



How do Social Media Influencers Trigger Impulse Buying: The Mediating Role of Emotional Arousal and Cognitive Bias

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ABSTRACT

Dual process theory and the elaboration likelihood model inform this study, which investigates the psychological mechanisms by which social media influencer posts lead to impulse purchasing. In particular, the research investigates the relationship between social media influencer content exposure and impulse purchasing behavior, an area that has been researched very little in consumer behavior literature. It does this by investigating the dual mediation influence of emotional arousal and cognitive bias. 412 Indian social media users filled out a standardized questionnaire, and partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed to analyze the data. The model examines both the direct and indirect effects to test the hypothesized dual-path mediation model. Results indicate that content created by influencers positively and significantly influences impulse buying behavior. Emotional arousal and cognitive bias were found to mediate this relationship, as hypothesized in this study through the dual psychological pathway. Influencer marketers must be aware of the cognitive and affective processes hidden in influencer posts and design campaigns appropriately, taking advantage of these mechanisms. Insights also have implications for consumer protection policy on the internet. The study contributes to influencer marketing and consumer psychology literature by empirically examining and determining a dual-mediation model and presenting a deeper insight into the mechanisms through which influencer posts drive impulse buying through affective and heuristic routes.

Keywords: Impulse Buying, Social Media Influencers, Emotional Arousal, Cognitive Bias, Dual Process Theory

JEL Classifications: M31, D91, D12, M37, D83

1. INTRODUCTION

The way in which customers interact with brands and products they buy has been completely transformed by the phenomenal growth of social media platforms such as YouTube and Instagram over the last decade. The enormous reach and popularity of these websites among world populations are attested to by the fact that Instagram has more than 2 billion monthly active users, respectively, according to Statista (2023). The rise of social media influencers (SMIs), larger-than-life figures with a following who are perceived as relatable, trustworthy, and experts on certain subjects, is arguably the most tangible change within this sphere. Influencers, through authentic, image-worthy content, are opinion leaders, shaping the views and behaviors of customers (Kapitan and

Silvera, 2016; Liu and Lee, 2024). Compared to typical celebrities, SMIs can build parasocial close relationships, and hence their endorsement of products becomes more effective as a result of perceived authenticity and familiarity (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017; Rizomyliotis et al., 2024). Influencer marketing enables brands to communicate with consumers in a more authentic and specific way, which is typically associated with higher engagement rates and stronger purchase intentions (Lou and Yuan, 2019; Liu and Zheng, 2024). According to research, influencer recommendations are more reliable for consumers, especially millennials and Gen Z, than paid messages from brands (Bratina and Faganel, 2024).

Impulse buying is an unexpected, spontaneous purchase due to emotional stimulation and lack of rational thought. It is contrary

to either planned or habitual buying in the sense of being unexpected and hedonically driven (Rook and Fisher, 1995). Impulse buying normally occurs as a response to stimuli outside of an individual—such as social media updates or tempting advertisements—without regard for long-term consequences. Psychologically, impulse buying is the outcome of emotional stimuli such as excitement, stress, or boredom, and consumers seek satisfaction immediately (Dholakia, 2000). Hedonic motivations and lower self-control are at the core, with more emotionally sensitive and reactive impulse shoppers (Rook, 1987). As they are attempting to make sense of what they have done, customers might feel post-purchase dissonance following such purchases (Hoch and Loewenstein, 1991). Impulse buying propensity is affected by individual differences such as personality and affect susceptibility, as suggested by Verplanken and Herabadi (2001). External environments like social media render individuals more impulsive because they are constantly exposed to influencing messages and transient offers (Baumeister, 2002; Luo et al., 2024). Therefore, the interaction between states of affect and limits of cognition is realized in impulse buying.

Social media influencers use compelling strategies such as shareable content, honest storytelling and scarcity messaging to highly influence consumers. Social media influencers have the ability to persuade their followers to make impulse purchases by using special offers or limited-time deals to create urgency (Liu et al., 2025). According to Wang and Chan-Olmsted (2024), influencers are seen as competent and credible, which increases the credibility of the message and reduces consumer resistance. The persuasiveness of influencers is supported by strong influencing factors such as perceived competence, physical attractiveness and credibility of the source (Chaihanchanchai et al., 2024). When consumers notice both knowledge and similarity from the influencers, they are more likely to mimic their behavior, especially in low-involvement purchases (Lim et al., 2017). Influencer content is a mixture of entertainment with implicit advertising and is less intrusive yet more effective than conventional advertising. It has been seen in recent times that over 60% of marketers plan to expand spending on influencer marketing, which shows the magnitude at which it is impacting e-commerce (Statista, 2023). Micro-influencers are especially becoming popular with their niche audience and improved engagement.

