

A Qualitative Study on the Impact of Instagram Influencers on Gen Z's Impulse Buying in Lahore

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the study: Influencer marketing is playing an increasing role in shaping the spontaneous buying habits of Generation Z in the digital era. This generation has become known for its values of social justice, diversity, and inclusion. The major concern of this research is to explore how Instagram influencers trigger Gen Z to buy impulsively in Lahore.

Methodology: This research has incorporated two theoretical models, the "Stimulus-organism-response model" and "Cue Utilization Model." The data was collected through 12-15 semi-structured in-depth interviews using a purposive sampling technique.

Findings: The results indicated that Instagram usage among participants is predominantly passive which is characteristics by high exposure to influencer content with limited engagement. Most of the participants have stated that visual aesthetics such as lighting, styling, and overall presentation emerges as a primary attention trigger, while product reviews and unboxing videos significantly enhances the credibility and reduced purchasing uncertainty. Promotional strategies such as discounts and limited-time offers strongly drive impulse buying, often supported by mild Fear of Missing Out (FOMO). Participants have demonstrated self-control strategies including delayed purchases, verifying from friends and peers, and managing digital exposure strategies.

Conclusion: This study provides practical insights for digital marketers by highlighting that that authenticity, transparency and visual engaging content are more effective in influencing Gen Z consumers than aggressive promotional tactics. It also contributes theoretically due to the applicability of the S-O-R model in explaining impulse buying behavior in social media environment.

Keywords: Instagram Influencer Marketing, Impulse Buying, Generation Z, Visual Cues, Promotions, S-O-R Model.

Article History

Received:
December 11, 2025

Revised:
February 28, 2026

Accepted:
March 10, 2026

Online:
March 14, 2026

1. INTRODUCTION

The growing popularity of digital media has made influencer marketing an essential tool for digital advertising, particularly among Generation Z globally. The COVID-19 epidemic has caused a significant shift from physical stores to e-commerce and influencer marketing (Alina et al., 2021; Safdar, 2020; Shabir et al., 2015).

1.1 Instagram influencers leading impulse buying behavior

Impulse buying is a spontaneous and unplanned purchase that happens due to internal and external stimuli. It occurs “when people experience an urge to buy a product without thoughtful consideration of why and for what reason they need it” (Verhagen and van Dolen 2011; Tayyaba et al., 2022). Brands utilize influencers' content to create an authentic connection with Gen Z to promote the brand and establish trustworthiness between Gen Z and themselves, as brands will be more trusted. These factors will produce more impulse buys among Gen Z (Pradhan et al., 2022).

1.2 Problem Statement

Previous research has quantitatively explored the impulse buying behavior, which emphasized the purchasing intentions and consumer trust of Gen Z. However, the hegemony of influencer marketing is increasing in Pakistan, but there's still a limited understanding of how and why Instagram influencers emotionally and psychologically influence impulsive decisions among Gen Z consumers. Consequently, this study has qualitatively explored how specific external cues, such as visual appeal, trustworthiness, and urgency, act as external stimuli that stimulate emotional and psychological responses and result in impulsive purchasing decisions.

1.3 Study Rationale

The main purpose of conducting this research is to understand the underlying insights of how and why Gen Z consumers end up buying the products that they see in the content of the Instagram influencers; somehow, the purchases are unplanned, planned, or reminder impulse buying. This research gives an understanding of how external cues, such as visual appeal, trustworthiness, and urgency, act as a strong stimulus to emotionally influence Gen Z to make impulsive buying decisions. The outcomes of this research will contribute to the stakeholders, including Instagram influencers, educators, and researchers. For stakeholders, this research will provide insights into how visual, promotional, and emotional cues can effectively trigger impulse buying among Gen Z. Influencers can benefit from the insights and create such content, which will enhance audience engagement and purchasing behavior. Additionally, digital regulation authorities must incorporate and regulate more ethical policies to promote more ethical consumption and the generation of marketing content.

1.4 Study Objectives

The objectives of this research are to investigate the effects of Instagram influencers on impulsive purchases among Gen Z consumers. Secondly, this research aims to explore how Instagram influencers' promotional strategies (e.g., reviews, trust cues, and promotional strategies) shape the impulse buying decisions. Additionally this research investigates the copying strategies Gen Z use to resist impulse urges triggered by influencers' content. Moreover, the outcomes of this research will help digital marketers identify effective influencer cues stimulating spontaneous purchases among Gen Z.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Influence marketing is the most adopted strategy by brands for their marketing and branding purposes. Strategies involve the use of influential individuals, such as celebrities and non-celebrities' social media users, with their strong presence on digital media platforms (Lou, 2019). These influencers create content for the brands not only to promote their products and services, but also shape their brand identity (Fadhilah & Saputra, 2023; Lou, 2019; Reinikainen et al., 2020).

