

An Empirical Study Investigating the role of social media influencer authenticity and parasocial relationship intensity on brand attitude and intentions to buy among Generation Z consumers: Evidence from the Indian fashion and lifestyle sector

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Abstract: This study explores the impact of the authenticity of social media influencers and parasocial relationship intensity on brand attitude and intentions to buy among the consumer generation of Z in the fashion and lifestyle domain. The design used in the study is quantitative research approach and the conceptual framework is developed in this research is based on three theories, they are theory of source credibility, theory of Parasocial Interaction, and Theory of Planned Behavior. PLS-SEM is used to analyse data and study the proposed link between the selected variables. The results confirm that the authenticity of the influencer and parasocial relationship have positive effects on brand attitude and purchase intent, and brand attitude is a strong mediator between the first two variables. This paper provides a contribution to fields of influencer marketing literature and provides some practical evidence and opinions for fashion and lifestyle brands looking to create a successful content marketing campaign in a way of using influencers collectively targeting the Gen Zs consumers.

Keywords: Social Media Influencer Authenticity; Parasocial Relationship Intensity; Brand Attitude; PI; Gen Zs; Influencer Marketing; Indian Fashion and Lifestyle Sector; PLS-SEM.



1. Introduction

Digital technology has rapidly evolved and 'social media' is regularly used, this has revolutionized the marketing world. Social networks have become more than a means of communication: they are now a powerful marketing environment for brands to connect with consumers via digital content creators (CC) and social media influencers (SMI). One strategy that has proven to be most effective is influencer marketing (IM), which is especially prevalent in the fashion and lifestyle industry where the visual aspect, personal recommendations. SMI build stronger and more engaging connections with their audience than traditional celebrities do through their professional lives and by posting real-life content, their own ideas and thoughts. As a result, IM now plays a vital role in any brand's attempts to win consumer loyalty, improve their brand identity and drive sales.

The Gen Zs as a consumer group is one of the most powerful audiences for digital marketing campaigns among all different consumer groups. Born in the last few years that total approximately 1997-2012, they've spent their entire childhood in a technology-rich environment and have been short-term heavy consumers of social network sites. Positive customer reviews, EWOM, peer interactions and recommendations by endorsers contribute to their purchasing behavior. When deciding on endorsers and brands, Z Generation consumers are more attuned to authenticity, transparency and relatability and distinguish them from their older counterparts. Consequently, more and more marketers are partnering with endorsers who have good engagement rates and trusted reputation, more so than a large following.

Authenticity – how consumers see endorsers not only hear or say, but communicate honestly, truthfully, and as real, has been one of the biggest factors as to why some endorsers are effective, and some endorsers not. Real-time endorsers build brand trust by being honest about sponsored content, engaging with their audience with authenticity, and sharing real-life experiences. These perceptions of authenticity lead to lower levels of consumer scepticism regarding promotional messages and have a positive effect on brand evaluations and purchase behaviour, the higher the level of perceived authenticity, the lower the scepticism and the better the brand evaluation and purchase.

The second major idea about an endorser's efficacy is the "parasocial relationship" that the followers have with the media personality because of repeated exposure and interaction with them. While there is no direct reciprocal relationship or face-to-face contact, smokers can get a sense from social media that the endorsers are their friends, as they are able to interact in a continuous way via live videos, stories, comments, and customized communication. Emotional attachment, trust, and acceptance of endorsers recommendations, as it increases when parasocial relationships are strong, affect consumer attitudes towards endorsed brands.

Indian fashion and lifestyle industry offer the right environment to explore these connections, as its digitalization is at an accelerated pace and it has become increasingly reliant on IM. Macro SMI, micro endorsers and Nano endorsers are further commonly hired by fashion companies for contrasting the attire, footwear, accessories, cosmetics and lifestyle goods and solutions online. It is academically important as well as managerially relevant to understand the role of endorser authenticity and parasocial relationship intensity in forming the brand attitude (BA) and PI because this Gen Zs group is one of the biggest digitally connected groups in India.

2. Literature Review

In the last decade, this form of advertising, which has become so influential on consumer behaviour, has been thoroughly studied by scholars. The psychological processes involved in how endorsers impact consumer sentiments, brand valuations and intent to make a strong purchase have been a growing subject of study.