Although much research has been conducted on consumers’ general attitudes towards social media influencers, little is known about the psychological processes involved in impulse buying in this context. Current research tends to examine general behavioral responses or trust in influencers (e.g., Ashraf et al., 2023; Lu and Chen, 2023), rather than examining the particular emotional and cognitive processes that mediate impulsive decisions. Notably, the two-step mediation process of emotional arousal (e.g., desire, excitement) and cognitive biases (e.g., heuristic processing, perceived scarcity) has received hardly any empirical examination in the context of influencer marketing. This is important because impulse buying is mostly based on affect and heuristics rather than systematic planning (Ameer Hussain et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2023). Deeper knowledge of how influencers provoke these internal responses can deepen their understanding of consumers’

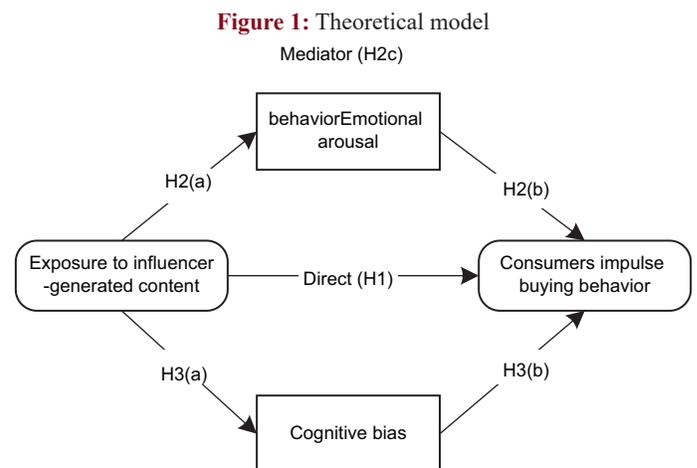
susceptibility and marketing efficacy. This study aims to address this gap by focusing on emotional and cognitive mediation on the impulse buying process driven by influencers.

This research uses dual-process theory, which distinguishes between two cognitive processing systems: System 1 (fast, automatic, affective) and System 2 (slow, controlled, analytical) (Kahneman, 2011). System 1 probably predominates in impulse purchases, especially when users are confronted with appealing influencer posts. Based on the elaboration likelihood model (Petty et al., 1986), we propose emotional arousal as an affective route and cognitive bias as a heuristic route that jointly mediate social media content effects on consumer behavior. Emotional arousal, for example, excitement or craving, will be likely to overcome deliberation, particularly high-appeal visual messages (Shiv and Fedorikhin, 1999). This theoretical approach enables subtlety in explaining how influencers create impulse buys through these twin psychological routes.

The overall aim of this study is to investigate how social media influencers trigger impulse buying by evoking emotional arousal and cognitive biases in customers. This study makes an original contribution by incorporating two mediators — i.e., affective and heuristic processes— in the context of influencer marketing. In contrast to previous studies that have looked at consumer attitudes in general, the current study examines the psychological mechanisms of impulse buying. The conclusions are relevant to both contemporary digital marketing practise and public policy, as they provide insights to help policymakers develop effective yet legitimate digital communication.

2. THEORY AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Based on dual-process theory (Kahneman, 2011) and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty et al., 1986), we develop hypotheses for the relationships between emotional arousal, cognitive bias, influencer characteristics, and impulse buying behavior (Figure 1). Influencer posts are an external cue that triggers System 1 processing, which is automatic and affect-based in nature. It can also trigger impulse buying characteristics



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through two psychological mechanisms. Emotional arousal, i.e., pleasure, desire, or excitement, is the affect channel and a central mediator in impulse choice when consumers are confronted with emotionally and visually stimulating information (Shiv and Fedorikhin, 1999). At the same time, cognitive biases, such as trust in source credibility, attractiveness, or social proof, are a heuristic pathway that enables quick decisions with little effort (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). Both of these intermediaries are triggered by influencer-created content, which is typically perceived to be convincing and personal.

2.1. Influence of Social Media Content on Impulse Buying

Influencer advertising and content commerce have contributed notably to the way consumers purchase as a result of the spread of social media. However, brand credibility and utilitarian values in shopping limit the power of social media influencers (SMI) over consumers' purchasing decisions (Afzal et al., 2024). The combination of SMI strategy, content and credibility largely influences the decision that consumers make (Mrisha and Xixiang, 2024). Linguistic attributes of marketing messages, for instance, self-referring, describing, and argumentation creation, are useful for consumer buying behavior in content-based social commerce, as noted by Wang et al. (2023). Parasocial relationship, sponsorship, authenticity, and interaction have dominated the research work on social media influencer advertising. These studies have also put the significance of audience, brand, content, and influencer-related factors into the spotlight in consumer reactions (Joshi et al., 2023).

Several studies conducted by Geurin (2023) show how followers generally view influencers, especially athletes, as trusted sources whose behavior and use of products directly influence their purchase intentions. For example, Clarke et al. (2024) and Zheng and Xu (2024) found that fans' attitudes towards athletes' influencers have a positive impact on attitudes towards the brand and behavioral outcomes such as purchase intentions. Similarly, Geurin and Burch (2017) demonstrated the relationship between athlete-sponsored Instagram posts and stronger parasocial experiences that eventually predicted followers' behavior and purchasing intent. Further, Lee (2021) discovered that influencer content's credibility and relevance were chief predictors of consumers' responsiveness, where promotional sports personalities' pages generated higher intention to buy. Geurin (2023) refers to the increasing marketization of influencer sites and highlights the importance of understanding the manner in which sponsored content leads to impulse or responsive buying behavior among fans.

