

Peer Influence versus Commercial Persuasion: Social Media's Role in Shaping Online Shopping Behaviour among Young Female Consumers in India

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Abstract

This study investigates the differential impact of peer-based versus commercial social media influences on online shopping behaviour among female undergraduate students in semi-urban India, addressing the critical gap in understanding authentic versus commercial influence effectiveness in digital marketing. A quantitative survey methodology was employed with 400 female undergraduate students from Bhiwani District, Haryana, India. Data were collected using validated scales measuring social media usage patterns, influence receptivity, and online shopping behaviours. Statistical analysis included descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and comparative analysis across demographic and geographic groups. The results revealed a pronounced hierarchy of social influence effectiveness, with friend recommendations ($M=4.050$) and online reviews ($M=3.987$) significantly outperforming influencer marketing ($M=2.985$) and commercial posts ($M=2.978$). An "authenticity discount" phenomenon emerged, wherein 35.3% of respondents actively resist commercial influence attempts. Rural respondents demonstrated significantly higher reliance on online reviews ($\Delta=-0.200$), while urban participants showed marginally greater receptivity to influencer content. Social media usage patterns exhibited minimal correlation with actual shopping behaviours ($r=-0.057$ to 0.061), challenging direct platform-to-purchase conversion assumptions. The findings suggested a strategic reorientation from influencer-centric to peer-facilitation marketing approaches. The prominence of authentic peer influence indicates opportunities for user-generated content strategies, community building initiatives, and organic recommendation facilitation rather than traditional commercial influence tactics.

Keywords: Social influence, Peer recommendations, Influencer marketing, Social commerce, India, Female consumers, Digital marketing, Authenticity

1. Introduction

The proliferation of social media platforms has fundamentally transformed the landscape of consumer influence, creating unprecedented opportunities for both peer-to-peer communication and commercial persuasion attempts (Chen & Shen, 2015). Within emerging market contexts, particularly India's rapidly expanding digital economy, understanding the relative effectiveness of different social influence mechanisms has become critical for both theoretical advancement and practical marketing strategy development (Shareef *et al.*, 2019).

Female undergraduate students represent a demographically significant and economically influential consumer segment within India's digital marketplace, characterized by high social media engagement, peer network density, and discretionary spending capacity (Mehta *et al.*, 2020). Their social media usage patterns and influence receptivity provide crucial insights for understanding broader digital marketing effectiveness and social commerce evolution within emerging market contexts.

Contemporary digital marketing strategies increasingly emphasize influencer marketing and social media advertising, presuming direct relationships between platform engagement and purchase behaviour (Voorveld *et al.*, 2018). However, emerging evidence suggests that digitally native demographics may exhibit sophisticated influence processing capabilities, potentially distinguishing between authentic peer communication and commercial persuasion attempts in ways that challenge traditional marketing effectiveness assumptions.

This study addresses the critical gap in understanding the relative effectiveness of peer-based versus commercially mediated social influence within the context of online shopping behaviour among female undergraduate students in semi-

urban India. By examining friend recommendations, online reviews, influencer following, and commercial post influence alongside actual shopping behaviour patterns, this research contributes to theoretical understanding of social influence mechanisms while providing practical insights for digital marketing strategy optimization.

The significance of this investigation extends beyond academic understanding to practical implications for social commerce platform development, influencer marketing strategy formulation, and authentic engagement cultivation within emerging market contexts. As India's social commerce ecosystem continues its rapid expansion, understanding the detailed influence preferences of digitally native demographics becomes increasingly critical for sustainable marketing effectiveness.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Social Influence Theory in Digital Contexts

Social Influence Theory, originally conceptualized by Kelman (1958), which distinguishes between compliance, identification, and internalization as distinct influence mechanisms operating through different psychological pathways. Within digital marketing contexts, these mechanisms manifest through varied social media influence channels, each potentially exhibiting different effectiveness levels and audience receptivity patterns (Wang & Yu, 2017).

Recent research has documented the particular significance of source credibility and perceived authenticity in determining influence effectiveness within social media environments (Erkan & Evans, 2016). The distinction between peer-generated and commercially sponsored content has emerged as a critical factor in influence processing, with audiences potentially applying differential scrutiny and resistance mechanisms based on perceived commercial intent (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016).

However, existing research has primarily focused on general social media influence patterns rather than demographic-specific or culturally contextualised analysis. The particular influence processing capabilities and preferences of female undergraduate students in semi-urban Indian contexts remain underexplored, despite their significance as early adopters and influence agents within broader consumer networks.