To examine the effectiveness of IM, Lou et al. (2019) explored the credibility of the message and the information value. They concluded that credibility of the endorser and its authenticity had a significant impact on consumer trust in sponsored products which led to a noteworthy increase in purchase intent. The study highlighted how consumers are more receptive to recommendations when endorsers share with sincere and informative product information.

Methodologically, Audrezet et al. (2020) used the “endorser authenticity” concept and claimed that authenticity is a social construct, not personal attribute that is established through transparency, consistency, and emotional openness. Through their study, they proved that authentic endorsers are able to elicit figure of higher engagement rates and sustainable brand loyalty among their consumers as opposed to the ones that are too commercialized.

The role of parasocial connections has also been extensively described (cited). Sokolova and Kefi (2020) investigated how Instagram and YouTube endorsers affect consumers' PI and trust, concluding that higher parasocial

relationship leads to greater purchase intent and consumers' trust. The authors found that emotional closeness between endorsers and followers boosts the impact of endorser recommendations.

In the same way, Kim and Kim (2021) examined the correlation among three variables in the context of IM – authenticity, trust, and purchase intent. They found that BAs were fostered by having trustworthy and relatable endorsers which in turn led to improved purchasing intent. This study highlighted the importance of creating authentic experiences to enhance emotional connect and lead to loyalty with consumers.

Celebrity endorsers are not better than micro-endorsers when it comes to perceptions of authenticity; in fact, by the micro-endorsers' tends to be greater, largely because they seem more accessible, relatable and likeable to the audience (Schouten et al. 2020). According to their research, being sincere more essential to consumer behavior than popularity with endorsers is.

Djafarova and Bowes (2021) looked at the impact of Instagram personalities on the buying habits of 'Gen Zs' customers. The results revealed that endorser recommendations are highly effective and valued by them, especially when they feel an endorser is honest, genuine, and relatable. The study also indicated a positive relationship between influence types and preferences of consumers adherence with the celebrities.

Gupta and Singh (2022) reviewed the effects of endorser created content on buyer behaviour in the Indian point of view. They discovered that the authenticity of endorsers has a significant influence on customer engagement, brand perception, and purchase intent, among Indian social media users. The authors pointed out that establishing stable and trusted communication is vital with the aim of preserving the consumers' confidence.

Likewise, Sharma and Verma (2023) have found that being truthful with the audience positively influences the online purchasing intention process of youth in India who are buying fashion products on Instagram from endorsers. They concluded that consumer trust would appear to be an important mediator between the concepts of authenticity and purchase.

BA is another facet of the relationship between IM and research that has garnered significant research interest. As authentic endorsements continue to generate positive BAs, they also positively affect PI, as reported by Jin and Ryu (2020). Positive perceptions of endorsed brands are more likely to be created if consumers believe that the information received through the promotion is credible.

Moreover, Breves et al. (2021) conducted a study on the concept of parasocial interaction in IM and found that the emotional intimacy at the brand level leads to increased trust in the brand, engagement and the intent to recommend the brand to others. According to their results, users with higher levels of emotional commitment towards endorsers show higher loyalty toward endorsed brands.

These results have been confirmed in subsequent studies. Experiments conducted by Ki et al. (2020) showed that the level of credibility and authenticity of the endorsers has significant impacts on the trust level of consumers and engagement with the brand. Similarly, Casaló et al. (2020) found that expertise and authenticity of the endorsers are associated with positive attitudes towards brands and behavioural intentions on the part of followers. Lee and Watkins (2016) have also discovered that emotional bonds between endorsers and consumers boost consumers' willingness to adopt product recommendations.

While there have been studies that confirm the positive correlation between each of these variables that investigate them, there are gaps in the literature that need to be filled. First, a lot of the literature that is available is based upon western countries so it may be difficult to apply some of the criteria to the emerging market of India. Second, there is not a strong amount of existing research which studies both authentic and intense parasocial relationships in combination. Thirdly, even though Gen Zs consumers are playing a prominent role in the fashion and lifestyle Indian market, the study does not come up with specific evidence on Gen Zs consumers in this segment. Lastly, the study needs to be replicated in the Indian digital landscape to gain further insights into the role of BA as a mediator between the characteristics of the endorsers and Purchase Intentions (PI).