In consumer behavior, especially in high-speed digital environments like social media, System 1 will be activated, yielding more instinctive and fewer analysis-based judgments (Shiv and Fedorikhin, 1999). Influencer marketing content posted on Instagram, and YouTube also tends to have emotionally appealing pictures, sharable narratives, and scarcity messaging that are all extrinsic cues stimulating System 1 processing. These stimuli elicit emotional arousal—such as excitement, urgency, or desire—and induce cognitive biases, including social proof, source

credibility, and perceived scarcity (Petty et al., 1986; Tversky and Kahneman, 1974). Consumers are accordingly more likely to make spontaneous buys, which result less as a matter of rational evaluation and increasingly as a matter of affective and heuristic cues. These psychological mechanisms reduce deliberative control and promote a state conducive to impulse buying. Therefore, influencer content not only serves as argumentative communication but also as a stimulus for rapid, affect-based, and bias-dependent decision-making. On the basis of this theoretical foundation, we hypothesize emotional arousal and cognitive bias as dual mediators that transfer the influence of influencer content on impulse buying by consumers.

Impulse buying is an unplanned, strong desire to purchase a product with no intention or careful thinking of what occurs. It is likely to be triggered by feelings and occurs in response to outside stimuli that reduce cognitive control (Rook, 1987; Verplanken and Herabadi, 2001). Impulse buying is known for its hurry, emotional choice, and lack of planning. Social media content comprises posts, videos, or stories created by influencers who have achieved a sizable number of supporters and are viewed as authentic and useful in their space. That type of material often includes product endorsements, sponsorships, or way-of-life adoption for the sake of changing purchaser conduct (Freberg et al., 2011; Lou and Yuan, 2019).

While earlier studies have investigated the influence of social media on consumer behavior, few have explicitly named influencer-specific content as a distinct antecedent of impulse buying. Most research so far takes into account general social media usage, brand attitude, or trust in influencers (Lim et al., 2017; Jin and Ryu, 2020), with little regard for the underlying psychological processes that convert exposure to influencers into impulsive action. Given the prevalence of emotionally engaging and heuristically driven content on sites such as YouTube and Instagram, there is an urgent need to determine how such content triggers impulse buying through certain internal mechanisms such as emotional arousal and cognitive bias. Integrating these findings, it is clear that influencer content is not just promotional but psychologically stimulating, able to evoke unplanned consumer behavior through both affective and heuristic routes. Despite increasing commercial investment in influencer advertising, its role in the emergence of impulse buying via these two channels has not been sufficiently investigated in existing research. Such a theoretical and empirical deficit justifies the focus of the present study. Accordingly, we propose:

H₁: Exposure to influencer-generated content is positively associated with consumers' impulse buying behavior.

2.2. Emotional Arousal as an Affective Mediator

Exposure to influencer-generated content on social media is defined by the use of high-arousal language, which involves activating consumers more as it communicates haste, excitement, or enthusiasm (Cascio Rizzo et al., 2024). Words such as “unbelievable,” “incredible,” or “amazing” and paralinguistic cues such as emojis, exclamation marks, and capital letters serve to enhance the emotional impact of a message (Luangrath et al., 2023). The language of arousal intensifies consumer belief that

influencers are genuinely excited, especially in the case of micro-influencers, whose messages will usually be interpreted as genuine and ordinary (Cascio Rizzo et al., 2024). This is a sensation that can create emotional responses such as craving and excitement, which are the most influential affective precursors of impulse purchasing (Shiv and Fedorikhin, 1999; Berger and Milkman, 2012). Importantly, Cascio Rizzo et al. (2024) establish that a 10% increase in arousal language increases engagement by 5.4% for micro-influencers—providing a significant emotional activation effect through exposure. When influencer content utilizes informative purposes instead of explicit commercial language, emotional arousal continues to have an effect without triggering consumer skepticism or persuasion knowledge (Friestad and Wright, 1994), which would otherwise erode trust. This distinction further establishes that the emotional strength of influencer content is sensitive to presentation and presenter. Thus, influencer-generated content—especially when emotionally intense—contributes significantly to facilitating System 1-based emotional responses, which are quick, automatic, and susceptible to impulsive consumer behavior (Kahneman, 2011).