Influencer marketing gained popularity globally in the early 2000s, in accordance with the rise of blogging as a new form of online content generation. With the rapid development of Web 2.0 in the mid-2000s, user-generated content and platforms became popular as they allowed them to create content within virtual communities (Hsiao & Lin, 2025). Social networking sites (SNS) have helped influencers become popular and encouraged brands to collaborate with them. Influencers of such platforms promote the brand's products and services, and ultimately this gives rise to influencer marketing (Hsiao & Lin, 2025; Shabir et al., 2015a).

McKinsey (2023) reported that most of the brands prefer Instagram for influencer marketing campaigns. (Statista, 2023) found that the Influencer marketing has grown by 13.7% compared to the previous year, which is valued at 21.1 billion. According to the same report, 66% of the Gen Z consumers are affected by their ideal influencer while making any purchasing decisions. As Gen Z is the Pakistan's largest population who are around 60-65% of the total population (Asar, 2022) elevating the largest population of Gen Z around the world. This demographic shows the distinct purchasing behavior characteristics such as sensitivity to social issues, online shopping preferences and seeking brands interactions (Jain, 2024; Shabir et al., 2015b).

Influencer marketing refers to the promotion on social media platforms that is done by brands in the form of ads or through the direct account of the influencer; however, influencers are known as opinion leaders (Fadhilah et al., 2023). Influencers are seen as a new form of celebrity endorsers; however, influencer marketing is seen as a form of celebrity endorsement (Weinswig, 2016) In influencer marketing, influencers often receive complimentary products or services in exchange for reviews or endorsements; however, they make a contract with the influencer and pay their influencer to get reviews (Sammis et al., 2016; Shabir et al., 2014).

A common term for Generation Z is 'digital generation'. Because, in comparison to other generations, they are the most exposed to mobile and internet penetration from an early age (Fadhilah et al., 2023). Social Networking sites (SNS), specifically Instagram. Influencer recommendations have a huge impact on Gen Z's purchasing behavior. Because Gen Z prefers authenticity, visually appealing content which makes influencer marketing more impactful than traditional ads.

"*A National Retail Federation*" study has found that almost 80% of the Gen Z respondents has responded that user-generated content on digital platforms have major impact on their purchasing behaviors. User-generated content, such as reviews, reels, and unboxing videos, plays an important role in influencing Gen Z consumers (Aulock, 2024).

An impulsive purchase is influenced by both external economic factors and internal psychological variables. For example, a meta-analysis of 231 sample size has revealed that internal traits such as pleasure gratification and impulse buying tendency, are primary factors in impulsive purchases, which are influenced by hedonic (e.g., pleasure-seeking) and utilitarian motives (Iyer, et al., 2020). Research indicates that the personality traits such as openness to experience, agreeableness, and sociability can significantly influence impulse buying in e-commerce (Shu-Chin et al., 2024).

