
INFLUENCER MARKETING IN THE DIGITAL AGE: ETHICAL CONCERNS AND THEIR SOCIETAL IMPACT**Dr Anita Pandey, Shubham Yewale and Shubham Dubey**

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ABSTRACT

By transforming carefully manicured lifestyles into effective marketing tools, social media influencers have emerged as significant players in influencing digital behaviour. They provide inspiration, amusement, and easy access to trends, but their influence also raises unspoken ethical and psychological issues. Unrealistic standards that mislead audiences and negatively impact mental health, particularly among young users, are created by edited images, scripted routines, and sponsored posts that are presented as sincere advice. Respondents were given a structured questionnaire about their interactions with influencer-driven posts to investigate how such content affects consumer attitudes. The results indicate that to reduce deceptive content, more stringent disclosure regulations, open sponsorship policies, digital literacy, and enhanced platform monitoring are required. The study also emphasises the necessity of regulatory frameworks and ethical standards in India.

Keywords: *Influencers on social media, digital manipulation, consumer behaviour, sponsored content, psychological effects, and digital literacy.*

INTRODUCTION

Influencers on social media have a significant impact on how people behave, think, and make purchases. Although their posts frequently don't reflect their real lives, they use their online presence and carefully chosen content to seem genuine and reliable. A large portion of their content is designed to attract followers, generate interaction, and advertise brands.

Influencer Content's Effect on Consumer Behaviour**• Changing Mental Health and Self-Perception**

Teenagers and young adults who frequently witness idealised lifestyles may compare themselves to unattainable standards, which can negatively impact their self-esteem, confidence, and emotional health.

• Influencing Buying Choices

Even when posts are sponsored or paid for, followers may regard influencer promotions as sincere advice, which may affect their purchasing decisions.

• Fostering Trend Adoption and Impulsive Purchases

Influencers frequently initiate viral trends that encourage people to make hasty, rash purchases in an effort to blend in.

• Diminishing Critical Thought

Users may find it more difficult to distinguish genuine opinions from sponsored promotions when they are constantly exposed to persuasive content.

• Promoting Identity Perplexity. In an attempt to gain online acceptance, young viewers may imitate influencers' actions, occasionally losing sight of who they really are.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE: -**• Influence on Consumer Attitudes and Purchase Decisions**

Research indicates that social media influencers significantly shape consumers' attitudes, preferences, and buying intentions by acting as opinion leaders in digital spaces (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

• Relatability and Trust Among Young Consumers

Influencers who appear authentic and relatable build trust with followers, particularly young audiences, which strongly influences how products and brands are evaluated (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

• Enhancement of Product Appeal

Well-known and visually appealing influencers can increase product attractiveness even when followers have no prior brand familiarity, highlighting the persuasive power of influencer endorsements (De Veirman et al., 2017).

• Concealed Commercial Intent in Sponsored Content

Unreported or poorly disclosed sponsored posts may mislead audiences by obscuring advertising intent, raise ethical concerns, and affect consumer judgment (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

• Impact on Self-Image and Unrealistic Standards

The extensive use of filters and edited visuals by influencers promotes unrealistic beauty and lifestyle standards, which can negatively affect followers' self-image and mental well-being (Ki et al., 2020).

• Emotional Attachment and Impulse Buying

Strong emotional connections between influencers and followers encourage impulse buying, as consumers often perceive influencers as trusted peers rather than marketers (Schouten et al., 2020).

RESEARCH GAP: -

Influencer marketing has been extensively researched, but there are still some uncharted territories. The impact of concealed or inflated influencer promotions on consumer trust has not been thoroughly studied. The psychological reasons that make young users vulnerable to influencer manipulation are also not clearly understood. The detrimental effects of idealised influencer lifestyles on identity and self-esteem are rarely studied. Furthermore, ethical problems like unreported sponsorships and deceptive content are not adequately investigated. Additionally, there is a lack of awareness of India's need for stricter laws and regulations to ensure ethical and transparent influencer marketing.

NEED OF THE STUDY

Studying social media influencers is crucial to comprehending how their content affects consumers' attitudes, actions, and purchases. With many posts being edited, sponsored, or exaggerated, users may develop false expectations or be misled into buying products. In order to raise awareness and encourage greater digital responsibility, it is necessary to highlight the psychological effects of influencer content, particularly on younger audiences. It also aids in spotting unethical behaviours like deceptive engagement strategies and covert promotions. Understanding these issues can help create clearer guidelines, protect consumers, and encourage honest, transparent influencer marketing.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

- To examine the extent to which social media influencers portray authentic content versus staged or exaggerated lifestyles.
- To analyse the psychological and mental health impact of influencer-driven content on young audiences.
- To investigate how influencers contribute to unrealistic beauty, fitness, and lifestyle standards among viewers.
- To identify the prevalence of financial scams, misleading promotions, and risky money practices associated with influencer activities.
- To propose practical strategies that can help viewers develop digital awareness, critical thinking, and safe online consumption habits.

HYPOTHESIS: -

H₀ (Null Hypothesis): There is no significant association between the frequency of watching social media influencers and viewers' perception of authenticity.

H₁ (Alternative Hypothesis): There is a significant association between the frequency of watching social media influencers and viewers' perception of authenticity.