2.2 Peer Influence versus Commercial Persuasion

The distinction between peer-based and commercially mediated influence represents a fundamental dimension of contemporary digital marketing effectiveness. Peer influence operates through perceived similarity, trust, and social proof mechanisms, while commercial influence relies on expertise claims, aspirational messaging, and persuasive content strategies (Chen & Shen, 2015).

Mehta *et al.* (2020) documented the continuing significance of peer opinions and recommendations in shaping youth purchasing decisions within the Delhi/NCR region, while simultaneously noting evolving scepticism toward commercial influence attempts. Their research highlighted the importance of perceived authenticity in influence effectiveness, suggesting that audiences may discount commercially motivated communications relative to peer-generated content.

Zhang *et al.* (2022) demonstrated the particular effectiveness of social proof mechanisms in online shopping contexts, emphasizing the role of user-generated reviews and peer recommendations in reducing perceived purchase risks. However, their analysis did not examine the comparative effectiveness of different influence sources or the potential resistance mechanisms applied to commercial influence attempts.

2.3 Influencer Marketing Effectiveness

Influencer marketing has emerged as a dominant digital marketing strategy, premised on assumptions regarding audience identification with influencer personalities and subsequent purchase behaviour influence (Voorveld *et al.*, 2018). However, emerging evidence suggests variable effectiveness across demographic segments and cultural contexts, with some audiences potentially developing resistance to overtly commercial influence attempts.

Derek *et al.* (2022) documented the continuing impact of social media on impulsive buying behaviour among students, while noting heterogeneous responses to different influence sources. Their research suggested that influence effectiveness may be moderated by factors including perceived authenticity, commercial transparency, and audience sophistication regarding marketing tactics.

The rapid growth of influencer marketing within Indian contexts has created diverse influence ecosystems ranging from celebrity endorsements to micro-influencer partnerships. However, systematic examination of influence effectiveness across different demographic segments and geographic contexts remains limited, particularly regarding the specific preferences and resistance patterns of female undergraduate students in semi-urban environments.

2.4 Online Reviews and User-Generated Content

Online reviews represent a hybrid influence mechanism combining peer-generated content with systematic evaluation frameworks, potentially offering enhanced credibility relative to both informal peer recommendations and commercial messaging (Erkan & Evans, 2016). The aggregated nature of review systems may provide additional social proof through quantity indicators while maintaining perceived authenticity through user-generated content characteristics.

Wang and Yu (2017) emphasized the significance of observational learning and word-of-mouth mechanisms in social commerce contexts, suggesting that review-based influence may operate through different psychological pathways than direct peer recommendations or commercial messaging. Their research highlighted the particular effectiveness of review systems in reducing information asymmetries and purchase risk perceptions.

However, existing research has provided limited insight into the relative effectiveness of review-based influence compared to other social influence mechanisms, particularly within emerging market contexts where digital literacy levels and trust perceptions may vary across geographical and demographic segments.

2.5 Social Commerce in Indian Contexts

Indian social commerce contexts present unique characteristics that may influence the relative effectiveness of different social influence mechanisms, including diverse linguistic requirements, varied cultural norms regarding peer communication, and heterogeneous digital infrastructure access across geographical regions (Agarwal & Wu, 2015).

The rapid expansion of social media platforms within India, including both global platforms (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube) and domestic alternatives, has created complex influence ecosystems with varied audience engagement patterns and commercial integration levels. Understanding how different demographic segments navigate these diverse influence environments has become critical for effective marketing strategy development (Selvakumar *et al.*, 2025).

Chaturvedi *et al.* (2022) documented the evolving sophistication of Indian consumers regarding digital marketing tactics, suggesting that younger demographics may exhibit enhanced persuasion knowledge and commercial intent recognition capabilities. However, systematic examination of how this sophistication manifests in differential response patterns to various influence sources remains limited.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Approach

This study employed a quantitative research methodology utilizing a cross-sectional survey design to examine social media influence patterns and online shopping behaviours among female undergraduate students in Bhiwani District, Haryana, India. The research design enables systematic examination of influence effectiveness across different social media mechanisms while controlling for demographic and contextual variables.

3.2 Population and Sampling

The target population comprised female undergraduate students enrolled in various educational institutions within Bhiwani District, representing a semi-urban context positioned between metropolitan and rural environments. A multi-stage stratified random sampling technique ensured representative selection across age, academic disciplines and geographical locations (Hossan *et al.*, 2023).

The final sample consisted of 400 respondents, distributed across academic streams (Commerce: 49.3%, Arts/Humanities: 30.0%, Science: 20.8%), residence locations (Urban: 44.8%, Rural: 55.3%), and age groups (16-19 years: 26.3%, 19-22 years: 53.5%, 22-25 years: 20.3%). This distribution ensures adequate representation while maintaining sufficient sample size for robust statistical analysis across demographic subgroups.