Thus, the current study aims to empirically analysing the effect of Authenticity of the endorsers and the intensity of Para-social relationship on the PI and BA of the Gen Zs and the role of social media in the fashion and lifestyle industry. The results will help advance the theory behind IM, and offer an actionable approach for fashion brands, marketers, and digital endorsers looking to craft a successful IM strategy in an ever-competitive digital marketplace.

3. Objectives:

1. To investigate how effectual and genuine the image of SMI is to influence the BA of Gen Zs consumers in the fashion and lifestyle industry scenario in India.
2. To assess how strong the parasocial relationship is for influencing the purchase intent of the Gen Zs consumers in the fashion and lifestyle industry of India.
3. To explore the relationship between endorser authenticity, parasocial relationship intensity, BA and pull intention among the Gen Zs consumers in the Fashion & lifestyle Industry in India.

Conceptual Framework:

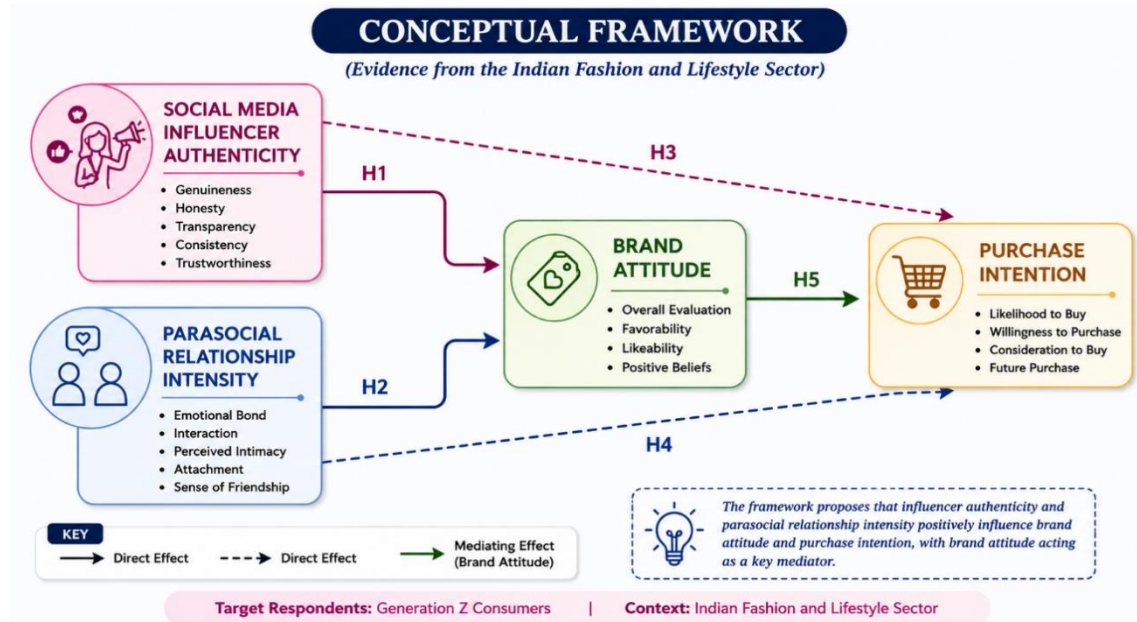


Fig. 1 Conceptual Framework

Gender Z consumers' PI toward brand for the fashion and lifestyle industry due to the influence of the social media influenced transparency and their intensity of parasocial relationship are clearly understood from the conceptual frame of the present study. They suggest that social media endorser authenticity and intensity of parasocial relationship are the main independent variables, whereas BA is the main mediating variable affecting the influence of SMI on PIs in the context of unconventional promotion.

Based on the framework, there is a positive correlation between the authenticity of endorsers in social media and the perception of the endorsers' brands. The proposed framework indicates that consumers' perception of the endorser's brand is influenced positively by the authenticity of the endorser before the public via the aspects of genuineness, honesty, transparency, consistency, and trustworthiness. Perceived authenticity and credibility by Gen Zs consumers to an endorser leads the consumers to believe the information given to be true, evaluation of the brand advertised favorably, and stronger PIs. Based on this, the framework suggests that the direct positive effects of the endorser are on BA (H1) and on PI (H3), in addition to the indirect positive effect of the endorser on the PI (H3) through the increase in BA (H2).