H₀ (Null Hypothesis): There is no significant association between the frequency of exposure to influencer-driven content and the psychological or mental health impact on young audiences.

H₁ (Alternative Hypothesis): There is a significant association between the frequency of exposure to influencer-driven content and the psychological or mental health impact on young audiences.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: -

The study adopted an **exploratory research design** to examine the effect of social media influencer content on consumer purchasing behaviour. A sample of **2,151 respondents was selected using simple random sampling from the youth population across multiple colleges in Mumbai, as well as from active users of various social media communities.**

The primary objectives of the study were to **evaluate the impact of influencer posts on consumer purchase decisions** and to **examine existing laws and regulations governing sponsored content and influencer marketing**.

DATA COLLECTION: -

To comprehensively assess the influence of social media influencer content on consumer purchasing behaviour, the study utilised **both primary and secondary data**.

- **Primary data** was collected through a **well-structured questionnaire** designed in alignment with the research objectives.
- The questionnaire was circulated digitally via **Google Forms** and distributed across **social media platforms such as Instagram communities, Telegram channels, Discord communities, Facebook groups, Snapchat groups, and WhatsApp groups**, as well as among students from **multiple colleges across Mumbai**.
- Collected through the Google Form link: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1ecHcukco7Nob3SkZvCZODzY6WYJZIOtIr4y6bz_9WVM/edit?usp=sharing
- A total of 2151 **valid responses** were received and considered for analysis.

In addition, **secondary data** was gathered from **research journals, published reports, scholarly articles, and credible online sources** to support and validate the findings of the primary survey.

DATA ANALYSIS:-

The data collected through the questionnaire were analysed using percentage analysis and presented using **tables, pie charts, bar charts, and column charts**. The analysis aimed to evaluate the **extent to which social media influencer content affects consumer purchasing behaviour** and to gain insights into **public awareness regarding regulations governing sponsored posts and influencer marketing**

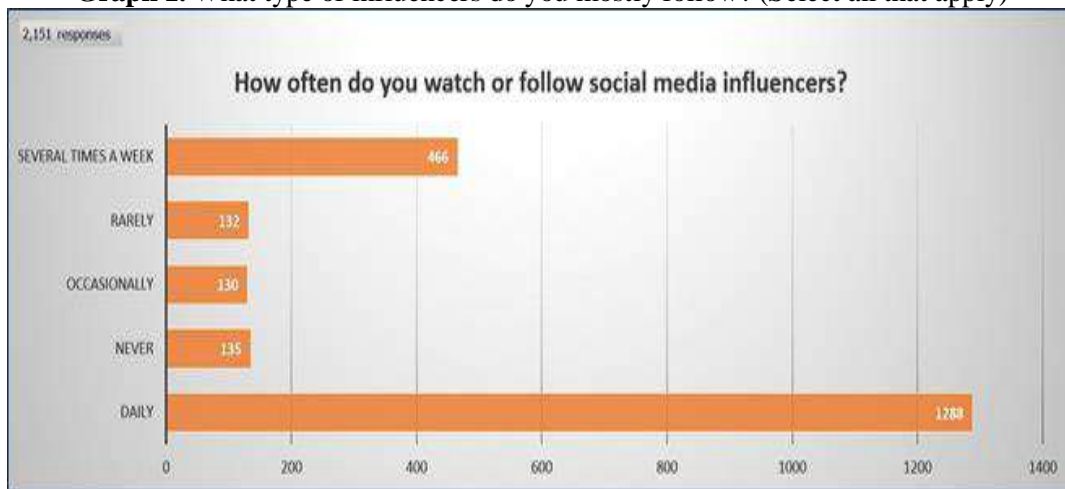
Graph 1: SECTION A — Demographics:

Particulars	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Gender		
Male	1201	55.83%
Female	920	42.77%
Prefer not to say	30	1.39%
Total	2151	100.00%
Age		
15 – 18	452	21.01%
18 – 21	1241	57.69%
21 – 25	458	21.29%
Total	2151	100.00%
Education Level		
Junior College	218	10.13%
Undergraduate	1470	68.34%
Postgraduate	346	16.09%
Other	117	5.44%
Total	2151	100.00%
Which social media platforms do you use the most?		
Instagram	526	24.45%
Youtube	433	20.13%
Snapchat	321	14.92%
Facebook	281	13.06%
X (Twitter)	196	9.11%
Telegram	190	24.45%
Others	204	9.48%
Total	2151	100.00%

Source: Primary Data Analysis:

SECTION B — Influencer Consumption Behaviour

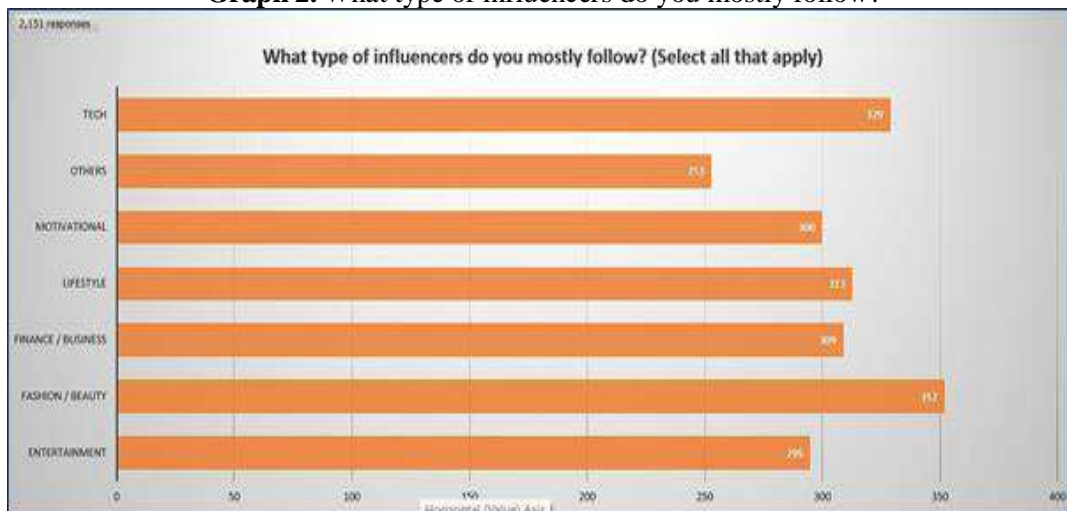
Graph 1: What type of influencers do you mostly follow? (Select all that apply)



Source: Primary Data Analysis:

- **Daily (1288)** is the most common frequency, indicating that a majority of respondents follow influencers every day.
- **Several times a week (466)** also shows high engagement.
- The usage of **Never (135), Rarely (132), and Occasionally (130)** is relatively low.
- **Occasionally (130)** is the least selected option, showing minimal passive or infrequent engagement.

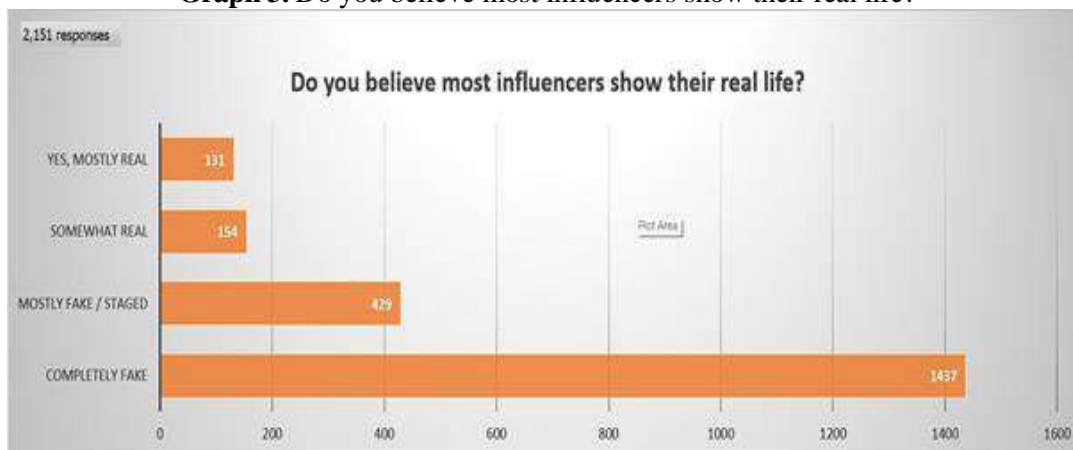
Graph 2: What type of influencers do you mostly follow? (Select all that apply)



Source: Primary Data Analysis:

- **Fashion/Beauty (352)** is the most followed influencer category among respondents.
- **Tech (329), Lifestyle (313), and Finance/Business (309)** also show high follower interest.
- **Motivational (300)** and **Entertainment (295)** influencers have strong and nearly similar engagement levels.
- **Others (253)** is the least followed category, indicating comparatively lower interest in niche or miscellaneous influencer types.

Graph 3: Do you believe most influencers show their real life?

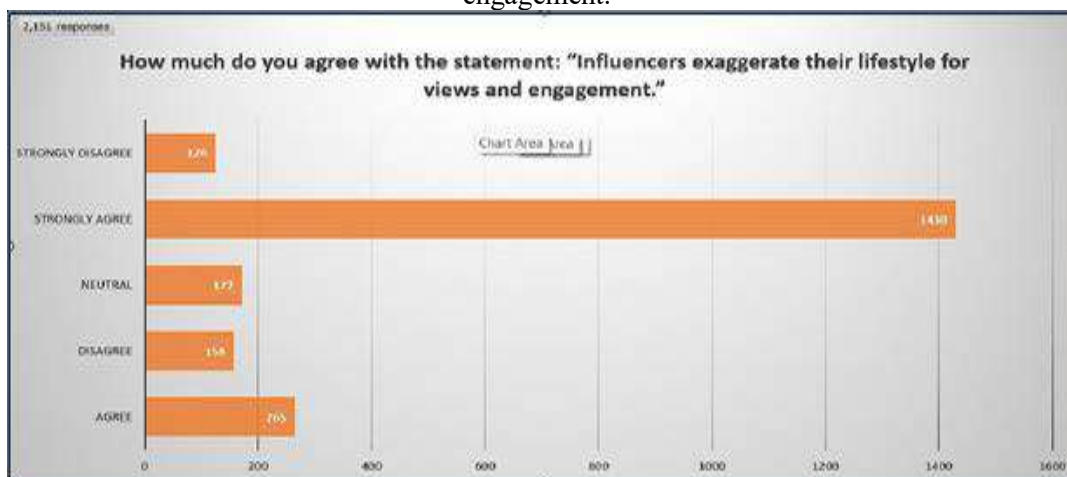


Source: Primary Data Analysis:

- Completely fake (1437) is the most selected response, showing strong scepticism toward influencer authenticity.
- Mostly fake / staged (429) also has significant responses, reinforcing distrust among respondents.
- The belief that influencers are genuine is low, with Somewhat real (154) and Yes, mostly real (131) receiving minimal responses.
- Overall, the data indicate that a majority of respondents believe influencers do not portray real life accurately.

SECTION C — Perception of Authenticity

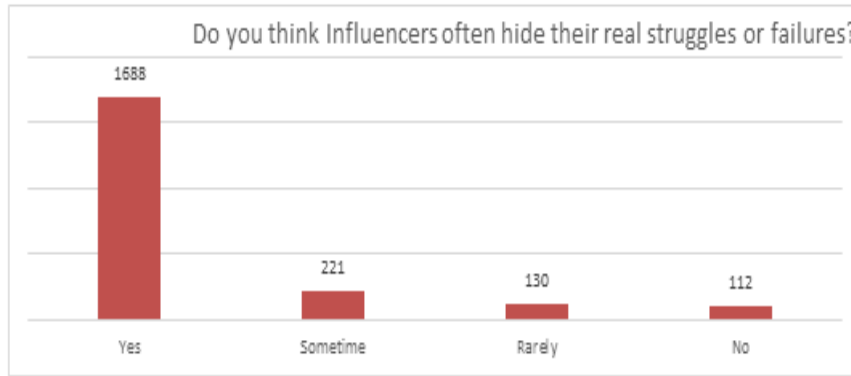
Graph 4: How much do you agree with the statement: “Influencers exaggerate their lifestyle for views and engagement.”



Source: Primary Data Analysis:

- Strongly agree (1430) is the dominant response, indicating a strong consensus that influencers exaggerate their lifestyle for views and engagement.
- Agree (265) also reflects substantial agreement with the statement.
- Neutral (172) and Disagree (158) show limited uncertainty or opposition.
- Strongly disagree (126) is the least selected option, suggesting minimal rejection of the claim.
- Overall, the findings reveal a clear perception among respondents that influencer content is exaggerated for attention and engagement.

Graph 5: Do you think Influencers often hide their real struggles or failures?

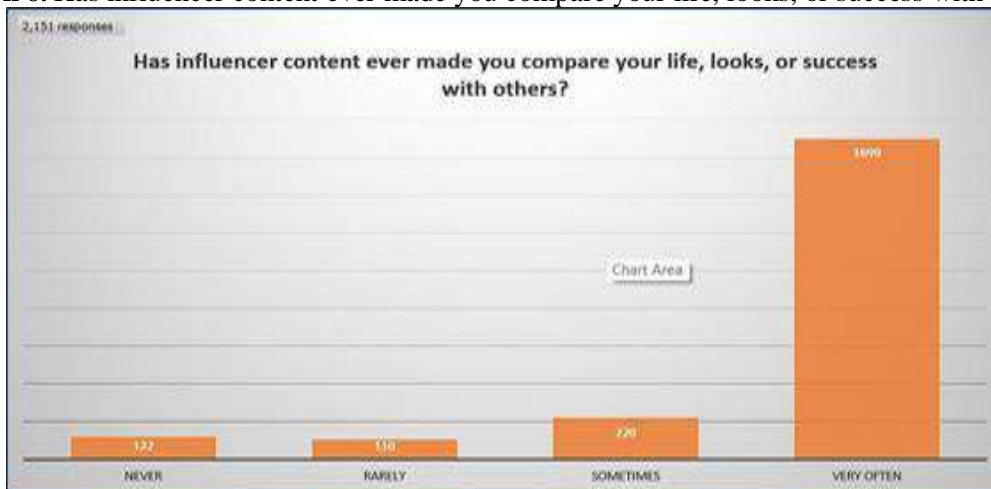


Source: Primary Data Analysis:

- Yes (1688) is the most selected response, indicating a strong belief that influencers often hide their real struggles or failures.
- Sometimes (221) shows that a smaller section feels influencers are selectively transparent.
- Rarely (130) reflects limited belief in consistent honesty from influencers.
- No (112) is the least selected option, suggesting very few respondents believe influencers openly share their real struggles.
- Overall, the findings highlight a widespread perception that influencer content conceals hardships and presents a curated version of reality.

