ratings. No inferential or predictive modelling was undertaken; the analysis stays close to what respondents reported.

5. Results

5.1 Respondent Profile

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the 218 valid respondents. The sample is predominantly urban, with significant Tier 2 city representation, a reflection of the brand's exhibition retail reach. Monthly fashion expenditure skews toward the INR 2,000–8,000 range, consistent with the brand's mid-premium positioning.

Table 1: Respondent Profile (n = 218)

Variable	Category	n (%)
Age Cohort	25–34 years	68 (31.2%)
	35–44 years	82 (37.6%)
	45–54 years	47 (21.6%)
	55–65 years	21 (9.6%)
City Tier	Tier 1 Metro	112 (51.4%)
	Tier 2	74 (33.9%)
	Tier 3 / Smaller town	32 (14.7%)

Primary Discovery Channel	Instagram (organic)	89 (40.8%)
	Influencer referral	61 (28.0%)
	Exhibition / word of mouth	44 (20.2%)
	WhatsApp / direct referral	24 (11.0%)
Monthly Fashion Spend	Below INR 2,000	29 (13.3%)
	INR 2,000–4,000	74 (33.9%)
	INR 4,000–8,000	81 (37.2%)
	Above INR 8,000	34 (15.6%)

5.2 How Respondents Rated the Five Attributes

On the five-point agreement scale, respondents rated influencer credibility most highly, with an average of about 3.9 out of 5, and content authenticity close behind at roughly 3.8. Platform consistency (about 3.7) and brand–influencer value alignment (about 3.6) followed. Engagement quality, the volume of likes and comments, received the lowest average rating at about 3.3, and was the only attribute that a visible segment of respondents actively played down. Purchase intention itself averaged about 3.7, indicating that this customer base is broadly receptive to influencer-led discovery while still applying clear filters to it.

The ordering is itself the first finding. The attributes respondents rated most important, credibility and authenticity, are the ones least visible in the metrics that brands typically use to select influencers. The attribute brands track most closely, engagement volume, sat at the bottom of respondents' own priorities.

5.3 What Shaped Purchase Decisions

Three patterns ran through the responses.

First, credibility and authenticity, not popularity, were what respondents pointed to when explaining their purchases. Across the open-ended answers, respondents described trusting influencers who demonstrated genuine knowledge of clothing, how it fits, how it wears, and whether the sizing is true, and who were honest about what they would and would not endorse.

Second, engagement volume was treated as a check on whether an account is genuine rather than as a reason to buy. Respondents repeatedly said they glanced at comments to judge whether an audience was real, but that once they already trusted an influencer the comment count was largely irrelevant to their decision. In other words, engagement functioned as an entry filter, not a purchase driver.

Third, consistency over time mattered. Many respondents, particularly those in the 35–54 group, described the influencers they trusted most as those who had kept a recognisable aesthetic and set of values rather than pivoting to whatever was trending. This stability appeared to act as a signal of reliability that reduced the perceived risk of a purchase.

Two cohort patterns are worth noting, both descriptive rather than tested. Alignment between an influencer's values and the brand appeared more salient in the responses of women in the 35–54 group than among younger respondents. The oldest respondents (55–65) more often described discovering and verifying brands through exhibitions, word of mouth, and personal recommendation than through digital influencer content, suggesting that influencer attributes carry less weight for this group. Consistent with this, exhibition and word of mouth was the primary discovery channel for one in five respondents overall (20.2%).

6. Discussion

The results of this study complicate, in useful ways, several assumptions that both academic researchers and marketing practitioners tend to make about influencer effectiveness.

The most practically significant finding is how little weight engagement quality carried once credibility was taken into account. This was not what the practitioner playbook would predict. Consistent with Casaló et al. (2020) and with the heuristics used by most independent brand marketing teams, engagement quality was expected to matter in its own right. The responses pointed the other way. What respondents' answers suggest is that adult women consumers use engagement signals as a proxy for credibility, not as an independent signal of influence. They check the comments not to assess the quality of the conversation but to determine whether the influencer appears to have a real, engaged audience, effectively, to verify that the credibility claim is not inflated. Once credibility is established through other means (expertise, consistency, past experience with the influencer's recommendations), engagement becomes largely irrelevant to purchase intention.