In the context of online purchases and influencer promotion, affective arousal has been shown to be the most important link between external stimulation and internal purchase compulsion, especially in emotionally stimulating conditions. Ramadania et al. (2022) found that positive emotions significantly influenced impulse buying behavior in the empirical study of the Matahari department store, with emotional states mediating the influence of environmental stimuli and hedonics on purchase decisions. This suggests that high-emotional-arousal shoppers are more likely to use impulse buying. Emotional arousal circumvents the rational decision-making system (System 2), so System 1—the fast, intuitive, and affective operation—is dominant (Kahneman, 2011). This is also evidenced by Loo et al. (2024) and Wang et al. (2024), which confirm that positive emotional responses—elicited by exciting environments or enjoyable stimuli—significantly impact impulse buying. These findings are also present in a broader meta-analysis by Santini et al. (2019), which places positive affect as a consistent and strong predictor of impulsive consumption in consumer settings. So when customers are emotionally activated—through influencer marketing content, visual aspects of the product or storytelling—they become more emotionally aroused, which encourages them to make spontaneous purchases without any prior intention.

The path from exposure to influencer-generated content to impulse buying behavior is illuminated by the mediating process of emotional arousal, a central construct of affect-driven consumer behavior. Based on dual-process theory (Kahneman, 2011) and the elaboration likelihood model (Petty et al., 1986), consumers are processing influencer content by means of the peripheral route with affective indicators of arousal, desire, and enthusiasm rather than systematic processing. Influencer-created content—especially micro-influencer content—is also more likely to use highly arousing language and visual elements (e.g., emojis, capitals, exclamation marks), that have been discovered to increase affective arousal and engagement (Cascio Rizzo et al., 2024). Subsequently, such affective reactions become affective

decisions. Ramadania et al.'s (2022) empirical result buttresses that positive emotional arousal significantly predicts impulse buying behavior. The study found that hedonic shopping value, store atmosphere, and promotion cues all had an effect on impulse buying through the way in which they affected emotional states. In online settings, when consumers see influencer posts, the affective appeal of such posts—through personality cues, story, or authenticity—first evokes emotional arousal. This heightened emotional sensitivity, in turn, overrides deliberative control, thus yielding impulsive consumer purchase behavior without explicit intent (Beatty and Ferrell, 1998; Lou and Yuan, 2019). Emotional arousal thus is the psychological process through which content produced by influencers impacts purchasing behavior. We put forth the following hypotheses in light of this line of reasoning and earlier research:

- H_{2a}: Exposure to influencer-generated content is positively associated with emotional arousal
- H_{2b}: Emotional arousal is positively associated with impulse buying behavior
- H_{2c}: Emotional arousal mediates the relationship between influencer-generated content and impulse buying behavior.

2.3. Cognitive Bias as a Heuristic Mediator

Influencers' posts typically contain heuristic cues such as source credibility, attractiveness, and scarcity that lead consumers to use System 1—quick, intuitive, and affect-based decisions—rather than deliberation (Kahneman, 2011; Petty et al., 1986). Influencers will most likely be perceived as opinion leaders or expertise authorities, so followers will create automatic opinions from familiarity or perceived expertise (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017; Liu and Zheng, 2024). Research suggests that consumers exposed to influencer content make quick judgments based on aesthetic appeal and trustworthiness and are not bothered about the detailed consideration of product features. For example, cues like “limited time offer,” “trending item,” or “influencer favorite” activate cognitive heuristics like scarcity bias and bandwagon effect that maximize mental efficiency at the cost of rational processing (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020).

Cognitive biases reduce consumers' deliberative control and increase their vulnerability to unplanned purchases. From empirical data, heuristic processing has been a consistent predictor of spontaneous conduct, especially in high-exposure situations where consumers are mentally fatigued or emotionally aroused (Rook, 1987; Verplanken and Herabadi, 2001). Influencer content marketing—particularly for apps like Instagram and YouTube—is created in shareable visual form, brief messaging format, and sense of urgency triggers, each designed to encourage the impulse to buy by leveraging cognitive bias. Additionally, Zhang and Choi (2022) and Angeles et al. (2024) are of the opinion that when influencer content is seen as informative and easy to process, users will avoid rational assessment and use behavior based on mental shortcuts, particularly when the content is seen as entertaining and credible.

Drawing upon the elaboration likelihood model (ELM), influencer material is processed via the peripheral route, with heuristic cues being the focus of the decision-making process. When exposed

to material that is perceived as credible or visually appealing, cognitive biases are called forth that enable their consumer behavior (Petty et al., 1986; Lou and Yuan, 2019). This path has been tried in various digital contexts. Influencer content, particularly when loaded with heuristic salience, increases the likelihood that consumers will form spontaneous judgments and ultimately practice impulse purchasing—not out of product need, but as a result of the message frame (e.g., urgency, endorsement, aesthetic satisfaction). In a meta-analysis, Santini et al. (2019) reaffirmed impulse buying to not only be affectively but also cognitively biased, especially when consumers are exposed to marketing stimuli full of non-rational cues, such as is typical with influencer advertising.

- H_{3a}: Exposure to influencer-generated content is positively associated with cognitive bias (e.g., heuristic processing based on influencer credibility, attractiveness, or scarcity cues)
 H_{3b}: Cognitive bias is positively associated with impulse buying behavior
 H_{3c}: Cognitive bias mediates the relationship between influencer-generated content and impulse buying behavior.