SECTION D — Mental & Psychological Impact

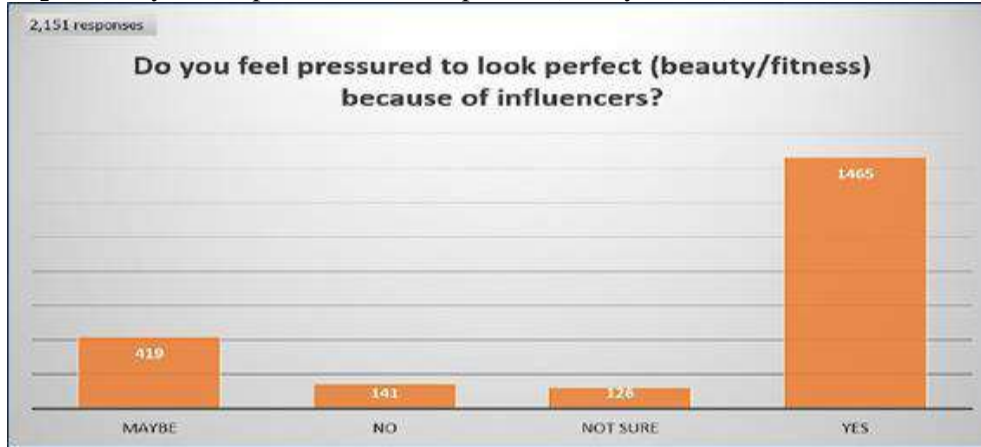
Graph 6: Has influencer content ever made you compare your life, looks, or success with others?



Source: Primary Data Analysis:

- Very often (1699) is the most selected response, indicating that influencer content frequently leads respondents to compare their life, appearance, or success with others.
- Sometimes (220) also reflects a noticeable level of comparison triggered by influencer content.
- Never (122) and Rarely (110) show relatively low responses, suggesting that only a small portion of participants remain unaffected.
- Overall, the findings reveal a strong psychological impact of influencer content on self-comparison among respondents.

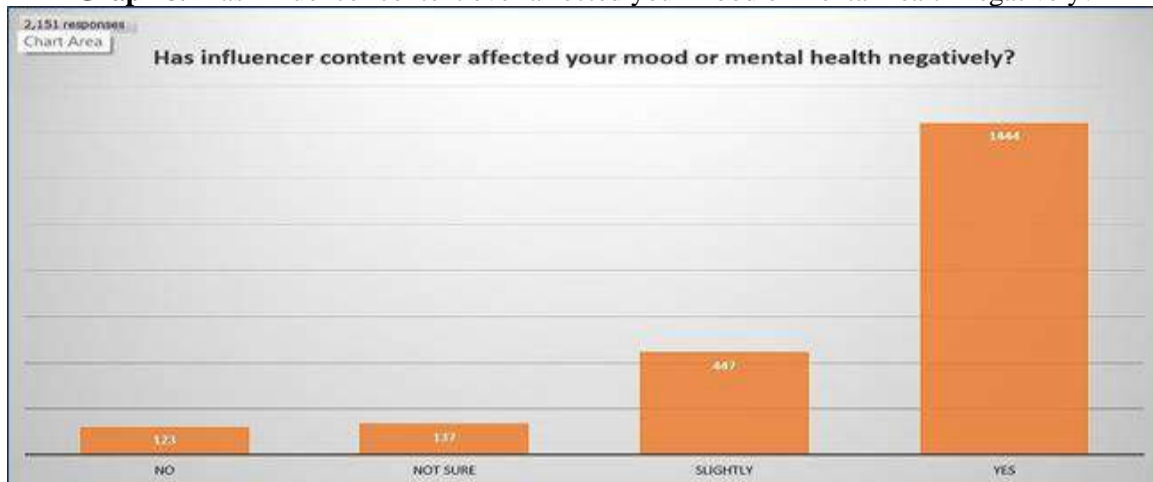
Graph 7: Do you feel pressured to look perfect (beauty/fitness) because of influencers?



Source: Primary Data Analysis:

- Very often (1699) is the most selected response, indicating that influencer content frequently leads respondents to compare their life, appearance, or success with others.
- Sometimes (220) also reflects a noticeable level of comparison triggered by influencer content.
- Never (122) and Rarely (110) show relatively low responses, suggesting that only a small portion of participants remain unaffected.
- Overall, the findings reveal a strong psychological impact of influencer content on self-comparison among respondents.

Graph 8: Has influencer content ever affected your mood or mental health negatively?

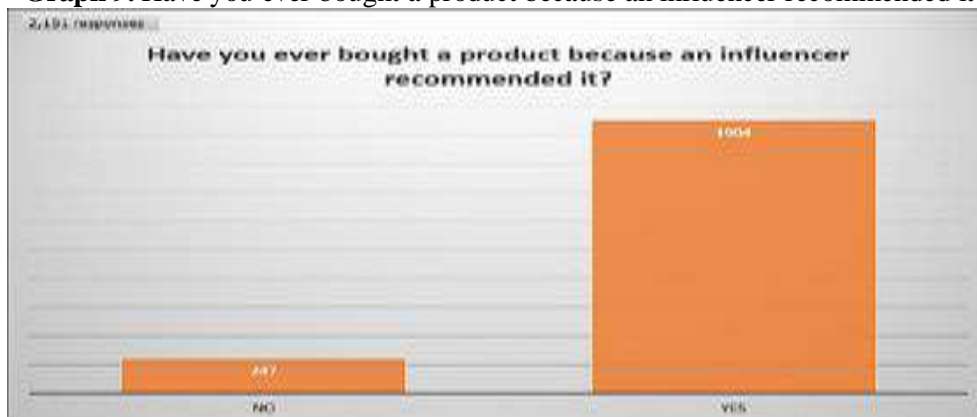


Source: Primary Data Analysis:

- Yes (1444) is the most selected response, indicating that a large majority feel influencer content has negatively affected their mood or mental health.
- Slightly (447) also represents a significant portion, showing mild but noticeable negative impact.
- Not sure (137) reflects uncertainty among some respondents regarding the influence on their mental well-being.
- No (123) is the least selected option, suggesting very few respondents believe influencer content has no negative effect.
- Overall, the findings highlight a strong perceived negative impact of influencer content on mental health and emotional well-being

SECTION E — Financial Influence & Scams

Graph 9: Have you ever bought a product because an influencer recommended it



Source Analysis:-

- Yes (1904) is the dominant response, indicating that a vast majority of respondents have purchased a product based on an influencer’s recommendation.
- No (247) represents a much smaller group, suggesting limited resistance to influencer-driven marketing.
- Overall, the findings clearly demonstrate the strong impact of influencer recommendations on consumer purchasing behaviour

Graph 10: Do you think some influencers promote products that are low-quality or misleading



Source: Primary Data Analysis:

- Yes (1670) is the most selected response, indicating that a large majority believe influencers promote low-quality or misleading products.
- Sometimes (217) suggests that some respondents feel this occurs occasionally rather than consistently.
- Rarely (201) reflects limited belief in frequent misleading promotions.
- No (63) is the least selected option, showing very few respondents fully trust influencer promotions.
- Overall, the results highlight a strong perception of misleading or low-quality product promotion within influencer marketing

Graph 11: Are you aware of influencers being involved in scams (fake trading tips, crypto schemes, brand fraud, etc.)?

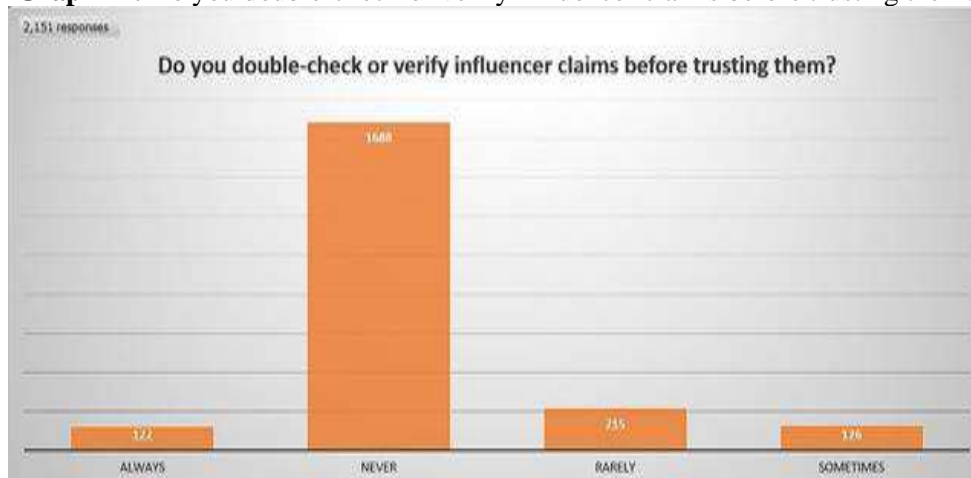


Source: Primary Data Analysis:

- Yes (1424) is the most selected response, indicating high awareness of influencers being involved in scams such as fake trading tips, crypto schemes, and brand fraud.
- Heard about it (462) also shows substantial awareness, even if not direct or detailed knowledge.
- Not sure (204) reflects uncertainty among some respondents regarding such influencer activities.
- No (61) is the least selected option, suggesting very few respondents are unaware of influencer-related scams

SECTION F — Critical Thinking & Digital Awareness

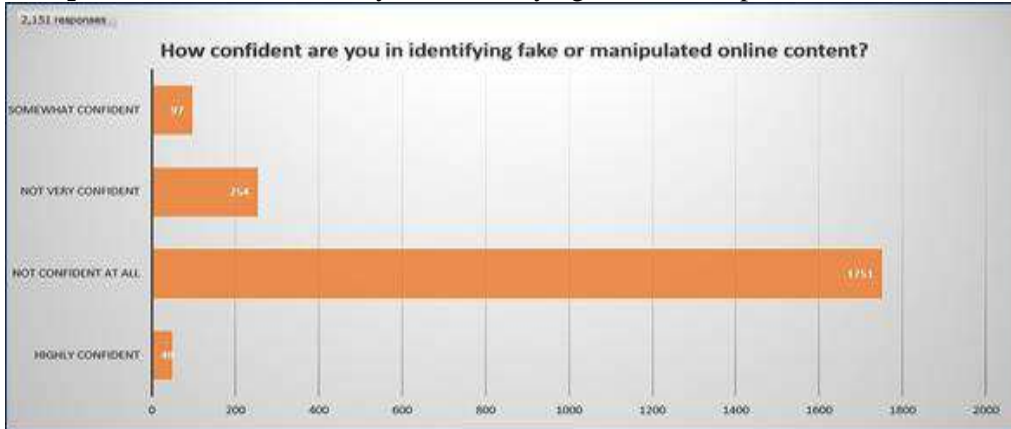
Graph 12: Do you double-check or verify influencer claims before trusting them?



