



Micro-Influencers and Behavioral Intentions: A Qualitative Study of Indian Instagram Users

Tanvi Vinod Sharma^{1*} and Rahul Soni²

Abstract

Purpose – Micro-influencers, identified as social media users between a regular user and celebrities, have become key players in digital marketing. This paper studies the changing credibility of micro-influencers and the way they affect the behavioral intention of Instagram users from India.

Design – The research employed a qualitative methodology. Distilled responses from 150 Instagram users, 20 micro-influencers, and 10 small business owners were tabulated. Participants were specifically sought out based on their extent of participation in the context of influencer-driven content, and their purchases of featured products.

Findings – The research shows that micro-influencers are having a substantial impact (again) in niche areas including beauty, fashion and fitness. Influencer relatability, consistency and perceived authenticity impact purchase intentions and viral behaviors (liking, sharing, tagging).

Implications – The concept of influencer marketing in India is evolving; thus, brands and especially SMEs are identifying micro-influencers with engagement rates, authenticity, and cost-effectiveness. The findings in this paper support investing in the micro-influencer element of influencer marketing given their perceived authenticity and still scalability and emotional relevance of campaign development.

Originality/Value - This research offers new insight into measurable effects of Instagram micro-influencers on behavioral changes of Indian consumers in 2024 while many papers study celebrity endorsements or macro-influencers.

Keywords: Behavioral Intention, Consumer Trust, Instagram, Micro-influencers, Social Media Marketing.

Introduction

In an ever-changing digital world, influencer marketing has become one of the most impactful methods within a brand's promotional toolkit. Once dominated by celebrity and macro-influencers, the limelight is shifting to

^{1,2} Ph.D. Research Scholar, Faculty of Commerce and Management, Vidhyadeep University, Surat, Gujarat, India.

1. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-0771-4163> 2. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-3788-7178>

*Corresponding Author: Tanvi Vinod Sharma, Ph.D. Research Scholar, Faculty of Commerce and Management, Vidhyadeep University, Surat, Gujarat, India.,
Email: tanvi.v.sharma1996@gmail.com

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Website: www.youngindiapublication.in

Email: info@youngindiapublication.in

micro-influencers, who retain a niche audience (typically under 100,000 followers), yet they demonstrate high levels of authenticity, relatability, and engagement, much like a trusted friend rather than a distant public figure - especially on visually charged platforms like Instagram.

Instagram is currently holding court as one of the most influential influencer marketing platforms, and this will likely hold true in 2024. According to Statista's 2022 annual report "State of Influencer Marketing" and the Influencer Marketing Hub report "Influencer Marketing Benchmark Report," over 80% of Instagram users claim to have discovered a new product or service using the app, often through micro-influencer recommendations. Micro-influencers fill the discovery gap between the brands and consumers while introducing curated content about lifestyle, beauty, fashion, and fitness products in a more relatable and personal manner.

Micro-influencers are different from traditional celebrities, as they are built from always publishing, two-way conversations with their followers, and true product recommendations, while celebrities utilize micro-influencers as the perfect combination of peer relatability and aspirational influence to contribute to consumer opinion and behavior.

The proposed research will analyze the perceived credibility of micro-influencers, and their effect on followers' behavioural intentions--specifically, purchase and viral intentions--in the Indian Instagram environment. Using updated 2024-2025 insights from Instagram users, the research considers how micro-influencers are influencing the decision-making process, and acting as digital word-of-mouth (WOM) agents of change, for small businesses who are looking for low-cost marketing solutions.

Literature Review

The role of social media in shaping consumer behavior has received widespread attention in various academic and marketing conversations and in particular the role of micro-influencers, who have a small following but a lot of engagement with their niche audience, have become powerful influencers as opinion leaders. Micro-influencers form a two-way conversation with their audience as they can share elements of their personal life, which encourages trust and relatability (Chae, 2017; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

There seems to be a difference between celebrities and micro-influencers. The difference is not only their level of fame but their interaction with their audience. Celebrities use a one-to-many model where the interactivity is limited, while micro-influencers use a community-based dialogue approach that has greater potential to shape consumers' attitudes and behavior (Khamis et al., 2016). Micro-influencers are becoming more relevant as they offer the perception of accessibility through their authenticity, especially on Instagram where they mostly represent their lifestyle through images.

Instagram continues to be the social media platform of choice for influencer marketing in 2024, boasting 2.4 billion active users globally and an influencer economy that is growing rapidly (Statista, 2024). Its visual-first design, “stories,” and “reels” qualify it as a one-stop shop for lifestyle branding, product displays, and community engagement. Multiple research projects, including research by Djafarova & Rushworth (2017) documented that Instagram influencers affect product discovery, and brand aspiration and trust.