Figure 1 is the conceptual model that was designed for this study, which analyzes the impact of exposure to influencer-generated content on impulse purchasing behavior among consumers, with emotional arousal and cognitive bias as mediators.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Sample and Procedure

This research used a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to investigate how social media influencers create impulse buying through two primary psychological processes: emotional arousal and cognitive bias. The study was carried out among active social media users in India aged between 18 and 35 years, as this is an actively engaged age group with channels such as Instagram, and YouTube (Statista, 2023). These platforms have been widely identified as the most important areas where influencer marketing is most prevalent (Lou and Yuan, 2019; Liu and Zheng, 2024). Previous research has also proven that this generation is more prone to digital persuasion, emotional stimulation, and impulse online purchases (Dholakia, 2000; Ramadania et al., 2022).

We used a purposive sampling approach to reach out to the respondents who had indicated regular exposure to influencer content from social media and previous online shopping experience. Online questionnaire was completed via Google Forms from February 2025 for 6 weeks until March 2025. We included a cover sheet that provided information on the research aim, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and ethical handling of data, following the recommendations of ethical procedures by Podsakoff et al. (2003). To achieve optimal response rates and prevent fatigue, the questionnaire was as short as possible and did not request any personally sensitive information, as in prescribed procedures by De Koning et al. (2021).

Total of 450 responses were collected from various Indian states. After excluding incomplete responses and careless responses based

on attention check questions, 412 valid responses were left for analysis. The response rate was 91.6%. The demographic profile of the sample is shown below: 58.5% were females, and 41.5% were men. The majority (64%) were in the 21-30 age group, indicating an active age group using digital media. 62% of respondents had a bachelor's degree, and almost 70% of participants said they follow five or more influencers. About 60% said they had made one or more impulse purchases in the past month because they had been exposed to influencer content. In order to achieve better generalizability, the sample also included respondents from urban and semi-urban areas.

To minimize standard method bias and content validate, questionnaire items were made sure to be well-developed from prior measures and pilot-tested among 25 users before the collection of the main data, according to proposals by Podsakoff et al. (2003).

3.2. Measures

Standardized multi-item scales derived from earlier, validated work were used to measure all constructs. Linguistic and cultural equivalence was ensured by having all the items translated to Hindi and Tamil meticulously by the back-translation procedure of Brislin (1980), as the original scales were constructed in Western environments. Two domain-knowledge bilingual experts translated the questionnaire from English into the target languages and then back from the target languages into English. Differences were verified and updated to preserve semantic equivalence. All items, except where stated otherwise, were scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), the same as had been done in earlier studies (Beatty and Ferrell, 1998; Lou and Yuan, 2019).

3.2.1. Exposure to influencer-generated content

This was measured using an adjusted four-item scale from Lou and Yuan (2019) and Liu et al. (2025). It established the frequency, relevance, and extent of focus toward content posted by influencers (e.g., “I often look at or interact with product posts released by influencers,” “I often see influencers endorsing brands or products on my timeline”). This behavior is also in keeping with previous research which proved repeated exposure to be linked with increased affective and heuristic processing (Petty et al., 1986). Cronbach's alpha on the scale was 0.81, indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

3.2.2. Emotional arousal

Emotional stimulation was assessed by a five-item scale using Shiv and Fedorikhin (1999), Berger and Milkman (2012), and Ramadania et al. (2022). Items quantified the extent to which the consumer experienced feelings of excitement, desire, and urge (e.g., “I get excited when I know that the recommendations for influencer products are here,” “After seeing influencer posts, there is an intense urge to make a purchase now”). These items reflect the general operations of System 1 processing where affect dominates deliberation (Kahneman, 2011). The scale's Cronbach's alpha was 0.85.

3.2.3. Cognitive bias

This measure explained the extent to which participants relied on heuristic cues such as influencer credibility, perceived scarcity, and attractiveness. The scale was adapted from six items by Tversky and Kahneman (1974) and Sokolova and Kefi (2020). Sample items were “I am likely to use influencer suggestions when buying” and “Influencer time-limited offers make me want to buy now.” These heuristic clues are characteristic of low-effort processing routes in the elaboration likelihood model (Petty et al., 1986). Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was 0.83.

3.2.4. Impulse buying behavior

Impulse purchase was measured through a modified five-item Rook and Fisher (1995), Verplanken and Herabadi (2001), and Santini et al. (2019) scale. It reflected on spontaneous behaviors, prior planning lack, and emotional decision-making (e.g., “I am likely to make impulsive purchases following social media updates,” “I tend to shop without considering whether something catches my attention online”). This measure reflects directly the definition of impulse buying as affect-based, non-rational action (Rook, 1987). Cronbach’s alpha was 0.87, showing high reliability.