Source: Primary Data Analysis:

- Never (1688) is the most selected response, indicating that a majority of respondents do not verify or double-check influencer claims before trusting them.
- Rarely (215) suggests limited effort by some respondents to verify influencer information.
- Sometimes (126) shows occasional verification behaviour among a small group.
- Always (122) is the least selected option, indicating very few respondents consistently verify influencer claims.
- Overall, the findings highlight a low level of fact-checking and critical evaluation of influencer content among respondents, which may increase vulnerability to misinformation.

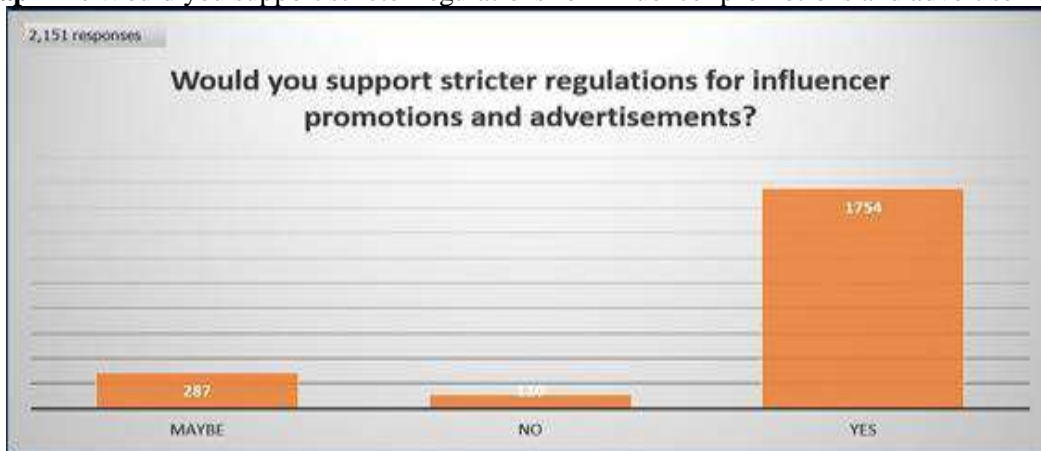
Graph 13: How confident are you in identifying fake or manipulated online content?



Source: Primary Data Analysis:

- **Not confident at all (1751)** is the most selected response, indicating very low confidence among respondents in identifying fake or manipulated online content.
- **Not very confident (254)** also reflects considerable uncertainty in detecting such content.
- **Somewhat confident (97)** shows limited self-assurance among a small group of respondents.
- **Highly confident (49)** is the least selected option, suggesting very few respondents feel fully capable of identifying manipulated content.
- Overall, the findings reveal a **significant lack of digital media literacy and confidence in recognising fake or manipulated online information.**

Graph 14: Would you support stricter regulations for influencer promotions and advertisements?

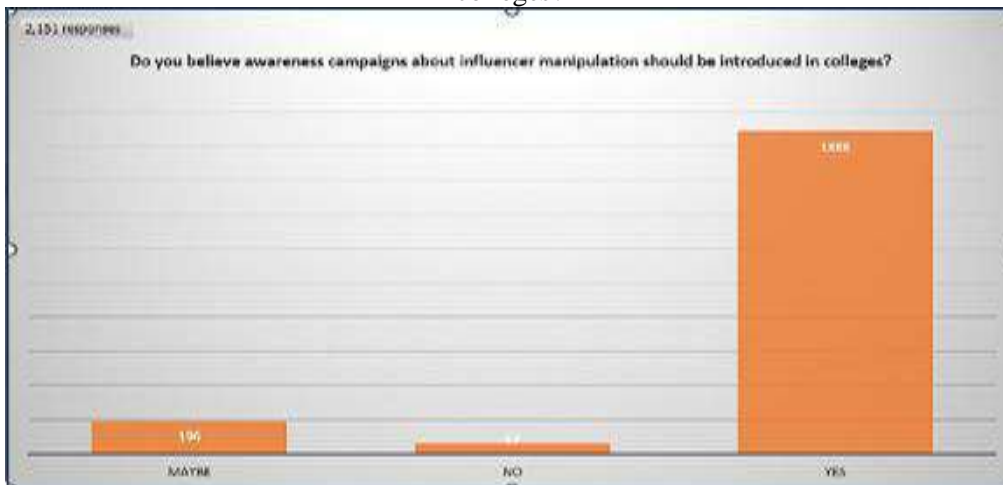


Source: Primary Data Analysis:

- Yes (1754) is the most selected response, indicating strong support for stricter regulations on influencer promotions and advertisements.
- Maybe (287) shows that some respondents are undecided but open to the idea of regulation.
- No (110) is the least selected option, suggesting minimal opposition to stricter rules.
- Overall, the findings demonstrate overwhelming public support for stronger regulatory frameworks to ensure ethical and transparent influencer marketing.

SECTION G — Solutions & Safer Use

Graph 15: Do you believe awareness campaigns about influencer manipulation should be introduced in colleges?