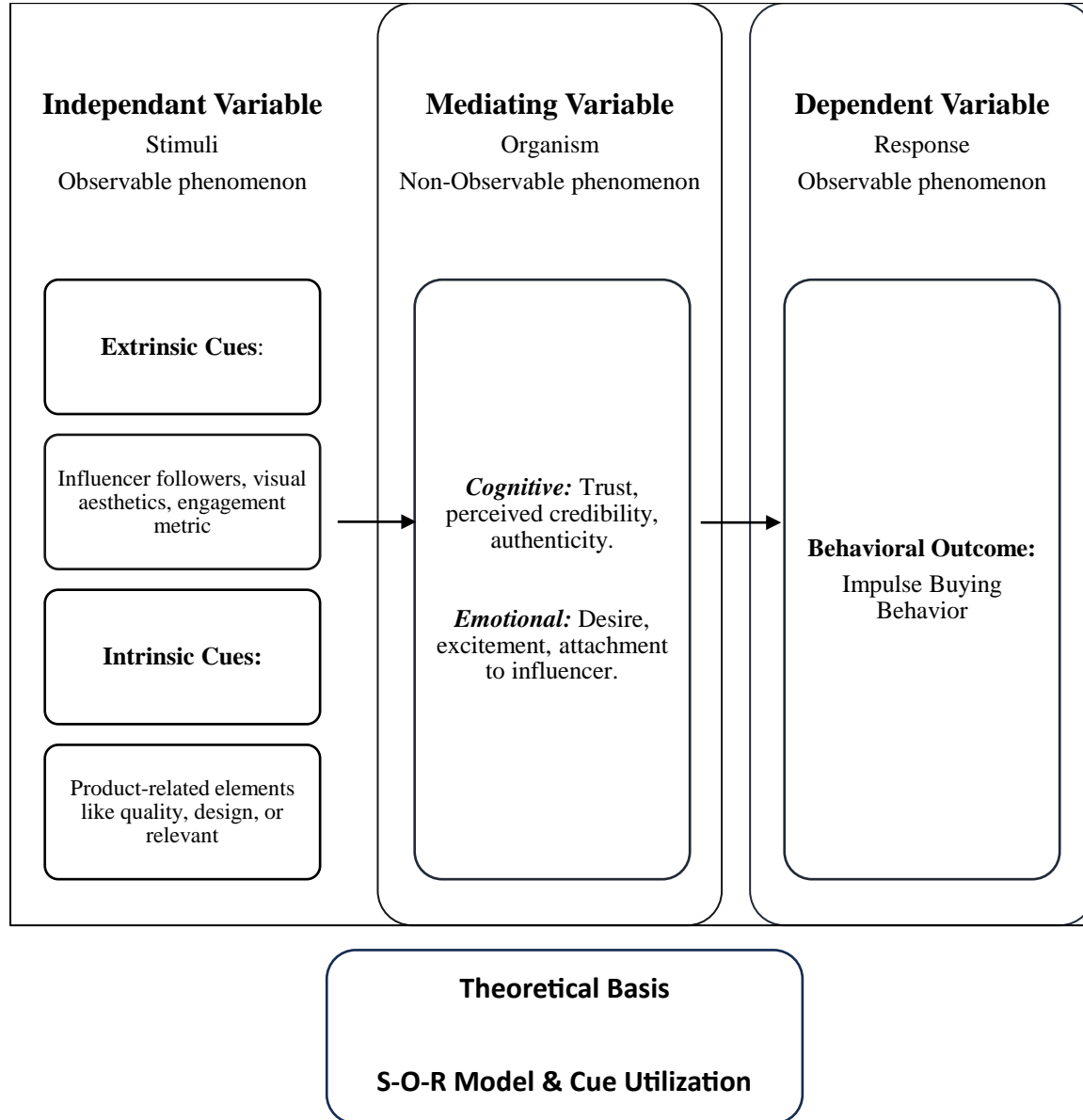
3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

Two fundamental frameworks are used in this study: the Stimulus-Organism-Response model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) and Cue Utilization Theory (Cox & Decker, 1962). These frameworks guided the investigation of how Instagram influencers encourage impulsive purchases among Pakistani Gen Z consumers. These theories serve the role of interpretive lenses through which psychological processes of unplanned buying decisions are influenced by social media cues, which could be understood in a qualitative context.

3.1 Conceptual Framework

This research has five major aspects that constitute the theoretical framework (see figure 1): 2 Independent variables, 1 dependent variable, 2 mediating variables, and the 2 theoretical foundations of the study are incorporated. This operationalization of variables helps to explain the dynamics of extrinsic and intrinsic cues which influence the Gen Z emotionally and cognitively, and Gen Z makes impulse buying responses.

Figure 1: *Conceptual Framework of the Study*



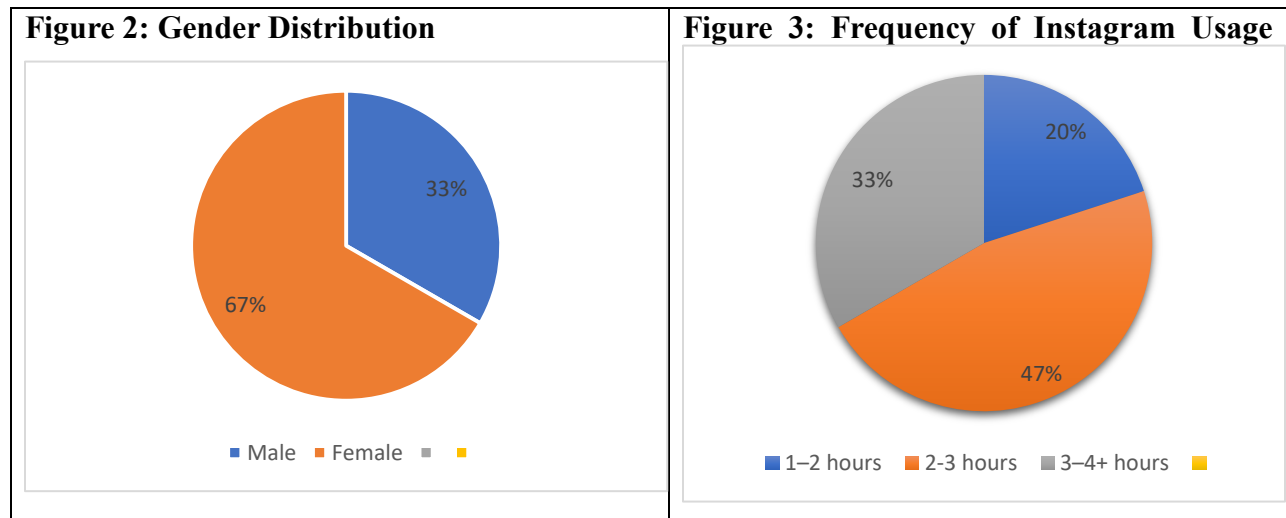
4. METHODS

To examine the perceptions, experiences, and opinions of Gen Z's impulsive buying behavior, this research has conducted a qualitative type of research to get deeper insights into Gen Z. The combination of judgmental sampling and chain sampling is best suited for a qualitative study as it prioritizes richness and depth of data.