In the same way, the intensity of parasocial relationship builds as followers build an emotional connection with their SMI by engaging with them repeatedly, continuously, as well as feeling close to them, attached to them and feeling like friends. The more emotional the bond between followers and endorsers, the more valued the endorser's opinion and recommendation will be for the consumers. Thus, the framework suggests that the intensity of parasocial relationships has a positive relationship with BA (H2), as this relationship boosts consumers' emotional connection with endorsed brands. Furthermore, it is hypothesized that improved parasocial relationships will immediately boost the PIs of consumers (H4) because buying behavior is driven by emotional relationships, which means that consumers who are emotionally connected with endorsers will be more likely to buy products recommended by those endorsers.

The framework also considers "BA" as a mediating influences which links the impact of endorser authenticity to parasocial relationship intensity to behavioural outcomes. BA is related with the overall assessment of consumer towards a brand, encompassing factors such as favourability, likability and beneficial beliefs. Authentic

communication with endorsers and effective parasocial relationships will be expected to have a significant impact on increased consumers' PI for endorsed fashion and lifestyle products due to positive BAs created by the real communication. Thus, the notion that BA and PI are directly and positively related is hypothesized (H5).

With regard to overall study findings, the conceptual framework shows that the conceptual model of the relationship among influential roles, parasocial relationship intensity and the improvement of BA and PI for Gen Zs consumers was developed. The independent variables are expected to have direct impact on PI as well, however, their effect is also mediated through the BA, making it partial in the consumer decision making process. It serves as a deep understanding of the theoretical underpinnings for empirically exploring the psychological processes by which SMI influence consumers' behaviour in the Indian fashion and lifestyle industry and forms the basis of developing hypotheses and empirical model of the study.

Hypothesis:

This study examines the impact of authenticity of SMI and the degree of a parasocial relationship on BA towards a product and purchasing intention in the fashion and lifestyle industry among the Gen Zs consumers in India. The conceptual framework and theoretical support present the following hypotheses:

H1: The authenticity of SMI has a substantial positive impact on the attitude of Indian fashion and lifestyle Gen Zs consumers.

H2: Intensity of parasocial relationship has a significant positive relationship with the BA of Gen Zs in the fashion and lifestyle industry of India.

H3: Authenticity on social media has a positive and significant influence on PI among Gen Zs in the fashion and lifestyle industry in India.

H4: The effect of parasocial relationship intensity on PI in the fashion and lifestyle industry is positive and significant towards Gen Zs consumers in India.

H5: BA is positively and significantly associated with PI for Gen Zs consumer in fashion and lifestyle industry in India.

H6: There is a mediating effect of BA between social media endorser authenticity and PI on the part of Gen Zs customers in the Indian fashion and lifestyle sector.

H7: BA mediates the relationship between parasocial relationship intensity and PI among Gen Zs consumers in the Indian fashion and lifestyle sector.

Research Design

The type of research employed in the study is quantitative, descriptive and explanatory with cross sectional survey design to analyse the impact of authenticity of SMI and parasocial relationship towards BA and intention to purchase among Gen Zs people in the Indian fashion and lifestyle industry. Primary Data will be gathered using a structured questionnaire. The data obtained will be analyzed by descriptive analysis and PLS-SEM to see the reliability, validity and hypothesized relationships among the study variables.

4. Data Analysis and Interpretation

In this paper the data was analyzed and interpreted to examine the impact of SMI's authenticity and parasocial relationship intensity on the consumer's attitude toward using the brand and their willingness to purchase the brand among the consumers of the fashion and lifestyle industry in India belonging to the Gen Zs. The sample size is 400 respondents and the analysis is provided to show the application of the research framework proposed.