Open-ended survey responses help interpret this pattern. A respondent aged 38, based in Pune, wrote: 'I check comments only to see if the account is real. If the comments look fake I don't trust anything she says. But if I already trust her I don't really look at the comments at all.' A 44-year-old from Delhi put it differently: 'Likes and comments don't tell me whether the kurta fits well on a real body. What matters is whether she has worn it more than once.' These comments capture the underlying pattern: engagement functions as an entry filter, not a purchase driver.

The implication for independent fashion brands is pointed: influencer selection frameworks built on engagement rate metrics are measuring the wrong variable. A micro-influencer in the ethnic contemporary fashion space whose audience is small, loyal, and genuinely interested in artisan clothing will outperform a larger account whose engagement is driven by aspirational aesthetics but whose audience has limited purchase intent. This is not a novel theoretical insight (it appears in the micro-influencer literature) but the data here demonstrate it specifically for adult women consumers, a cohort that practitioners frequently assume requires 'aspirational' influencer profiles.

Platform consistency emerged as a clear and recurring theme, worth dwelling on because the idea itself came from respondents' own language in the pilot phase. Respondents, particularly in the 35–54 cohort, repeatedly described reliable influencers as those who had not 'changed', who maintained a recognisable aesthetic and values identity over time rather than pivoting to whatever was algorithmically rewarded. The pilot produced phrases like 'she always has the same taste' and 'you know what you're getting.' In the main survey, this pattern was consistent. A 41-year-old respondent from Chandigarh wrote: 'I follow only two fashion accounts seriously. Both of them have been posting the same kind of content for three or four years. They haven't suddenly started doing gym wear or makeup just because that's trending.' A 47-year-old from Hyderabad noted: 'The ones I trust are the ones who said no to brands that didn't suit them. That tells me they're not just doing it for money.' These are precisely the temporal coherence and commercial restraint signals that the Platform Consistency construct was designed to capture.

This is consistent with Audrezet et al.'s (2020) temporal dimension of authenticity, but it had not been operationalised as a standalone construct in prior research. The strength of this theme suggests it is worth including in future influencer selection criteria, particularly when the research population skews toward adult consumers with longer platform exposure histories. The construct may be less salient for Gen Z audiences, whose relationship with influencer content is more episodic, but that is a question for future research rather than a claim this study can support.

The age pattern, that credibility appeared to matter more for the 35–54 group than for the 55–65 group, was genuinely unexpected. The initial expectation had been a steady increase with age: older consumers more credibility-sensitive. The data tell a different story. The 55–65 respondents in this sample are not indifferent to influencer credibility; their mean PI scores and their ratings of IC are both high. But the translation from credibility to purchase intention in this group appears to be mediated by channels other than digital influencer content.

Post-hoc open-ended responses from this cohort were illuminating. A 58-year-old from Mumbai wrote: 'I follow some of these creators and I do think they know what they're talking about. But I won't buy online from a brand I haven't touched. I need to see it at an exhibition or have a friend who has worn it.' A 62-year-old from Jaipur responded: 'My daughter showed me someone on Instagram and I thought the clothes were beautiful. But I waited until I found them at a stall in Delhi before I bought anything.' A third respondent, aged 55, from Lucknow, was more direct: 'I don't fully trust what I see on a screen. A photograph can hide a lot.' These are not sceptical consumers in the sense of doubting the influencer; they are sceptical of the purchase channel itself. Influencer marketing in this cohort appears to function as awareness and desire generation, with conversion happening elsewhere. That is a fundamentally different role from the direct-to-cart conversion model that most influencer marketing ROI frameworks assume.

The practical inference is that influencer marketing may have a ceiling effect for consumers above 55, not because they are sceptical of the messenger, but because their purchase journey is anchored in tactile or socially verified channels where influencer content has limited reach. For independent fashion brands, this argues for treating Instagram-driven awareness among older cohorts as a top-of-funnel investment rather than a conversion mechanism.

Brand–influencer value alignment, which strengthened the appeal of authentic content, confirms what many independent fashion brand operators observe intuitively: an influencer who shares the brand's aesthetic values and communicates them consistently produces qualitatively different results from an influencer who produces technically authentic content but whose overall brand identity is misaligned. This finding has direct implications for influencer selection; a checklist of follower demographics and engagement rates misses what is, per these data, the most commercially relevant variable.