The one defining factor of influence, is source credibility, defined as the sum of perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness (Ohanian, 1990). Micro-influencers tend to reflect these aspects better than macro-influencers or celebrities, as peers are more relatable than remote figures. Research has shown that these factors are significant in effective influencer content, as they affect attitudes towards the ads and purchase and sharing intent (Goldsmith et al., 2000; Schapers, 2018).

The growing trend is that authenticity is recognized over follower account. The literature has recently challenged the past assumption that credibility was heavily reliant on the number of followers an influencee had, as engagement rate and content quality have now taken precedent (Weinswig, 2023; Sammis, 2024). In India, especially, this is even more relevant as trust and cultural aligning aspects are necessary elements of any form of online persuasion. The studies presented by Munnukka et al. (2016) have also shown that peer referrals are regarded as a more credible promotional form than celebrities promotional involvement for both the Indian millennial and generation Z consumer.

While the research on influencer marketing has grown and developed internationally, there has been little research, particularly academic work, about micro-influencers in India and especially influencers working through the Instagram platform or in niche categories (for example, fashion, beauty, and fitness). The present study will be useful in continuing to fill that research gap by addressing the specific case of how Indian social media users evaluate and interpret micro-influencer social credibility and how this influences not only their purchase intention but also the potential for measurable viral behaviours including tagging, sharing, and following brand pages.

Research Methodology

This research considers a qualitative research design to investigate the role of micro-influencers in shaping behavioural intentions of Instagram users in India. The overall goal is to investigate how perceived credibility (a combination of expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness) can affect two significant behavioural outcomes as measured behavioural intentions: purchase intention and viral intention (i.e., liking, sharing, commenting, tagging, or recommending).

Research Questions

1. To what degree do the perceived facets of credibility, specifically expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness, demonstrated by micro-influencers impact the buying inclinations of Instagram users within the Indian context?
2. What are the fundamental drivers that trigger viral behavioral intentions (such as favouriting, reposting, and mentioning) among Instagram users who are influenced by micro-influencers?
3. How do small enterprises in India assess the return on investment (ROI) and strategic importance of collaborations with micro-influencers?
4. How do Indian Instagram users assess the genuineness of micro-influencers relative to traditional marketing approaches?

Ethical Considerations

The present research rigorously followed ethical guidelines by ensuring voluntary participation and obtaining informed consent from all subjects. Various strategies were employed to uphold ethical principles:

- **Informed Consent:** Participants received detailed information about the study's goals and their right to withdraw from the research at any point.
- **Anonymity and Confidentiality Protection:** Measures were taken to anonymize participant data to protect their confidentiality. Data storage and access were closely monitored, allowing only authorized researchers to retrieve information.
- **Data Governance:** The collected data was solely used for academic purposes.

Sampling and Participants

The research is based on data collected from 150 active Instagram users who follow at least one micro-influencer and have made at least one purchase as a result of influencing from the micro-influencer, and the 20 micro-influencers and 10 small business owners, who each worked with area micro-influencers to promote their brands, were interviewed to triangulate user perceptions with influencer tactics and brands' expectations.

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique appropriate for qualitative research where specific characteristics (influencer interaction and engagement in this study) are required. This allowed for people to be included in the study who have relevant and recent experiences with each influencer marketing ecosystem.

Participant Group	Gender	Gender	Age Range	Region	Occupation Type	Sample Size
Instagram Users	60% Female	40% Male	18–35	Urban India	Students & Working Professionals	150
Micro-influencers	50% Female	50% Male	21–40	Pan-India	Beauty, Fitness, Fashion creators	20
Small Business Owners	30% Female	70% Male	25–45	Gujarat, Maharashtra, Delhi	Fashion & Lifestyle Startups	10

Data Collection Instruments

The research used three-tier focus group discussions:

1. Instagram users (6 groups of 8–10 participants each) were facilitated through semi-structured discussions on their perceptions influencer credibility and its effect on purchasing behavior and online engagement.
2. Micro-influencers participated in two separate sessions to discuss their strategies for followers, follower engagement, and their perspectives on the authenticity of content.
3. Small business owners provided insight on the return on investment (ROI), strategies for selecting micro-influencers, and how they perceive campaign effectiveness.

The discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded for content analysis. The responses were cross-validated against literature and organized into thematic categories on dimensions of credibility and behavioural influence.