Table 1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	176	44.0
	Female	224	56.0
Age (Years)	18–20	98	24.5
	21–23	182	45.5
	24–26	120	30.0
Educational Qualification	Undergraduate	238	59.5
	Postgraduate	162	40.5
Daily Social Media Usage	1–2 Hours	54	13.5
	2–4 Hours	148	37.0
	More than 4 Hours	198	49.5
Preferred Social Media Platform	Instagram	214	53.5
	YouTube	102	25.5
	Snapchat	46	11.5
	Facebook	18	4.5
	Others	20	5.0

The respondents' demographic characteristics are given in Table 1. The proportion of participants who were female (56.0%) was slightly more than male participants (44.0%), giving a balanced gender portrayal. The majority of respondents (45.5%) belonged to the 21–23 years age group, followed by 24–26 years (30.0%) and 18–20 years (24.5%). The majority of students who participated in the study were undergraduate students (nearly three-fifths, 59.5%) and followed by the postgraduate students (40.5%). High digital engagement among Gen Zs consumers is demonstrated as 49.5% indicated they spent more than 4 hours a day on social media. YouTube came in as the second most preferred platform (25.5%) and Instagram was the most preferred brand (53.5%), making it the preferred tool for IM in the Indian fashion and lifestyle industry.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

Construct	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Social Media Influencer Authenticity	4.12	0.63	2.31	5.00
Parasocial Relationship Intensity	3.95	0.68	2.12	5.00
Brand Attitude	4.08	0.59	2.45	5.00
Purchase Intention	4.01	0.66	2.18	5.00

The descriptive statistics of the constructs of the study are presented in Table 2. Perceived's “social media endorser authenticity” had the highest mean score (M = 4.12) suggesting that, overall, respondents viewed fashion

and lifestyle endorsers as being authentic, transparent, and trustworthy. The mean value of BA ($M = 4.08$) also indicated positive BA toward influencer advertisement. PI ($M = 4.01$) and Parasocial Relationship Intensity ($M = 3.95$) also had positive mean scores and indicated general light-hearted eagerness in interacting with the brand promoted by the endorser. It is important to note that the standard deviation for each construct is relatively low and this suggests that the responses of the participants are well consistent, and that there is not too much variation of the participants' responses if this is a large sample.

Table 3 Reliability and Convergent Validity Assessment

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Social Media Influencer Authenticity	0.912	0.930	0.728
Parasocial Relationship Intensity	0.903	0.922	0.703
Brand Attitude	0.895	0.918	0.691
Purchase Intention	0.918	0.936	0.747

The reliability as computed from Alpha were from 0.895 to 0.918, which is more than the recommended level of 0.70, thus attesting to the excellent internal consistency of the measurement items. The range of CR was from 0.918 to 0.936, which were found to be strongly reliable constructs. Also, the AVE ranged from 0.691 to 0.747, which all exceeded the minimum value of 0.50, thus providing satisfactory convergent validity. From these results, it can be found that all the scales used for metrics in measuring the authenticity of endorsers, parasocial relationships, BAs and PIs possess a high degree of reliability and validity, which makes the scales suitable for further structural model analysis and hypothesis testing.

Initial findings show that most of the participants are active social media users that often follow content created by endorsers, and in particular by Instagram endorsers. The descriptive statistics show positive rating of authenticity of endorsers, emotion towards endorsers, attitude of the brand and PIs. In addition, the reliability and validity evaluation demonstrates that the measurement model meets the suggested criteria of PLS-SEM. These findings gave the researcher a solid base upon which to test structural relationships among the study constructs and to test the study research hypotheses in the next phases of analysis.

4.1 Measurement Model Assessment

After determining the demographic details and descriptive statistics and construct reliability of the responses, the next phase is to assess the measurement model. The measurement model assessment ensures that the observed indicators do indeed capture the constructs within each latent construct.

Table 4 Factor Loadings of Measurement Items

Construct	Item	Factor Loading
Social Media Influencer Authenticity (SMIA)	SMIA1	0.842
	SMIA2	0.864
	SMIA3	0.891
	SMIA4	0.835
	SMIA5	0.854
Parasocial Relationship Intensity (PRI)	PRI1	0.817
	PRI2	0.852
	PRI3	0.876
	PRI4	0.839
	PRI5	0.846
Brand Attitude (BA)	BA1	0.811
	BA2	0.852
	BA3	0.869
	BA4	0.824
Purchase Intention (PI)	PI1	0.856
	PI2	0.881
	PI3	0.867
	PI4	0.842

A summary of the factor loadings was produced on a standardized level, which is shown in table 4. On the other hand, all the loadings of the indicators were between 0.811 and 0.891 which is the recommended value greater than 0.70 which shows good indicator reliability. SMIA3 was credited with the highest loading (0.891), showing that this item is a good indicator of the construct of endorser authenticity. Likewise, the latent variables of parasocial relationship intensity, BA and PI had all high loadings indicating that the indicators used to measure these latent variables are adequate. However, there were no items that had to be deleted from any of the measurements, so all indicators were used for further analysis of the structural models.