3.2.5. Control variables

In line with previous research (Lou and Yuan 2019; Liu et al., 2025; Ramadania et al., 2022), a few demographic and behavioral controls were included to avoid spuriousness: Gender, age group, educational qualification, frequency of online shopping, Number of influencers followed, daily time spent on social media. These controls have been found to affect online behavior and impulse buying and were therefore controlled for while analyzing.

also found to be significantly negatively correlated with emotional arousal ($r = -0.355, P < 0.01$) and cognitive bias ($r = -0.280, P < 0.01$), suggesting more complicated psychological processes that need to be explored.

Emotional arousal (EA) was positively associated with cognitive bias ($r = 0.374, P < 0.01$), supporting the suggestion that emotional arousal improves heuristic reasoning. Of note here is that emotional arousal did not show a strong relationship with impulsive buying behavior ($r = -0.071, P = n.s.$), perhaps suggesting that arousal of an emotion does not always directly lead to impulsive behavior unless it is part of other mediating processes. In addition, cognitive bias (CB) was weakly but positively correlated with impulse buying behavior ($r = 0.078, P = n.s.$), indicating a mediating role that may not be apparent from the bivariate correlations. Among the control variables, time on social media was significantly associated with emotional arousal ($r = 0.103, P < 0.05$) and education level ($r = 0.871, P < 0.01$), suggesting that educated respondents spent more time on social media and could be slightly more emotionally aroused by influencer messages. In addition, age and frequency of online shopping were highly correlated ($r = 0.916, P < 0.01$), suggesting that younger users shop online more frequently.

4.2. Confirmatory Factor Analysis

To quantify the reliability and validity of the constructs, we empirically tested the measurement model using factor loadings, Cronbach’s alpha, composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), and variance inflation factor (VIF). Table 2 shows the results.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

We calculated the means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlation coefficients for all the study variables. Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations among variables are presented in Table 1.

The results show that exposure to influencer-generated content (EIGC) was positively correlated with impulse buying behavior ($r = 0.459, P < 0.01$), which would mean that greater exposure to influencer content tends to drive more impulsive buying. EIGC was

All factor loadings were above the threshold of 0.70, indicating good indicator reliability, with the exception of EA4 (0.685) and IBB2 (0.628), which were retained given their theoretical importance and minimal deviation from the threshold (Sarstedt et al., 2021). The reliability of internal consistency was confirmed as the Cronbach’s alpha values of all constructs were between 0.70 and above (0.726-0.849). In addition, the composite reliability (CR) values were all above the minimum value of 0.70 (0.841-0.893), indicating good to acceptable consistency between the constructs. Convergent validity was established for all constructs as the AVE values were above the recommended threshold of 0.50 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981), ranging from 0.545 (cognitive bias) to

Table 1: Means, standard deviations and correlation

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Gender	1.58	0.49	1									
Age	1.92	0.72	0.756**	1								
Education	1.45	0.62	0.608**	0.729**	1							
Frequency of online shopping	2.94	0.78	0.715**	0.916**	0.694**	1						
Influencers followed	2.57	0.72	0.720**	0.778**	0.438**	0.794**	1					
Time spent on social media	2.2	0.9	0.725**	0.868**	0.871**	0.874**	0.713**	1				
Exposure to influencer gen. content	13.38	3.24	-0.123*	-0.115*	-0.111*	-0.119*	-0.059	-0.099*	1			
Emotional arousal	12.76	3.5	0.114*	0.105*	0.087	0.092	0.061	0.103*	-0.355**	1		
Cognitive bias	16.88	5.09	0.047	-0.001	0.037	-0.015	-0.024	0.011	-0.280**	0.374**	1	
Impulse buying behavior	15.84	2.92	-0.022	-0.004	-0.02	-0.014	0.008	-0.005	0.459**	-0.071	0.078	1

P<0.05*, *P<0.01 (2-tailed), Gender: 1=Male, 2=Female, 3=Other; Age group: 1=18-24 years, 2=25-30 years, 3=31-35 years; Educational qualification: 1=Undergraduate, 2=Postgraduate, 3=Other; Frequency of online shopping: 1=Never, 2=Monthly, 3=Weekly, 4=Daily; Number of influencers followed: 1=Fewer than 3, 2=3-5, 3=More than 5; Time spent on social media per day: 1=0.5-2.0 h, 2=2.1-4.0 h, 3=4.1-6.0 h, 4=More than 6 h. Source (s): Created by the authors

Table 2: Measurement models

Construct	Indicator	Factor loading	Cronbach's alpha	rho_A	CR	AVE	VIF
Exposure to influencer-generated content	EIGC1	0.706	0.849	0.877	0.893	0.676	1.300
	EIGC2	0.905					2.762
	EIGC3	0.800					1.688
	EIGC4	0.889					2.674
Emotional arousal	EA1	0.807	0.752	0.783	0.842	0.572	1.629
	EA2	0.887					1.957
	EA3	0.779					1.615
	EA4	0.685					1.446
	EA5	0.779					1.514
Cognitive bias	CB1	0.804	0.835	0.863	0.874	0.545	2.064
	CB2	0.837					2.452
	CB3	0.811					1.901
	CB4	0.679					2.030
	CB5	0.766					2.365
	CB6	0.765					1.245
Impulse buying behavior	IBB1	0.718	0.726	0.751	0.841	0.574	1.019
	IBB2	0.628					1.248
	IBB3	0.870					1.593
	IBB4	0.790					1.394
	IBB5	0.704					1.007