3.3 Data Collection Instrument

Data collection utilized a structured questionnaire incorporating validated scales adapted from existing literature. Social media influence dimensions were measured using constructs adapted from Mehta *et al.* (2017), including:

- Regular social media platform usage intensity
- Influencer following behaviour and influence receptivity
- Social media post influence on purchase decisions
- Online review importance in decision-making
- Friend recommendation influence on shopping choices

Online shopping behaviour dimensions utilized constructs adapted from Tandon and Kiran (2019), encompassing purchase frequency, convenience orientation, product category preferences, promotional responsiveness, and transaction security perceptions.

All constructs employed 5-point Likert scales (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) to ensure measurement consistency and enable sophisticated statistical analysis. The questionnaire underwent pilot testing with 50 respondents to verify clarity, reliability, and construct validity before final data collection.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis employed PAST statistical software package (version 4.17) for comprehensive statistical examination. Descriptive statistics characterized sample demographics and variable distributions, while inferential statistical tests examined relationships between variables and demographic group differences.

Correlation analysis investigated relationships between social media influence dimensions and online shopping behaviour patterns to understand the extent of direct influence-behaviour linkages. Comparative analysis across geographical and demographic groups utilized t-tests and ANOVA to identify significant difference patterns (Dowdy *et al.*, 2011).

Reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha ensured internal consistency for all multi-item constructs, while frequency distribution analysis characterized response patterns across different influence mechanisms.

4. Results

4.1 Social Media Usage and Influence Patterns

Analysis of social media usage and influence patterns revealed pronounced hierarchical effectiveness across different influence mechanisms, as presented in Table 1. Friend recommendations demonstrated the highest influence level (M = 4.050, SD = 0.818), with 69.0% of respondents expressing agreement or strong agreement regarding their impact on purchase decisions.

Table 1: Social Media Influence Effectiveness (n=400)

Influence Mechanism	Mean	SD	Agreement/Strong Agreement (%)
Friend Recommendations	4.050	0.818	69.0%
Online Reviews Importance	3.987	0.812	66.6%
Social Media Regular Usage	3.947	0.841	62.1%
Follow Influencers	2.985	0.832	33.8%
Influence of Posts	2.978	0.833	33.5%

Online reviews demonstrated similarly high influence levels ($M = 3.987$, $SD = 0.812$), with 66.6% of respondents acknowledging their significance in purchase decision-making. Regular social media usage achieved substantial endorsement ($M = 3.947$, $SD = 0.841$), indicating high platform engagement among the demographic cohort.

In stark contrast, commercially oriented influence mechanisms demonstrated markedly lower effectiveness. Influencer following behaviour received moderate endorsement ($M = 2.985$, $SD = 0.832$), with only 33.8% expressing agreement regarding influencer impact on their decisions. Direct social media post influence achieved similar levels ($M = 2.978$, $SD = 0.833$), with 33.5% agreement.

4.2 Commercial Influence Resistance Patterns

Detailed frequency analysis of commercially oriented influence dimensions revealed pronounced resistance patterns, as detailed in Table 2. For both influencer following and post influence, approximately 35% of respondents actively disagreed with influence statements, while roughly equal proportions (31-36%) maintained neutrality and expressed agreement.

Table 2: Commercial Influence Response Distribution (n=400)

Influence Type	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
Follow Influencers	0 (0.0%)	141 (35.3%)	124 (31.0%)	135 (33.8%)	0 (0.0%)
Influence of Posts	0 (0.0%)	143 (35.8%)	123 (30.8%)	134 (33.5%)	0 (0.0%)

This trimodal distribution suggests substantial audience fragmentation regarding commercial influence receptivity, with roughly equivalent proportions demonstrating resistance, ambivalence, and receptivity. The absence of extreme responses (strongly disagree/strongly agree) indicates moderate rather than polarized attitudes toward commercial influence attempts.

4.3 Peer-Based Influence Adoption

Conversely, peer-based influence mechanisms demonstrated markedly different response patterns, with no respondents expressing disagreement regarding friend recommendations or online review importance. Response distributions concentrated in neutral to strongly agree categories, indicating universal acknowledgment of peer-based influence significance.

This distribution pattern confirms universal recognition of peer-based influence legitimacy while demonstrating variation in intensity rather than acceptance of these influence mechanisms.