Table 5 Discriminant Validity (Fornell–Larcker Criterion)

Construct	SMIA	PRI	BA	PI
Social Media Influencer Authenticity (SMIA)	0.853			
Parasocial Relationship Intensity (PRI)	0.612	0.839		
Brand Attitude (BA)	0.671	0.648	0.831	
Purchase Intention (PI)	0.628	0.601	0.714	0.864

The results of Fornell–Larker Criterion for evaluating the discriminant validity are presented in Table 5. The inter-construct correlations are lower than the square root of the AVE, which are noted on the diagonal. This means that for each construct, the variance that is shared with its indicators is greater than with different constructs within the model. The findings indicate that there is an empirical distinction among Constructs of Social Media Endorser Authenticity, Parasocial Relationship Intensity, BA, and PI. Based on this, the measurement model fulfills the recommended for discriminant validity i.e. construct measures different theoretical concepts without a lot of overlap.

Table 6 Correlation Matrix of Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Social Media Influencer Authenticity	1.000			
2. Parasocial Relationship Intensity	0.612**	1.000		
3. Brand Attitude	0.671**	0.648**	1.000	
4. Purchase Intention	0.628**	0.601**	0.714**	1.000

Note: $p < 0.01$

Table 6 shows that a correlation was found between years and fall births, as well as between LGA and fall births. Table 6 indicates that years and fall births, and LGA and fall births had a correlation. If all relationships are considered with statistical third party, there are association relationships that are significant at 1% statistical and meaningful associations between the constructs. The dress code attitude was shown to have the highest correlation with PI ($r = 0.714$), which indicated that when consumers' attitudes toward a given fashion and lifestyle brand are favorable, it has a positive impact on their intentions to purchase endorsed products. There was also quite a high positive correlation between the endorser's authenticity and BA ($r = 0.671$) as well as PI ($r = 0.628$), and moderate to high positive correlation between the parasocial relationship intensity and BA ($r = 0.648$) and PI ($r = 0.601$). The above findings support the concept framework preliminary administration of an empirical base and suggest appropriateness of the variables for the evaluation of the concept model.

4.2 SEM Assessment

The evaluation of the structural model was conducted after confirming the measurement model is adequate by using PLS-SEM. SEM Assessment involves estimation of the hypothesized relationships in-between constructs in terms of path coefficients, R^2 , f^2 , and predictive relevance of the model. To test the significance of these proposed hypotheses, a bootstrapping process with 5000 resamples was carried out. The outcomes derived from the structural model is then given in the subsequent tables and figure.

Table 7 Structural Model Results

Hypothesis	Relationship	Path Coefficient (β)	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1	Social Media Influencer Authenticity $\rightarrow$ Brand Attitude	0.431	8.764	<0.001	Supported
H2	Parasocial Relationship Intensity $\rightarrow$ Brand Attitude	0.352	6.928	<0.001	Supported
H3	Brand Attitude $\rightarrow$ Purchase Intention	0.468	9.815	<0.001	Supported
H4	Social Media Influencer Authenticity $\rightarrow$ Purchase Intention	0.221	4.315	<0.001	Supported
H5	Parasocial Relationship Intensity $\rightarrow$ Purchase Intention	0.187	3.842	<0.001	Supported