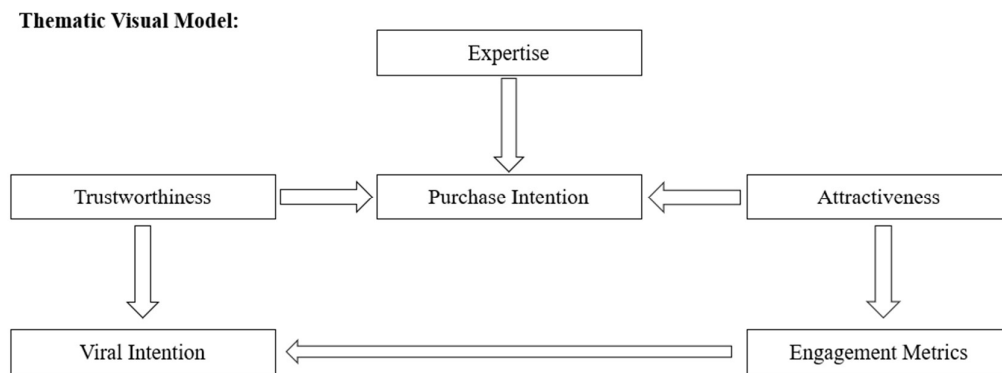
Platform Justification

The research only examines Instagram as it is the most strategically important influencer marketing platform in India currently (2024). Influencer Marketing Hub (2024) found that Instagram has the highest engagement rate per post (1.4%) anywhere in influencer marketing, including YouTube and Facebook. Instagram remains the visual platform and offers the most highly interactive atmosphere (stories, reels, polls, etc.); therefore, it is well-suited as the platform for product discovery and brand building, especially in fashion, beauty, and fitness markets. To strengthen the platform relevance, participants were also requested to categorize influencer content into specific verticals. The top three clusters of themes presented—Fashion, Beauty, and Fitness—formed the basis of the content analysis.

Data Analysis Procedure

Data collected from all focus groups were subjected to thematic content analysis, allowing for the extraction of meaningful patterns and themes from the qualitative responses. User responses were grouped under credibility dimensions—expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness—based on the established model of Ohanian (1990). Further, behavioural dimensions were coded as purchase intention and viral intention to determine how credibility translated into user actions.

The triangulation of perspectives from users, influencers, and business owners strengthens the validity of the study and provides a multi-stakeholder understanding of micro-influencer effectiveness in India's social media landscape.



Findings / Emerged Credibility Dimensions

The analysis involved reviewing focus group discussions with Instagram Users, micro-influencers, and small business owners, establishing the characteristics of a set of credibility dimensions that provides a framework for how followers think about micro-influencers and their content. These dimensions manifest in two critical consequences; the perceptions of influencer messages and the behavioural intentions to perform an action, such as purchasing and viral intention. A range of 22 traits were categorized by the use of respondents' narratives. These characteristics were encapsulated by three dimensions of source credibility, and were consistent with Ohanian's (1990) triadic model of source credibility. These dimensions are expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness.

1. Perceived Expertise

Participants used terms like "knowledgeable," "skilled," "experienced," "professional," and "proficient" to describe social media influencers whose content they found credible. Expertise often was associated with influencers who shared niche content (e.g., skincare routine, product tutorial, fitness transformation), posted at a consistent and high rate, and who demonstrated a strong knowledge of their products and/or categories they were sharing content about.

2. Trustworthiness

Trust was the dimension with the highest number of mentions. Followers used words like "honest," "ethical," "transparent," "authentic," "trustworthy," and "consistent" when talking about influencers whose opinions they valued. Ways in which influencers demonstrated trustworthiness ranged from the extent to which they disclosed their paid partnerships, to what they said in the reviews of their products, to whether they remained genuine participants in engaging with commenters.

Notably, followers expressed greater loyalty toward micro-influencers that were open about product flaws than those that only displayed perfection. This supports the recent trend that authenticity trumps promotional polish.

3. Attractiveness

The attractiveness dimension is more than just being physically attractive. The impression influencers were able to create from the words "elegant," "charming," "confident," "stylish," and "relatable" spoke to the presentation of influencers who appeared both aesthetically attractive and aspirational but also relatable within a visual context. The way influencers staged their posts to create visually attractive content—whether through stories, reels, and how influencers arranged their grids—could significantly impact perceptions of influencer credibility.