CR>0.70, AVE>0.50, and VIF<5 are acceptable thresholds for construct validity and multicollinearity. Source (s): Created by the authors

0.676 (exposure to influencer-generated content). Multicollinearity tests indicated that all the VIF values were considerably below the critical value of 5.0, and the values ranged from 1.007 to 2.762. This confirms that there was no multicollinearity between indicators, which guarantees model stability for further structural equation modeling.

To assess discriminant validity, we used the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations, as recommended by Henseler et al. (2015). HTMT is considered a more robust measure than the Fornell-Larcker criterion, especially in variance-based SEM. The results in Table 3 indicate that all HTMT values are below the conservative threshold of 0.85, which confirms satisfactory discriminant validity among all constructs. HTMT values (e.g., CB-EA = 0.745; EA-IBB = 0.587) also remain well within the accepted boundaries of <0.85 (Kline, 2023) and even below the more liberal threshold of 0.90 suggested by Gold et al. (2001) for conceptually similar constructs.

4.3. Hypothesis Test

To examine the structural relationships between the variables, path coefficients, t-statistics, P-values, effect sizes (f²) and coefficients of determination (R²) were examined using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). The results showed that all hypothesized direct effects were statistically significant at 1% (P < 0.001). The results are summarized in Tables 4-6.

First, exposure to influencer-generated content (EIGC) had a significant positive effect on impulse buying propensity (IBB) (β = 0.702, t = 12.409, P < 0.001), supporting H₁. The corresponding effect size (f² = 0.573) indicates a large effect. In addition, EIGC significantly and substantially influenced emotional arousal (EA) (β = 0.590, t = 17.333, P < 0.001; f² = 0.533), which supports H_{2a}. Emotional activation, in return, positively influenced IBB (β = 0.239, t = 3.621, P < 0.001), though with an extremely tiny effect size (f² = 0.001), thereby verifying H_{2b}.

Table 3: Discriminant validity (HTMT criterion)

Construct	CB	EA	EIGC	IBB
CB	—			
EA	0.745	—		
EIGC	0.329	0.669	—	
IBB	0.347	0.587	0.84	—

Source (s): Created by the authors

EIGC also highlighted cognitive bias (CB) strongly (β = 0.315, t = 6.770, P < 0.001), in support of H_{3a}, with a small-to-moderate effect size (f² = 0.110). Cognitive bias, on its own, moderately but significantly predicted IBB (β = 0.267, t = 5.342, P < 0.001; f² = 0.005), in support of H_{3b}. These results suggest that both affective (EA) and cognitive (CB) processes are significantly influenced by influencer content and in turn drive consumers' impulse buying behavior.

In terms of mediation, both indirect effects were significant. Emotional arousal mediated the EIGC-IBB relationship (β = 0.123, t = 3.153, P < 0.001), confirming H_{2c}. Similarly, cognitive bias mediated the EIGC-IBB relationship (β = 0.121, t = 7.562, P < 0.001), thus confirming H_{3c}. These results confirm the presence of partial mediation, where both emotional and cognitive responses partially explain the effect of influencer content on impulse buying.

The coefficients of determination's R² values indicate that EIGC, EA, and CB explained 44.0% variance in IBB. Additionally, 34.8% of variance in EA and 9.9% in CB was explained by EIGC. Chin (1998) declares that these values of R² represent moderate explanatory power for EA and IBB, and weak explanatory power for CB.

5. DISCUSSION

This study aimed to investigate the influence of social media influencer-generated content on impulse buying among customers

Table 4: Structural model results – direct effects

Hypothesis	Path	Original sample (β)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistic	P-value	f ² effect size
H ₁	EIGC→IBB	0.702	0.7	0.057	12.409	0.000	0.573
H _{2a}	EIGC→EA	0.59	0.595	0.034	17.333	0.000	0.533
H _{2b}	EA→IBB	0.239	0.233	0.066	3.621	0.000	0.001
H _{3a}	EIGC→CB	0.315	0.323	0.046	6.77	0.000	0.110
H _{3b}	CB→IBB	0.267	0.265	0.05	5.342	0.000	0.005

Table 5: Mediation effects (indirect effects)

Hypothesis	Mediated path	Indirect effect (β)	Sample mean (M)	STDEV	T statistic	P-value	Significance
H _{2c}	EIGC→EA→IBB	0.123	0.119	0.039	3.153	0.000	***
H _{3c}	EIGC→CB→IBB	0.121	0.121	0.016	7.562	0.000	***

n=412, *P<0.05, **P<0.01, ***P<0.001. Both mediation paths are statistically significant. Source (s): Created by the authors

Table 6: Coefficient of determination (R²) and adjusted R²

Endogenous construct	R ²	Adjusted R ²
Cognitive bias	0.099	0.097
Emotional arousal	0.348	0.346
Impulse buying behavior	0.44	0.436

with emphasis on the mediating roles of emotional arousal and cognitive bias. Drawing on dual-process theory and the elaboration likelihood model, the results supported the roles of affective and heuristic processes in statistically significant mediation of the effect of influencer-generated content on consumer purchases. All six hypotheses proposed in this research work (H₁-H_{3c}) were validated through PLS-SEM, furnishing strong theoretical and empirical support for the psychological mechanisms of influencer-driven business.