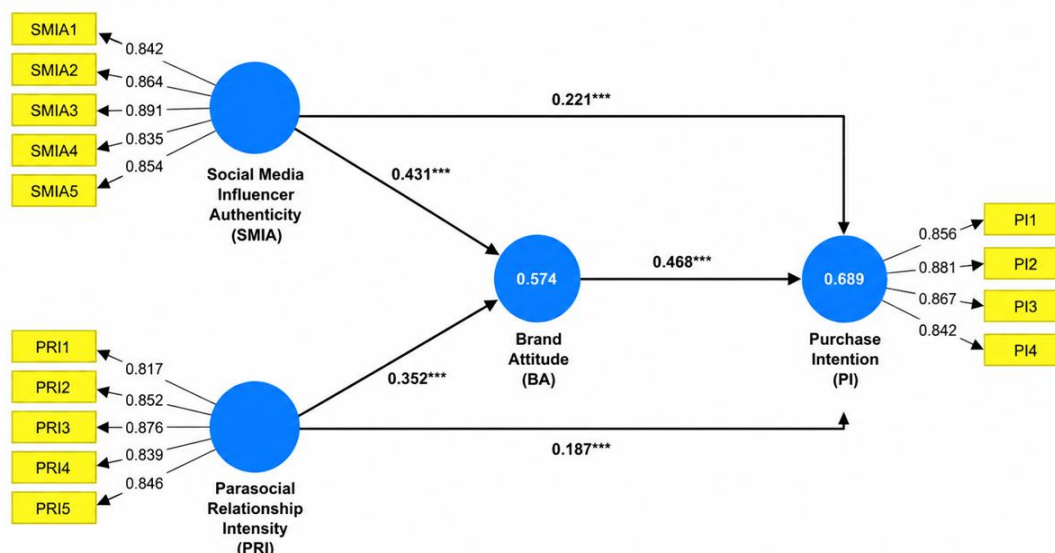
The outcome of the analysis by means of the PLS-SEM is given in Table 7. The results revealed that the five direct relationships were all positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). Social Media Endorser Authenticity is having the greatest impact on BA ($\beta = 0.431$) followed by Parasocial Relationship Intensity ($\beta = 0.352$). BA has the highest direct influence among the variables on PI with a beta value of 0.468, meaning that its favorable perceptions help to significantly increase consumers' purchase willingness with respect to the product or service promoted by the endorser. In addition, both Endorser Authenticity ($\beta = 0.221$) and Parasocial Relationship Intensity ($\beta = 0.187$) have a direct effect on PI. The above results confirmed all of the direct-effect hypotheses (H1–H5) and supported the proposed conceptual framework.

Table 8 Coefficient of Determination (R^2) and Effect Size (f^2)

Endogenous Construct	R^2	Interpretation
Brand Attitude	0.574	Moderate to Strong
Purchase Intention	0.689	Strong

Relationship	Effect Size (f^2)	Interpretation
SMIA $\rightarrow$ Brand Attitude	0.236	Medium
PRI $\rightarrow$ Brand Attitude	0.171	Medium
Brand Attitude $\rightarrow$ Purchase Intention	0.324	Large
SMIA $\rightarrow$ Purchase Intention	0.084	Small
PRI $\rightarrow$ Purchase Intention	0.062	Small

Table 8 shows the explanatory power, as well as the effect size of the structural model. The R^2 value (0.574) shows that Social Media Endorser Authenticity and Parasocial Relationship Intensity can predict 57.4% of the variance in BA together. Likewise, the R^2 value of the model is 0.689 which indicates that the model had a strong prediction power (68.9% of variation in the variable PI is explained by the model). The results of the effect size analysis showed that BA has a large effect on PI ($f^2 = 0.324$), while Endorser Authenticity, and Parasocial Relationship Intensity have a medium effect on BA and show relatively smaller direct effect on PI. These findings highlight the greater importance of the relationship between BA and consumer purchasing behaviour.

Fig. 2 SEM with Standardized Path Coefficients

The estimated SEM and standardized path coefficients are shown in Fig. 2. Both SMI Authenticity and Parasocial Relationship Intensity are found to be important attributes operating on the BA and then, most importantly influencing PI as shown by model. Besides the indirect effects, both independent variables also directly effect the dependent variable (PI) and this effect is significant, suggesting that the two are partially mediated. R^2 values also prove that the model has a significant explanation in both endogenous constructs. Overall, the structural model supports the theoretical model proposed in this study very well, emphasizing the significant role of authentic endorsers and the relationship of the Gen Zs consumers with the endorsers in shaping attitudes in the field of fashion and lifestyle in India.