The sampling framework consists of two levels. In the first level, an initial survey questionnaire will be sent to respondents conveniently across the Lahore metropolitan city on social media platforms. Respondents will be selected using their responses if they meet the criteria of purposive sampling. A semi-structured interview guide was incorporated to get an in-depth understanding. All interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants and transcribed according to the ethical standards of research. The researcher has used thematic analysis to identify patterns, do coding, identify themes and subthemes, and further interpret how Gen Z is influenced by the intrinsic and extrinsic cues used by influencers and how they make impulsive purchasing decisions.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Demographic Profile of Participants



As mentioned in Figure 2, shows that 33% of respondents in this study are male, however 67% are female. This sample is female-skewed, which is relevant because female Gen Z users are more indulged into fashion, beauty, and lifestyle influencers' content.

Figure 3 shows the frequency of Instagram usage on a daily basis. Approximately 20% of the respondents use Instagram 1-2 hours daily, 47% of the respondents use Instagram for 2-3 hours, and 33% of Gen Z use Instagram 2-4 hours daily.

The themes and sub-themes generated through thematic analysis are closely aligned with the research questions of the study which are described below:

Theme 1: Passive Exposure and Limited Engagement with Influencers' Content

This theme provides a contextual understanding of Instagram usage patterns among Gen Z consumers as it highlights the passive engagement behavior of Gen Z's which increases long-term exposure to influencer's content and sets the foundation for impulse buying tendencies explored in RQ1 (see table 1).

Table 1: Passive Exposure and Limited Engagement with Influencers' Content

| Sub-themes | Participant Views Summary | Interpretation |
|------------------------------------|---|---|
| Passive Content Consumption | Most participants have reported watching reels and stories without active interaction, describing themselves as those who "mostly | Results indicated that the high exposure with low interaction with the influencers suggests that influencer impact occurs even without active |

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| | scroll and watch content”. | engagement on posts and reels. |
| Selective Interaction Behavior | Participants engage with content (e.g., reels, stories) only when the content is highly relatable, mentioning likes, shares, or reacting occasionally. | This shows that engagement levels are conditional and triggered by relevance, aligning with selective attention behavior. |
| Content-Oriented Usage | Instagram is mainly used for entertainment and influencer content purposes rather than communication or discussion. | This highlights the platform’s role as an entertainment-driven consumption where marketing cues are continuously encountered. |
| Peer Networking Behavior | Some participants share content with friends, especially when considering purchases and purchasing decisions. | This suggests that influencer content extends into peer networks, amplifying its persuasive impact. |
| Limited Comments Culture | Commenting and direct interaction were minimal across participants in the research. | This reinforces a passive engagement culture, which supports the idea that influence does not require active participation. |

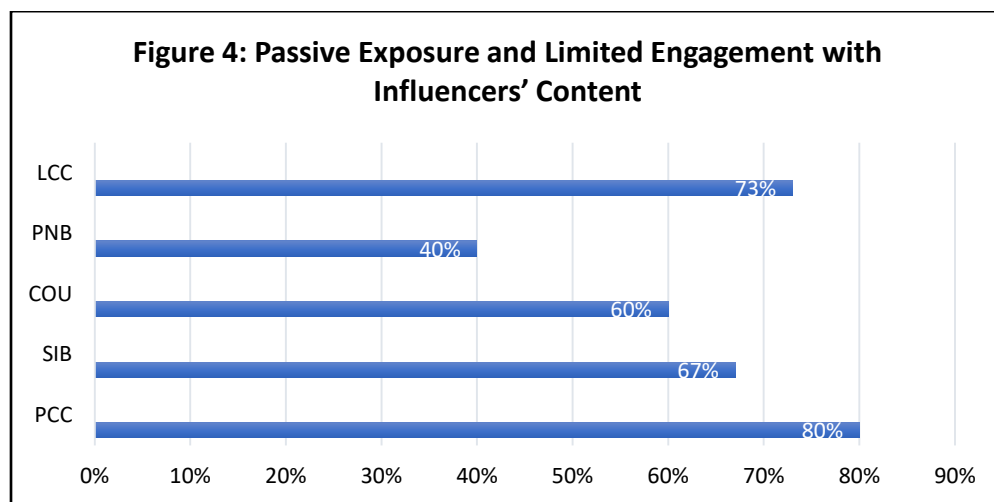


Figure 4 shows that passive consumption of Instagram influencer’s content is the most dominant pattern, reported by 80% respondents, followed by 73% reporting low commenting behavior on Instagram content, 60% reported content-oriented usage, and 40% reported peer networking behavior.