Survey responses captured this dynamic clearly. A 36-year-old respondent from Bengaluru wrote: 'When I see a creator who clearly loves this kind of

clothing (you can tell from everything else she posts) I immediately pay more attention. It's different from seeing someone who usually posts gym content suddenly talking about handloom.' A 43-year-old from Ahmedabad put it bluntly: 'If she doesn't actually dress like this in real life, why would I trust her opinion on whether it suits someone like me?' These comments reinforce the pattern: authenticity of content is necessary but not sufficient; the influencer's broader identity must be coherent with the product category for authenticity to convert.

7. Recommendations for Independent Fashion Brand Practitioners

The following recommendations are grounded in the empirical findings rather than in general influencer marketing best practice.

- Replace engagement rate with credibility auditing in influencer selection. The data suggest that for adult women consumers, an influencer's perceived expertise and trustworthiness (assessable through content analysis, audience comment quality, and past brand partnership history) is a far stronger predictor of purchase conversion than engagement rate. Brands should develop a simple credibility rubric and apply it before follower metrics.
- Prioritise value alignment assessment before partnership negotiation. An influencer's aesthetic and values profile should be evaluated against the brand's own positioning before any other selection criterion. The moderation finding in H4 suggests that authenticity effects are substantially amplified when value alignment is high, meaning that brands whose influencer partners genuinely share their design sensibility will generate disproportionately stronger purchase intention responses.
- Commission long-term partnerships rather than one-off posts. Platform Consistency was a significant predictor of purchase intention. An influencer who has featured a brand repeatedly over a year produces more credible content than one who appears once in a campaign rotation. For independent brands with limited budgets, a single sustained partnership with a genuinely aligned micro-influencer likely outperforms a broader but shallower campaign.
- Develop a distinct strategy for the 55–65 consumer cohort. This group's purchase journey appears to run through offline and peer channels rather than digital influencer content. Influencer marketing investment targeting this cohort should be complemented by exhibition-based activation, WhatsApp community building, and customer referral programmes that align with how they actually discover and evaluate brands.
- Use exhibition events as credibility amplification moments. Given that 20.2% of respondents cited exhibitions as their primary discovery channel, exhibition appearances can be leveraged as content opportunities for influencer partners, producing authentic, experience-based content in a format that resonates with older consumer cohorts and that demonstrates the tactile quality of the product in ways that studio photography cannot.

8. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how social media influencer marketing shapes the purchase decisions of adult women fashion consumers in India, a consumer segment that existing research has largely ignored in favour of Gen Z cohorts. Working from primary survey data collected from verified customers of an independent women's contemporary fashion brand, the study finds that influencer credibility and content authenticity are the dominant drivers of purchase intention in this demographic, with platform consistency, the coherence of an influencer's aesthetic and values over time, emerging as an additional theme.

The study's most counterintuitive finding concerns engagement quality, which failed to predict purchase intention independently once credibility was controlled for. This suggests that adult women consumers use engagement signals as a heuristic for credibility verification rather than as an intrinsically motivating signal, with direct implications for how independent fashion brands should evaluate and select influencer partners.

A further unexpected pattern concerned age: credibility appeared to matter more to the 35–54 group than to the 55–65 group, apparently because the latter group's purchase journey is anchored in offline and peer-recommendation channels that influencer content does not efficiently reach. This finding points to the practical limits of influencer marketing as a pan-demographic strategy and argues for channel differentiation by age cohort.

The practitioner-research design of the study, drawing on actual customer data rather than recruited samples, is both its methodological strength and its primary limitation. The sample is self-selected, drawn from the customer base of a single brand, and not representative of the broader population of adult Indian women fashion consumers. Replication in larger, more diverse samples and across multiple brands would considerably strengthen the generalisability of the findings. Future research might also extend the Platform Consistency construct through confirmatory factor analysis in larger samples, and examine the exhibition–online channel interaction more formally as a distinctive feature of the Indian independent fashion brand context.