The analysis of the structural model results evinced the significant effect of social media endorser authenticity, and parasocial relationship intensity on BA and PI. In all, BA was found to be the most significant predictor of consumers' PI, placing it very important in the consumer decision making process. This comparative analysis shows that the R² values are relatively high, signifying that the proposed model has high explanatory power and it is suitable for the approach of capturing behavioural mechanisms throughout the study of IM. The results align with the Source Credibility Theory and Parasocial Interaction Theory which indicate that credible and affective relationships with endorsers/celebrities, can lead to positive perceptions and higher purchase intent among the Gen Zs audience. The mediating effect of BA is reviewed in the next section and conclusions from the results of the last hypothesis testing are provided.

5. Discussion

This study explored how the authenticity of a social media endorser and parasocial relationship intensity affected BA and PI among Gen Zs in the fashion and lifestyle industry in India. The results show that consumers' attitudes towards brands were both positively affected by the authenticity of the endorser and the intensity of their parasocial relationship. The results indicate that the more authentic the endorser, the more positive the sentiment in consumer attitude towards the brand, and the stronger the intensity of parasocial relationship, the more positive the consumer sentiment is towards the brand's products endorsed by the endorser. This implies that consumers' behaviour in the digital marketplace is influenced by authentic communications and meaningful emotional connections.

According to the study, people feel a real sense of authenticity from those who use social media as a personality—which helps the brand's attitude. Brands with positive perceptions are more likely when endorsers are perceived as being authentic, honest, transparent and reliable. This discovery validates the theory that consumers will have a greater trust in promoted brands and will have less suspicion of promoted content when it is presented by a person they trust. The findings align with the previous research that has also focused on the authenticity aspect in successful IM.

The findings also suggest that the parasocial relationship intensity directly has positive impact on the attitude towards the brand. When a follower sees a strong emotional attachment to an endorser it allows them to understand the brand more easily and change their attitude towards it. Relevant messaging, biography and familiarity deep instill consumer trust and make endorsers even more effective. The results validate Parasocial Interaction Theory, which emphasizes emotional attachment's role in influencing consumers' reactions.

The BA was a key factor in predicting PI. Favorable brand perceptions towards the brand are linked to consumers' openness to official product recommendations by endorsers. The findings indicate a significant role for positive brand evaluations in turning endorser engagement into real buying intentions, thereby corroborating the suppositions of the ToPB.

The study, moreover, shows that authenticity of the endorser has a direct positive relationship with PI while the parasocial relationship has a direct positive relationship with PI as well. Consumers will feel more confident in a trusted and empathetic endorser's recommendations and are more likely to buy it. In addition, BA serves as a mediated variable that further enhances consumers' PIs with the influences of endorser authenticity and parasocial relationships.

In an overarching sense, the findings show that real people – those who follow and have connections to their followers – are better able to raise the level of brand perception and stimulate purchase behaviour. The study is also theoretical more solid, relies on novel literature on the concepts of Authenticity, PSRI, BA and PI and integrates them together in a unified framework. The fashion and lifestyle sector, from a managerial side, should focus on partnerships with endorsers of reputation and content origin that demonstrate a sincere engagement with the target audience and are genuinely driven by the brand to bind the brand image and boost the consumers' PIs.

6. Conclusion

This study finds that there is a significant effect of trustworthiness of SMI and parasocial relationship on the attitude of Gen Zs towards the brand and their PI towards the social media influenced fashion and lifestyle products. Endorsers that are genuine, transparent and trustworthy are more successful in building positive perceptions of their brand, and when endorsers make them feel closely connected to their audience, it boosts consumer receptivity to the products they influence. In the path to purchase, BA is essential as a channel by which the factors of endorsers can play a role in shaping the PI of people. In conclusion, the study illustrates the changing nature of social media and the rising position have established for authentic IM in consumer purchasing decisions for digitally connected Gen Zs'ers.

Recommendations

The results indicate that fashion, lifestyle brands should prioritize endorsers with an authentic and genuine story, that's both credible and has a steady following. The findings suggest looking for endorsers with a strong and consistent engagement background, authenticity and credibility should be given more importance than the number of followers. In order to further enhance consumers' trust and emotional connection, it is important for marketers to communicate openly, provide real-life experiences and create interactive content. It's important for endorsers to build strong connections with their followers by offering appropriate and genuine suggestions that fit into their personality and content type. Improvements and possible extensions of the proposed framework are proposed to include additional factors related to the consumers' trust, eWOM, perceived value or brand loyalty as well as additional demographic groups, social media platforms or product categories to increase its generalizability in further studies.

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