Table 3: Peer-Based Influence Response Distribution (n=400)

Influence Type	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
Friend Recommendations	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	124 (31.0%)	132 (33.0%)	144 (36.0%)
Online Reviews	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	134 (33.5%)	137 (34.3%)	129 (32.3%)

4.4 Geographic Variations in Influence Patterns

Geographic comparative analysis revealed significant variations in influence receptivity patterns between urban (n=179) and rural (n=221) respondents, as presented in Table 4. The most pronounced difference emerged in online review valuation, with rural respondents demonstrating substantially higher reliance on review-based information (M = 4.077 vs. 3.877, $\Delta = -0.200$).

Table 4: Urban-Rural Influence Pattern Comparison

Influence Mechanism	Urban Mean	Rural Mean	Difference (U-R)
Online Reviews Importance	3.877	4.077	-0.200*
Friend Recommendations	4.045	4.054	-0.010
Follow Influencers	3.000	2.973	0.027
Influence of Posts	2.961	2.991	-0.030
Social Media Usage	3.955	3.941	0.014

*Differences ≥ 0.1 highlighted

This substantial rural enhancement in review reliance potentially reflects compensatory information-seeking behaviour addressing limited alternative validation sources or elevated risk perceptions associated with online purchasing in contexts with reduced logistical infrastructure.

4.5 Academic Stream Influence Variations

Academic discipline analysis revealed precise patterns in social media influence preferences, as detailed in Table 5. Science students demonstrated highest overall social media engagement (M = 3.619), while Commerce students emphasized friend recommendations (M = 4.076) and Arts/Humanities students prioritized online reviews (M = 4.042).

These disciplinary variations suggest education-linked influence orientation patterns, potentially reflecting curriculum-specific emphasis on analytical evaluation (Arts/Humanities prioritizing reviews), network utilization (Commerce emphasizing peer recommendations), or technology adoption (Science demonstrating high platform engagement).

Table 5: Academic Stream Social Media Influence Patterns

Academic Stream	n	Overall Mean	Engagement	Highest Influence Dimension	Score
Science	83	3.619		Social Media Usage	4.096
Commerce	197	3.594		Friend Recommendations	4.076
Arts/Humanities	120	3.562		Online Reviews	4.042

4.6 Influence-Behaviour Correlation Analysis

Correlation analysis examining relationships between social media influence patterns and actual online shopping behaviours revealed predominantly minimal associations, as presented in Table 6. Correlation coefficients ranged from -0.057 to 0.061, indicating limited direct linear relationships between specific influence mechanisms and shopping behaviour dimensions.

Table 6: Social Media Influence and Shopping Behaviour Correlations

Social Dimension	Media	Frequent Purchases	Convenience	Apparel Preference	Festival Sales	Security
Social Media Usage		0.038	0.021	-0.040	-0.056	0.061
Follow Influencers		0.002	-0.000	-0.024	0.015	0.060
Influence of Posts		-0.049	-0.057	-0.045	-0.004	-0.005
Online Reviews		-0.033	0.015	0.058	0.004	-0.024
Friend Recommendations		0.013	-0.012	0.013	-0.048	0.010

The minimal correlations challenge direct platform-to-purchase conversion assumptions prevalent in digital marketing strategy, suggesting complex, potentially mediated or conditional relationships between social media engagement and actual purchasing behaviour.

4.7 Online Shopping Behaviour Patterns

Independent analysis of online shopping behaviour dimensions revealed pronounced convenience orientation and category-specific engagement patterns. Time and convenience benefits achieved universal endorsement (M = 4.497, SD = 0.501), with 100% of respondents expressing agreement or strong agreement. Apparel and accessories preferences demonstrated equivalent universal acceptance (M = 4.492, SD = 0.501).

Table 7: Online Shopping Behavior Dimensions (n=400)

Shopping Behavior	Mean	SD	Universal Agreement (%)
Time and Convenience	4.497	0.501	100.0%
Apparel and Accessories	4.492	0.501	100.0%
Festival Sales Influence	3.990	0.810	66.8%
Transaction Security	3.975	0.801	66.8%
Frequent Purchases	2.940	0.773	27.0%

Purchase frequency demonstrated notably lower endorsement (M = 2.940, SD = 0.773), with only 27.0% expressing agreement regarding frequent purchasing behaviour, potentially reflecting financial constraints characteristic of the student demographic.

5. Discussion

The findings reveal distinct patterns of social influence effectiveness among female undergraduate students in semi-urban India, with peer-based mechanisms significantly outperforming commercial influence attempts. This discussion examines the implications for both theoretical understanding and practical marketing applications.