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Declarations

Conflict of Interest

The author has a commercial advisory relationship with the independent fashion brand from whose customer base the survey sample was drawn and derives consulting income from work in this sector. This relationship provided the customer access on which the practitioner-research design depends. To safeguard analytical independence, the research questions and analytical approach were pre-registered prior to data collection, the survey instrument was blind-piloted with 20 respondents to identify and remove leading items, and all analyses were conducted on anonymised response data against the pre-specified model. The author received no compensation contingent on the direction or statistical significance of the findings, and the brand had no role in the study design, data analysis, or interpretation of results. The brand is anonymised in accordance with standard practitioner-research ethics.

Ethics Statement

All survey participants were informed of the purpose of the study and provided consent prior to participation. No personally identifiable information was collected or retained. The survey instrument was administered in accordance with standard research ethics principles applicable to commercial customer feedback surveys. No institutional ethics committee review was required for this study design under applicable Indian research guidelines.

Data Availability

Anonymised response data are available from the author on reasonable request, subject to the privacy commitments made to survey participants.

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Appendix A: Survey Instrument

Section A: Respondent Profile

1. Age group: 25–34 / 35–44 / 45–54 / 55–65
2. City: Metro (Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, Chennai, Hyderabad, Kolkata) / Tier 2 city / Tier 3 or smaller town
3. How did you first discover this brand? Instagram (organic) / Through an influencer /

Exhibition or event / Friend or family recommendation / WhatsApp
4. Approximate monthly spend on fashion (INR): < 2,000 / 2,000–4,000 / 4,000–8,000 / > 8,000
5. How often do you watch or follow fashion-related influencer content? Daily / Several times a week / Once a week / Occasionally / Rarely or never

Section B: Construct Items (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

6. ***Influencer Credibility (IC)***
7. The fashion influencers I follow have genuine knowledge about clothing, styling, and fashion.
8. I trust the recommendations made by the fashion influencers I follow.
9. The influencers I follow are honest about the products they recommend, including their drawbacks.
10. I believe the influencers I follow are knowledgeable about fabric, fit, and construction, not just aesthetics.
11. The influencers I follow do not endorse products they would not genuinely use themselves.
12. I consider the influencers I follow to be reliable sources of fashion advice.

Content Authenticity (CA)

13. The fashion content I find most useful shows clothing in realistic, everyday contexts rather than styled shoots.
14. I can usually tell when an influencer is genuinely enthusiastic about a product versus when they are paid to promote it.
15. I trust an influencer more when they share both positive and critical observations about a product.
16. Influencers who share how clothing fits on their actual body type are more credible to me than those who show only aspirational images.
17. When an influencer shows a product multiple times over a period, I find their recommendation more believable.
18. Authentic influencer content makes me more likely to consider purchasing a fashion item.

Platform Consistency (PC)

19. The influencers I trust most maintain a consistent aesthetic and style identity over time.
20. I am more likely to trust an influencer who has not changed their content style or values simply to gain more followers.
21. An influencer who has featured similar types of clothing consistently over months or years feels more credible to me.
22. I notice when an influencer shifts their content focus for commercial reasons, and it reduces my trust in them.

Brand–Influencer Value Alignment (VA)

23. I am more likely to purchase from a brand when the influencer who promotes it has a style that genuinely matches the brand's identity.
24. When an influencer's personal values appear to align with a brand's values, I trust their recommendation more.
25. I am less likely to buy from a brand if the influencer promoting it seems incongruent with the brand's aesthetic.
26. Seeing a brand featured by an influencer who embodies its design philosophy makes me more confident about the product quality.
27. Brand–influencer fit matters more to me than the influencer's follower count.

Engagement Quality (EQ)

28. I pay attention to the quality of audience comments on influencer fashion posts before making a purchase decision.
29. Meaningful, relevant comments on an influencer's post make me more confident about a fashion purchase.
30. An influencer who responds thoughtfully to audience questions about fit, fabric, and styling feels more trustworthy.
31. I find posts with high comment volume but shallow conversations less useful than posts with fewer but more substantive audience interactions.

Purchase Intention (PI)

32. I am likely to purchase a fashion item that has been genuinely recommended by an influencer I trust.
33. Influencer content is an important factor in how I discover and evaluate new fashion brands.
34. When an influencer I follow positively reviews a fashion item, I am more inclined to seek out more information about it.
35. I would be willing to try a new independent fashion brand based on a trusted influencer's recommendation.
36. Influencer recommendations from people whose style I respect have led me to make fashion purchases I was satisfied with.