5.1. Theoretical Implications

This research provides three theoretical contributions to the current influencer marketing and consumer psychology literature.

To begin with, it moves existing knowledge forward by confirming the claim that exposure to influence-generated content will predict impulsive buying behavior. This research incorporates a two-stage mediation framework using dual-process theory (Kahneman, 2011). In contrast to the previous focus on generalized trust or attitudinal impact (Lim et al., 2017; Jin and Ryu, 2020), System 1 demonstrates working with affect, i.e., emotional states, and heuristics in order to bypass rationality and generate undesired buys. This is evident in line with the theoretical hypothesis that affectively engaging and cognitively simple information avoids analytical thinking (Petty et al., 1986).

Second, the study contributes to the literature on emotional persuasion by outlining emotional arousal as a critical mediator. Results show that impulse purchase tendency increases with high-arousal cues (e.g., “amazing,” emojis, visual stories), supporting evidence by Cascio Rizzo et al. (2024), Shiv and Fedorikhin (1999), and Ramadania et al. (2022). Emotionally primed consumers from influencer posts are more willing to make hedonic and instant-gratification-congruent decisions.

Third, the current research reveals cognitive bias as the central heuristic route in impulse purchasing. Credibility, attractiveness

and scarcity-based communication are peripheral cues that elicit rapid, automatic responses (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). In contrast to previous studies that linked trust in influencers to brand liking, the results of this study identify specific cognitive biases underlying purchasing behavior, providing a more accurate explanation for influencer success.

Taken together, these results demonstrate that impulse buying is not the result of a single emotional response but of both emotional activation and heuristic mental processing that are highly embedded in the influencer’s content strategy. This two-path mechanism suggests a more multifaceted view, complementing and expanding both theories of persuasion and consumer behavior.

5.2. Practical Implications

This work has several practical implications for social media planners, marketers and legislators.

1. First, brands should tactfully design influencer campaigns to elicit emotional responses— - through storytelling, humor, urgency and exhilaration — without being overly commercial. Emotional intensity has been shown to have a strong impact on consumer engagement and conversion.
2. Secondly, marketers must employ heuristic cues such as scarcity (“limited time”), authority (“expert tip”), and visual appeal to compel consumers to make quicker, less thoughtful decisions. But there must be boundaries to ethics so as not to employ manipulative tactics, especially on vulnerable groups such as teenagers.
3. Third, because of the dual mediation effects, micro-influencers may be more powerful than macro-influencers in cognitively and affectively influencing niche consumers because they are more relatable and are viewed as real (Cascio Rizzo et al., 2024).
4. Finally, consumer protection regulators can use these results to warn of high-risk content that exploits emotional or cognitive susceptibility and thus foster responsible digital advertising policy.

5.3. Limitations and Future Research Directions

All the same, this study has limitations deserving of future research.

1. First, the cross-sectional design does not allow for causal inference. Experimental or longitudinal studies may be better placed to frame the temporal dynamics of emotional and cognitive mediation.

2. Secondly, the study focused on Indian millennials and Gen Z consumers. Future studies should find out whether the results are specific to culture, age group or product group.
3. Third, since the present study considered influencers in general, a breakdown by influencer type (e.g. beauty, sports, finance) could reveal domain-specific effects.
4. Fourth, although cognitive bias and emotional arousal are strong mediators of the effects, future studies could investigate moderators such as digital literacy, consumer skepticism, or trust in platforms.

6. CONCLUSION

The growing influence of social media influencers has shifted consumer behavior towards online content and purchasing behavior. Drawing on quantitative data collected from a sample of Indian millennials and Gen Z consumers, this study presents empirical results that exposure to influencer content is an important driver of impulse buying behavior, primarily through the mediating function of emotional arousal and cognitive bias. According to Dual Process Theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model, the study concludes that influencer messages activate affective (System 1) and heuristic-based responses that circumvent rational decision and cause impulse buying. Affective cues such as pleasure and time pressure and cognitive cues such as source credibility and perceived scarcity lead to a dual-path influence process that explains the success of influencer marketing in causing unplanned consumer behavior. This study sets the psychological mechanisms of influencer effectiveness, advancing theoretical insight into impulse buying in the digital age. It also underscores the significance of ethical and strategic content generation in influencer marketing and calls for future research into consumer vulnerabilities in turbulent social media contexts.

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