Theme 2: Visual and Informational cues as Attention Drivers

This theme addresses research question 2 by explaining how visual cues such as aesthetics, creativity, and presentation act as a primary attention triggers which influences how Gen Z consumers process influencer content develop interest in products (see table 2).

Table 2: *Visual and Informational cues as Attention Drivers*

| Sub-themes | Participant Views Summary | Interpretation |
|---------------------------------------|---|--|
| Dominance of Visual Aesthetics | Most of the participants has consistently highlighted that visuals such as “lighting, colors, background, and styling” as a | This indicates that visual cues act as the strongest stimulus in attracting attention of the Gen |

| | | | |
|------------------------------------|------------|---|--|
| | | primary attention trigger for Gen Z's. | Z's. |
| Creativity and Storytelling | and | Many students has mentioned that unique, creative and visually different content was reportedly best strategy among others to stop them scrolling down. | This indicates that novelty and creativeness in content ultimately enhances engagement beyond basic aesthetics. |
| Usefulness and Relevance | and | Some of the respondents has stated that they keep on watching any content or reel only if the content is "useful or relatable" to them. | Visual appeal and aesthetic cues are attractive to Gen Z but cognitive evaluation sustains the engagement levels of the content. |
| Role of Textual Cues | | A minority of participants have preferred captions and textual information to evaluate product usefulness | This highlights variations in cue preference which indicates both visual and cognitive processing. |
| Audio-Visual Engagement | | A few participants have stated that music and reels formats increase viewing time and engagement levels. | It demonstrates how audio-visual cues strengthens content impact on Gen Z. |

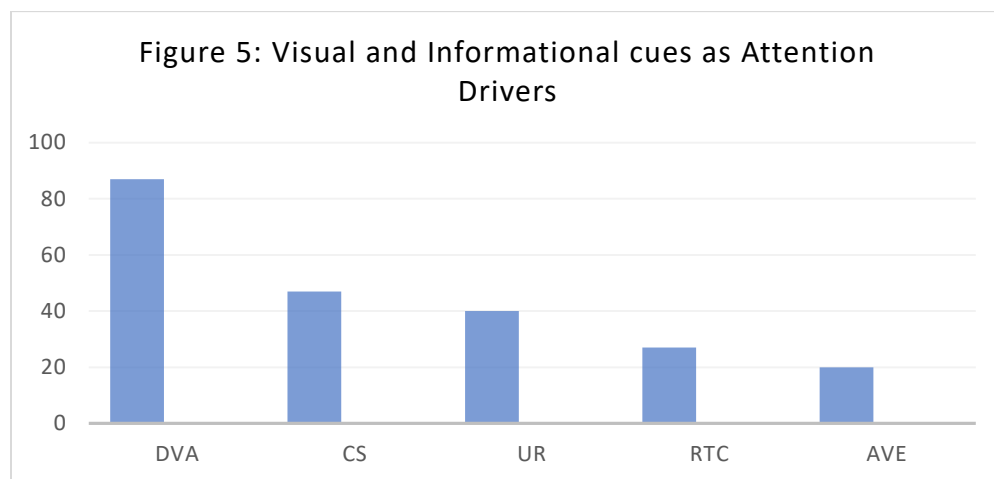


Figure 5 shows that the outcomes of the study shows that visual aesthetics has emerged as the most dominant attention trigger which is reported by 87% of the participants, followed by creative and storytelling cues which has been reported by 47% of the respondents. However, 40% of the participants have stated that cognitive evaluation of the content sustains the engagement levels of the content of influencer.

Theme 3: Trust Formation Through Authenticity and Social Proof

This theme directly addresses the research question 2 by explaining how trust is constructed through authenticity, consistency, and social proof which shape how influencers' recommendations are evaluated and accepted by Gen Z consumer (see table 3).