Credibility Metrics Beyond Follower Count

Previously, follower count was often viewed as a landscape for gauging an influencer's impact, but conversations revealed that most followers now valued engagement rates, follower-to-following ratios, frequency of posts, and overall interaction with the community... was seen as a better measure of credibility. An example shared in the context of follower-count credibility was a user with 12,000 followers, who regularly maintained two-way communication and consistently engaged (e.g., comments, DMs, polls) with their community was viewed as more credible than another user, who had 100,000 mostly passive followers.

The follower-to-following ratio emerged as a semi-accepted heuristic: an influencer that followed "much fewer" accounts than accounts that followed them was more credible. For example, an influencer had a follower-to-following ratio of 1/4; in this instance the influencer followed few accounts (e.g., 250) she had 1,000 followers. However, while this heuristic became more common, many participants were reluctant to endorse the follower-to-following ratio, especially influencers in this investigation who oriented towards building community and followed almost all engaged followers back.

Validation from Literature

These emergent themes are consistent with previous literature on source credibility theory (Hovland et al., 1953; Ohanian, 1990; Goldsmith et al., 2000), which suggests expertise and trustworthiness are two key dimensions in message acceptance. Consistent with Schapers (2018) and Rebelo (2017) this study identifies that, in a crowded digital space, audiences prioritize relatability, authenticity, and community over showy, broad reach.

Ultimately this transformation to a new definition of credibility also suggests a shift from influencer reach to influencer authenticity, with micro-influencers becoming the best option for small businesses looking to create trust-based conversions.

Impact of Micro-Influencer Credibility on Behavioural Intentions

Micro-influencers' credibility—derived from the perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness—has a strong impact on their followers' behavioural intentions. In this study, behavioural intention is assessed in two main aspects: purchase intention (the probability of buying a product that the influencer has advertised) and viral intention (the likelihood of engagement, sharing, or recommending the influencer's content or the product being advertised).

1. Influence on Purchase Intention

Participants across all focus groups reported that their decision to buy a product was influenced very much by how credible they perceived the influencer. Buying behavior was influenced more by the credibility of micro-influencers who exhibited consistency, product knowledge, honest feedback, and good visual presentation.

This supports Sertoglu et al. (2014), and Rebelo (2017) studies that indicated influencer credibility positively correlated to consumer purchase intention, notably on the highly visual based Instagram. Unlike traditional advertisements where audiences experience a marketing message designed to close a sale, micro-influencer content is considered organic and personal—especially when the influencers share their experiences using the product, their trials, and their real-time feedback.

Additionally, many participants stated that trust increased when influencers openly and honestly showed a balanced view, including both positive and negative aspects of a product. This critical and non-promoting style creates perceptions of transparency, leading to stronger conviction to purchase the product among followers.

2. Influence on Viral Intention

Viral intention is defined as a user's likelihood of liking the posts, commenting on them, saving them, sharing them with others, or recommending the brand and influencer to someone else. In today's social media landscape, this peer-to-peer sharing is critical for both organic reach and user-generated advertisement.

Our study showed that micro-influencers who engage with their followers on a regular basis (through Q&A sessions, polls, or just responding to DMs or comments) do inspire followers to have higher viral intention. Followership will be more likely to share "near peer" or relatable content that they feel was helpful or supports their social sharing intention. For example, content with product demonstrations, tips and tricks, or discounted promotional codes were far more likely to be forwarded to their friends or saved for a future look.

These findings are supported by Gunawan & Huarng (2015) and Mahapatra & Mishra (2017) who note the importance of source credibility and tie strength in instigating eWOM and eWOM intent. The more a user trusts the influencer, the more likely that user is to actively do something to influence positive action, and further, broadcast that message to their own "network."

Viral intention is frequently a precursor to purchase intention, especially in a younger user group. Many participants stated that they had saved posts, followed the tagged brand, and/or talked about product representation with their peers prior to an actual purchase decision.

Investment and Returns with Micro-Influencers

With brands increasingly moving into influencer-driven marketing models, micro-influencers have risen as a budget-friendly, high return alternative, especially for small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) without large budgets for celebrity endorsements or media buys.

1. Investment Models

Based on the qualitative data it collected from 10 small business owners, the most commonly identified forms of investment in micro-influencer partnerships included:

- Product gifting (as in-kind promotions)
- Monetary payments (in fixed fee or performance-based)
- Affiliate commissions (tracked through custom discount codes or links)
- Content barter (co-created posts or testimonials that could be used jointly in promotion)

Such investments are seen as comparatively more flexible, negotiable, and scalable, compared to traditional advertising. Collaborations were seen as advantageous to business and influencer alike, particularly when businesses and influencers share values and target the same niche audience, or have a suitably aligned product offering.