5.1 Peer Influence versus Commercial Influence Effectiveness

The substantial difference between friend recommendations (M = 4.050) and influencer marketing (M = 2.985) demonstrates the concept of "authenticity discount". This pattern aligns with Social Influence Theory, which emphasizes source credibility as a key determinant of influence effectiveness (Kelman, 1958). Young consumers appear to systematically distinguish between authentic peer communication and commercial persuasion attempts, applying greater scepticism to the latter.

The trimodal distribution for influencer-related questions with roughly 35% disagreeing, 31% neutral, and 34% agreeing, which suggests significant audience fragmentation rather than universal rejection. This finding extends the observations about evolving consumer sophistication in India, providing quantitative evidence for commercial influence resistance among digitally native demographics (Chaturvedi *et al.*, 2022). The resistance patterns indicate that traditional influencer marketing approaches may face fundamental limitations with this audience segment.

5.2 Geographic Variations in Information Seeking

Rural respondents demonstrated significantly higher reliance on online reviews ($M = 4.077$ vs. urban $M = 3.877$), suggesting contextual adaptation of information-seeking behaviour. This difference potentially reflects compensatory mechanisms addressing structural limitations in rural contexts, including limited peer networks with relevant product experience and reduced physical retail alternatives for product evaluation (Agarwal & Wu, 2015).

Wang and Yu (2017) emphasized the role of observational learning in social commerce, and these findings suggest that rural consumers may rely more heavily on aggregated peer feedback through review systems to reduce purchase risks. This geographic variation has practical implications for platform design and marketing strategy, indicating that review visibility and credibility signals may be particularly important for rural market penetration.

5.3 The Platform Engagement Paradox

The minimal correlations between social media influence dimensions and actual shopping behaviours ($r = -0.057$ to 0.061) present a puzzling finding that challenges direct conversion assumptions prevalent in digital marketing. Despite high influence ratings for peer recommendations and reviews, these mechanisms showed virtually no correlation with reported shopping behaviours such as purchase frequency or product preferences.

This disconnect suggests that social media influence may operate through indirect pathways, potentially affecting pre-purchase research phases or brand consideration sets rather than directly driving measured shopping behaviours (Erkan & Evans, 2016). Alternatively, the influence may be conditional, manifesting only under specific circumstances or for particular product categories.

5.4 Implications for Marketing Strategy

These findings necessitate strategic reconsideration of social commerce approaches. Rather than investing heavily in influencer partnerships, brands may achieve greater effectiveness by facilitating authentic peer communication through user-generated content initiatives and community building (Shareef *et al.*, 2019). The universal acknowledgment of peer influence legitimacy, coupled with substantial commercial influence resistance, suggests opportunities for organic recommendation facilitation systems.

The geographic differences indicate need for location-specific strategies, with enhanced review emphasis for rural markets and more diverse influence approaches for urban contexts. The academic stream variations with Commerce students emphasizing peer recommendations and Arts/Humanities students prioritizing reviews, suggest additional segmentation opportunities based on educational background.

5.5 Theoretical Contributions

This research extends Social Influence Theory by documenting systematic commercial influence discounting among digitally sophisticated audiences. The findings challenge simplistic platform-to-purchase models, suggesting complex, potentially mediated influence processes that require more nuanced theoretical frameworks (Voorveld *et al.*, 2018).

The geographic and demographic variations in influence preferences indicate that social influence operates through culturally embedded mechanisms rather than universal processes, contributing to understanding of contextual moderators in digital marketing effectiveness. Future research should examine the psychological mechanisms underlying the authenticity discount phenomenon and explore conditions under which commercial influence may overcome peer influence primacy.

6. Conclusion

This study provides novel empirical evidence regarding the differential effectiveness of peer-based versus commercially mediated social influence among female undergraduate students in semi-urban India. The pronounced authenticity discount applied to commercial influence attempts, coupled with universal acknowledgment of peer influence legitimacy, suggests fundamental challenges for traditional digital marketing approaches while highlighting opportunities for peer-facilitation strategies.

The research demonstrates that friend recommendations ($M = 4.050$) and online reviews ($M = 3.987$) significantly outperform influencer marketing ($M = 2.985$) and commercial posts ($M = 2.978$) in influence effectiveness. Approximately 35% of respondents actively resist commercial influence attempts, while 100% acknowledge peer-based influence legitimacy. Rural respondents demonstrate significantly higher review dependence ($\Delta = -0.200$), and academic stream variations suggest discipline-specific influence preferences. The minimal correlations between social media influence and shopping behaviours ($r = -0.057$ to 0.061) challenge direct conversion assumptions, suggesting complex, potentially mediated influence processes requiring sophisticated theoretical and practical approaches.

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