Table 3: *Trust Formation through Authenticity and Social Proof*

| Sub-themes | Participant's Views Summary | Interpretation |
|------------------------------------|---|---|
| Authenticity Through Honest | Most of the respondents have stated that those influencers are most trust worthy and authentic who provide honest | This indicates that authenticity and credibility is a key factor for persuading Gen Z to make |

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|--|--|--|
| Communication | reviews, including “pros and cons” and avoid overly promotional tone. | impulsive purchasing decisions. |
| Consistency and Real Behavior | Most respondents have stated that consistent opinions and non-scripted communication were key indicators of genuineness of influencers. | This suggests long-term observation which shapes long-term trust of Gen Z rather than one-time exposure to the influencers’ content. |
| Social Proof and Engagement Metrics | Some participants relied on likes, comments and audience’s feedback on comments section to judge the credibility of the content and influencers. | Social validation acts as a external cue of building trust and credibility. |
| Low Importance of Follower Count | Many participants have rejected the fact that follower count matters to them as a credibility measurement and instead they favored the content quality matters most to them. | This reflects a huge shift of Gen Z consumers from quantitative measures to qualitative trust evaluation. |
| Independent Verification Behavior | Respondents have reported that checking reviews, comments, and other sources before trusting recommendations of any influencer. | It demonstrates active cognitive processing despite of passive exposure before making any purchasing decisions online. |

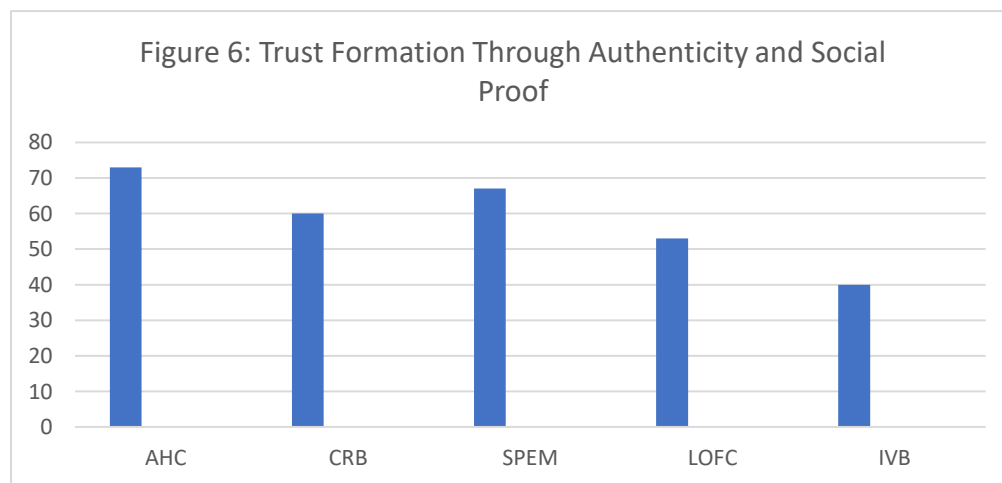


Figure 6 shows that 73% of the respondents believe that authenticity in communication is the key factor for persuading Gen Z to make impulsive purchases, and 67% of the respondents relied on social proof and engagement metrics. 60% of the respondents have stated that consistency and honest opinions are key indicators of the authenticity their content. 53% of the respondents have stated that content quality is most important than the follower count.

Theme 4: Promotional Triggers and Impulse Buying Behavior

This theme addresses the research question 1 by explaining how promotional strategies, visual appeals, review-based content, and FOMO act as key stimuli that trigger impulse buying behavior among Gen Z consumers (table 4).

Table 4: Promotional Triggers and Impulse Buying Behavior

| Sub-themes | Participants Views Summary | Interpretations |
|--|--|--|
| Promotions and Discounts as Triggers | Many participants have admitted that they tend to make sudden purchasing behaviors due to discount offers and promotions | This confirms that promotions plays a primary driver of impulse buying among Gen Z. |
| Urgency and Scarcity Pressure | Most of the respondents have stated that limited-time offers and “limited-stock” messages create sense of urgency which leads Gen Z to take quick decisions. | This highlights that scarcity and urgency cues trigger immediate behavioral responses. |
| Visual Appeal Driving Purchase Desire | Attractive product presentation and influencer styling led to unplanned purchases. | Highlights the emotional impact of visual cues in decision-making. |
| Review and Unboxing Influence | Participants reported increased trust and purchase likelihood after watching reviews. | Indicates informational cues reduce uncertainty and encourage buying. |
| FOMO and Emotional Motivation | Feelings of missing out, excitement, or trend-following influenced buying decisions. | Suggests emotional triggers act as mediators between stimulus and response. |