The small businesses noted that internships partnerships with micro-influencers provided them an opportunity for trial and error—testing content format, messaging angles, and creative campaigns—without a heavy financial risk.

2. Returns and Performance Indicators

The outcomes of these collaborations were reported in a variety of ways, including:

- Increase in product purchases (tracked via referral codes, direct traffic, and conversions)
- Increase in brand engagement (likes, comments, follows, DMs)
- Increase in user-generated content (UGC) as followers shared their own experiences
- Increase in brand recall and local profile, especially for hyper-local businesses
- Improved targeting accuracy, based on the influencer's niche.

The business owners we interviewed also noted that their ROI (Return on Investment) was better with micro-influencers than with traditional marketing channels because of stronger connection to their audience and putting the product in authentic context.

This agrees with research from Wissman (2018) and Influencer Marketing Hub (2024) that cites campaigns with several micro-influencers typically better engage users and result in more conversions than using a single mega-influencer. In fact, a campaign where a brand used 5-10 micro-influencers simultaneously reached a more diverse audience and reinforces the brands message more effectively than a single mega-influencer campaign.

In addition, micro-influencers offer engagement rates at 2-5% rates as opposed to only relying on macro- or celebrity influencers whose additional reach is often more diluted. This allows businesses to achieve more focused impact without spending a great deal of money which makes micro-influencer marketing the most cost-effective ROI tool in the digital environment.

Conclusion

The findings of this research underscored the increasing role and importance of micro-influencers in influencing consumer behaviour in the Indian social media marketing ecosystem. With the growth of social commerce, credibility of influencers specifically their expertise, attractiveness, and trustworthy characteristics has emerged as the mediating construct that digital consumers use to interpret branded content and base their purchase decisions.

The study confirms that micro-influencers contribute significantly to the development of consumer trust, purchase intentions, and viral behaviours. Given their consistency of engagement and relatability, micro-influencers also appear more authentic than traditional celebrities, especially to younger age demographics. Today's users are inclined to either purchase a product, save a post, or recommend a brand based on how credible and knowledgeable they perceive the influencer to be.

From a business or organizational standpoint, especially for startups and SMEs, collaborating with micro-influencers represents a high ROI. The required investment is normally low but the outcomes can be very large - such as: sales uplift, credibility of brand, engagement, enthusiasm and motivation. Most importantly, brands are tapping into highly engaged niche audiences where they avoid the costs associated with traditional advertising.

As a final thought, micro-influencers are not just another marketing trend, but rather, they are a strategic asset in the ongoing evolution of the digital landscape. They continue to develop a presence in our lives that warrants further academic and industrial exploration in the future, particularly in new and vibrant markets such as India. Future studies may include, but are not limited to, quantitative studies, comparisons across platforms, and research looking at how AI can help with identifying ideal influencers for brands.

Future Research Directions

1. Prospective scholarly pursuits may entail the execution of an extensive large-scale survey incorporating regression analysis or Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to substantiate qualitative observations empirically.
2. Broaden the investigative scope to encompass platforms such as YouTube, Moj, and Threads in order to discern variations in consumer responses across heterogeneous platforms.
3. Investigate the feasibility of utilizing artificial intelligence for the purpose of aligning brands with influencers through the integration of credibility evaluation algorithms.
4. Undertake an examination of micro-influencers situated in Tier-2 and Tier-3 urban locales in India, investigating promotional initiatives disseminated in local dialects to elucidate regional and linguistic diversity.
5. Employ longitudinal research methodologies to assess the enduring impacts and customer allegiance fostered through enduring alliances with influencers.

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Annexures: Interview Schedules

Annexure I – Instagram Users

Focus Group Topics:

- Perception of influencer trustworthiness and credibility
- Purchase decisions influenced by Instagram influencers
- Comparison of paid vs. organic content
- Preferred formats (Reels, Stories, Posts) and engagement behaviors

Annexure II – Micro-influencers

Discussion Questions:

- Strategies to maintain follower trust and authenticity
- Engagement techniques used (polls, Q&A, reels)
- Views on paid partnerships and content alignment with values
- Challenges in collaborating with brands

Annexure III – Small Business Owners

Key Points of Inquiry:

- How micro-influencers are selected
- Expectations from influencer campaigns
- Types of ROI metrics used (referrals, engagement, sales)
- Feedback on campaign effectiveness and challenges