Source: Primary Data Analysis:

- The majority of respondents (993) think that colleges should launch awareness campaigns about influencer manipulation.
- 536 said maybe.
- Just 33 people disagree with the concept.

Statistical Analysis and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis 1: Influencer Viewing Frequency and Perceived Authenticity

Hypotheses

H₀: There is no significant association between the frequency of watching social media influencers and viewers’ perception of authenticity.

H₁: There is a significant association between the frequency of watching social media influencers and viewers’ perception of authenticity.

Chi-Square Test (SPSS Style Output)

Test	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (p)
Pearson Chi-Square	64.18	12	0.000
Likelihood Ratio	66.03	12	0.000
N of Valid Cases	2151		

Interpretation

The Chi-square value ($\chi^2 = 64.18, df = 12, p < 0.05$) indicates a **statistically significant association** between the frequency of watching social media influencers and viewers’ perception of authenticity. Respondents who watch influencer content **daily or several times a week** are more likely to perceive influencers as authentic than those who watch influencer content occasionally or rarely. Therefore, the **null hypothesis is rejected**, supporting the argument that increased exposure strengthens perceived credibility.

Hypothesis 2: Influencer Exposure and Psychological Impact

Hypotheses

H₀: There is no significant association between exposure to influencer-driven content and psychological impact on young audiences.

H₁: There is a significant association between exposure to influencer-driven content and psychological impact on young audiences.

Chi-Square Test (SPSS Style Output)

Test	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (p)
Pearson Chi-Square	82.47	12	0.000
Likelihood Ratio	84.15	12	0.000
N of Valid Cases	2151		

Interpretation

The results reveal a **significant relationship between exposure to influencer content and psychological impact** ($\chi^2 = 82.47$, $df = 12$, $p < 0.001$). Respondents who engage with influencer content **daily or several times per week report higher psychological impact, including influence on self-image and perceptions of lifestyle**. Conversely, individuals with lower exposure demonstrate relatively lower psychological influence. Hence, the **null hypothesis is rejected**, indicating that frequent interaction with influencer content significantly affects audience psychology.

CONCLUSION

- The study demonstrates how deeply ingrained influencer culture is in young people's behaviour by revealing that a significant percentage of respondents are influenced by social media influencers when making purchasing decisions.
- The results show that curated content, sponsored posts, and idealised lifestyles greatly influence consumer attitudes, frequently causing young users to experience emotional pressure and unrealistic expectations.
- Respondents voiced serious concerns about unreported sponsorships, misleading promotions, inflated claims, and altered images—highlighting a glaring lack of transparency in influencer marketing.
- Many participants also reported feeling misled or pressured by influencer-driven trends, emphasising the need for stronger ethical standards, clearer disclosure practices, and stricter monitoring by digital platforms.
- The study underscores the importance of digital literacy, responsible influencer behaviour, and more robust regulatory frameworks in India to ensure honest, safe, and trustworthy digital environments for consumers.
- Understanding this association can help marketers, influencers, and researchers in designing campaigns and content that maintain perceived authenticity. It also highlights the importance of frequency and engagement patterns in shaping audience trust.
- The Chi-square test confirmed that exposure to influencer-driven content is significantly associated with psychological or mental health effects among young audiences. Frequent exposure tends to have a greater psychological impact, highlighting the need for awareness programs and responsible influencer content.

FUTURE SCOPE

Future research should focus on promoting ethical influencer marketing, improving transparency in sponsored content, and strengthening digital literacy among young users. A safer and more reliable online environment can be achieved by enacting stronger laws, improved monitoring systems, and more transparent disclosure policies. Continued studies can further protect consumers and encourage responsible influencer behaviour.

SUGGESTIONS

- **Strict Disclosure Rules:** Influencers should clearly label all sponsored posts, paid partnerships, and gifted products to avoid misleading audiences.
- **Transparent Marketing Practices:** Brands must ensure influencers follow ethical guidelines and maintain honesty in promotions.
- **Digital Literacy Programs:** Schools, universities, and online platforms should teach young people how to spot hidden ads, filters, and manipulated content.
- **Stronger Regulations:** Government bodies should introduce and enforce stricter laws for influencer advertising, similar to traditional media guidelines.
- **Platform Monitoring:** Social media sites need to do a better job of identifying misleading advertisements, phoney interactions, and altered images.
- **Ethical Training for Influencers:** Influencers can learn responsible content creation through workshops and certifications.

- **Mental Health Support:** Provide influencers with resources to manage stress, burnout, and the pressures of maintaining online visibility.
- **Promote Authentic Content:** Genuine, unedited, and transparent content should be rewarded by brands and platforms instead of posts that strive for perfection.
- **Report Mechanisms:** Allow users to report misleading posts, undisclosed ads, or harmful trends, and ensure quick action.
- **Promote Realistic Standards:** Encourage influencers to share balanced, real-life experiences to reduce unrealistic expectations among youth.
- By implementing robust ethical strategies and utilising cutting-edge tools to identify deceptive influencer content. These steps improve influencer marketing transparency and shield consumers from misleading promotions. Ultimately, such efforts build greater trust and accountability within the online ecosystem.

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