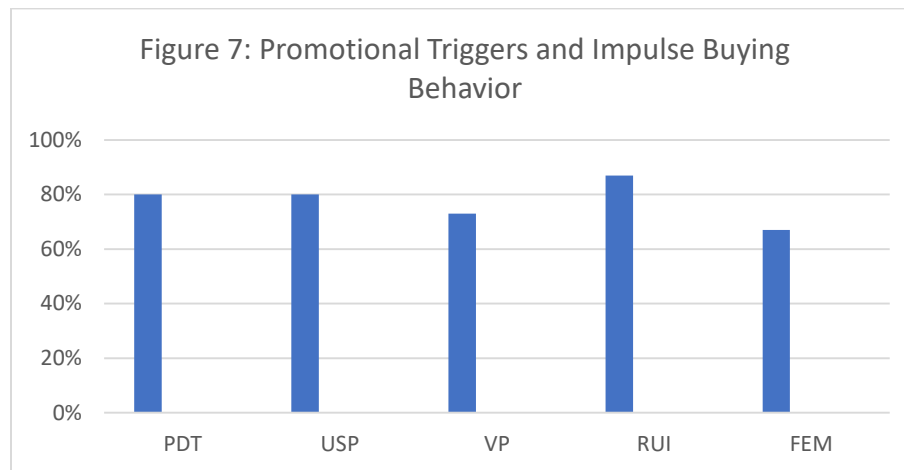


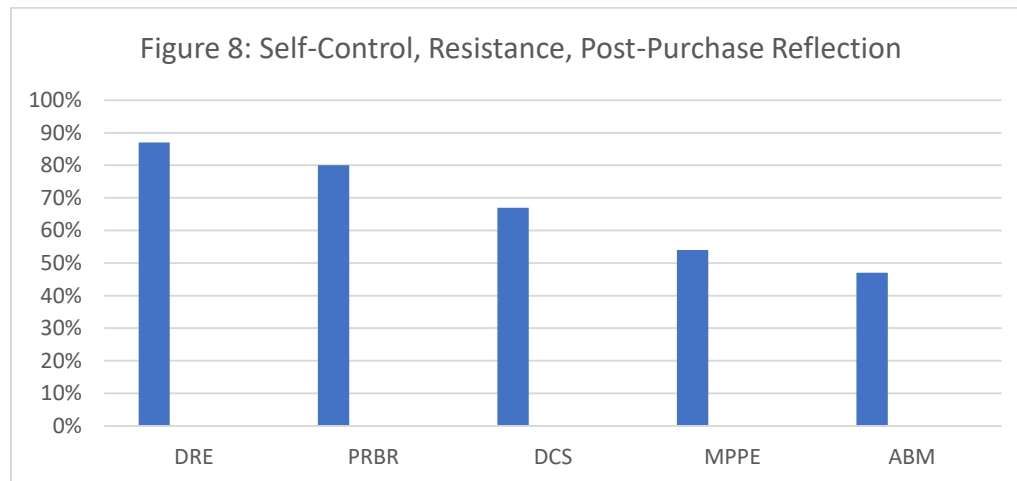
Figure 7 shows that approximately 87% of the respondents have stated that reviews and unboxing videos had a great impact on the impulse buying behavior of Gen Z, followed by 80% stated promotions and discounts triggers spontaneous behaviors, urgency and scarcity pressure, 73% of respondents stated visual appeal driving purchasing desires, 67% of them stated FOMO and emotional motivation triggers spontaneous behaviors.

Theme 5: Self-Control, Resistance, Post-Purchase Reflection

This theme addresses research question 3 by identifying the coping strategies used by Gen Z consumers such as purchase delay, verification, and digital avoidance to manage and resist impulsive urges triggered by influencer’s content (see table 5).

Table 5: Self-Control, Resistance, Post-Purchase Reflection

| Sub-theme | Participant Views Summary | Interpretations |
|--|--|---|
| Delay and Rational Evaluation | Most participants have reported they delay their purchasing decisions sometimes before making purchases to resist to buy impulsively or do a rational evaluation of the product before buying. | This reflects that cognitive resistance works as a key strategy for Gen Z to make informed purchases. |
| Peer and Review-Based Resistance | Seeking advice from friends and checking reviews helped avoid unnecessary purchases. | Indicates social and informational validation as control mechanisms. |
| Digital Control Strategies | Some of the participants have stated their use of digital strategies like unfollowing, avoiding content, or selecting “not interested” options to resist unwanted pages to appear and rid of influencer’s promotional content. | This indicates that digital resistance strategies can work well to manage algorithmic exposure to avoid such promotional content. |
| Mixed Post-Purchase Emotions | After making purchases participants have reported to have mixed emotions like sometimes excitement and sometime regret if the purchase doesn’t went as they expected. | This indicates that emotional consequences post purchase also have an influence on their future buying behaviors and decisions. |
| Awareness and Behavioral Maturity | Many respondents have reported that they are becoming more conscious about their purchasing decisions over-time, and they take their purchasing decisions more responsibly then before. | This indicates that Gen Z consumers are learning and adapting their behavior in a way that is consistent with long-term coping mechanism. |



In figure 8, 87% of the respondents have reported review-based validation as influential tactic, 80% of promotional urgency triggers impulse buying, 73% of respondents believed that visual appeals are key tool of impulsive responses, and 53% of the respondents have reported budget constraints constrains them from spontaneous purchasing behaviors among Gen Z consumers.

6. DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study indicate that visually appealing content of influencers, specifically reels with strong aesthetics plays a significant role in capturing attention and encouraging impulse buying among Gen Z consumers. Participants have frequently reported elements such as lighting, styling and overall presentation as primary triggers of engagement. The outcomes of the statement are consistent with the findings of prior research that Instagram's visual strongly influences the purchase intentions among Gen Z consumers (Elmira et al., 2016). Similarly the report by (Chen et al., 2018) highlights that visually appealing influencer content enhances consumer engagement and trust levels.

The results indicate that exposure to influencer content – specifically through visually appealing reels, promotions, and repeated product visibility encourages spontaneous purchase decisions. Participants have also reported passive engagement levels on influencer's content however reported frequent exposure to influencer content suggests that continuous scrolling behavior increases chances of impulse buying.

The outcomes of the study further reveals that trust in influencers is primarily built thorough authenticity, consistency and honest communication rather than follower count alone. Many participants showed that they are more skeptical towards highly promotional or scripted content and prefers those who provide balanced reviews. Previous research findings have stated that authenticity and accuracy is a key factor of influencer's credibility (Audrezet et al., 2018).

The outcomes of the research explored the dominant role of visual cues such as lighting, background, and overall presentation of the content shapes the consumers' buying decisions. Additionally, trust was found to be constructed more through the quality and authenticity in their content rather than followers count alone. This reflects a major shift in the cognitive processes of Gen Z's that they prefer quality not the quantity of followers.

Furthermore, Gen Z consumers use various coping and resisting strategies to manage their impulsive urges, such as delaying purchases and verifying information from multiple sources. The findings mentioned above verify that the most effective influencer cues that drive impulse buying behavior are visual cues, authentic information, promotional strategies, and review-based content, which emerged as key factors influencing consumer responses.

The factors have been witnessed in the findings, such as aggressive, repetitive promotions and inauthenticity, which were found to reduce the trust in influencers' content and lead Gen Z to resist their buying decisions. Some of the respondents have mentioned various coping and resistance strategies to manage their impulsive urges by delaying purchase decisions, checking reviews, and seeking peer opinions.

6.1 Theoretical Implications

This research is supported theoretically by using the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) Model and Cue Utilization theory to explore Instagram influencer marketing among Gen Z consumers. The findings of the study have shown that external cues such as visual aesthetics, promotional strategies, and social proof act as stimuli that trigger the internal cognitive and emotional responses. These cognitive and emotional responses lead them to make impulsive buying or show controlled cognitive behaviors. This study highlights a major shift where Gen Z relies more on qualitative factors rather than follower count alone. The results have practically contributed to suggesting that marketers and influencers should prioritize their content to visually appeal to consumers. The content provided should

From a practical perspective, the results suggest that marketers and influencers should prioritize their content to visually appeal to consumers and provide informative content while maintaining authenticity and transparency in order to build long-term consumer trust.

7. CONCLUSION

This study has qualitatively examined how Instagram influencer marketing shapes impulse buying behavior among Gen Z consumers in Lahore. The findings show that while visuals, promotions and social proof attract the attention of Gen Z's which strongly influence authenticity, relevance and personal evaluation. Overall, the study highlights the importance of authentic and balanced influencer strategies which influences the consumer behavior among Gen Z's.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the outcomes of the study, these recommendations have been driven which are given below:

Authentic and Transparent Content: Stakeholders and influencers are recommended to focus on authentic and transparent content including honest reviews with advantages and limitations of the product to build a long-term trust among Gen Z.

Visually Appealing and Aesthetic Content: The content of the influencers and marketing campaigns has to be visually and aesthetically appealing elements such as lighting, background, and storytelling to capture initial attention and increase engagement levels of Gen Z consumers.

Promotional strategies: It is recommended to use promotional strategies and urgency cues such as discount offers, and limited-time offers but in moderate levels to avoid creating skepticism among Gen Z consumers.

Avoiding Aggressive Marketing Tactics: The influencers should use natural tone and original scripts rather than aggressive marketing tactics as it reduces perceived authenticity and trustworthiness.

Consistency in Content: Consistency in influencer's content encourages trust and authenticity among Gen Z's, however, frequently switching between brands and its products may weaken the credibility.

Self-Control Strategies: Gen Z consumers use self-control strategies such as digital strategies, delaying purchases, or checking reviews so influencers should provide clear and reliable information to support informed decision-making.

Acknowledgements

None.

Conflict of Interest

Authors declared NO conflict of interest.

Funding Source

The authors received NO funding to conduct this study.

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