An Empirical Study on the Influence of Social Media Influencers on Post-Pandemic Consumer Behaviour Among UK Youth

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Abstract

The emergence of social media influencers (SMIs) has significantly transformed the marketing ecosystem, especially among younger demographics. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, this group has displayed greater financial caution alongside evolving buying behaviours, coinciding with intensified social media engagement. This study investigates the influence of SMIs on purchasing decisions among young consumers in the United Kingdom. Anchored in the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), the research examines how attitudes, perceived social pressures, and perceived control influence consumer behaviours in influencer marketing. A structured questionnaire targeting individuals aged 15 to 30 was utilised, and factor analysis revealed four primary factors shaping consumer decision-making under SMI influence, including attitudes towards the SMI, social pressures, perceived behavioural control and intention to purchase. Total percentage of variance shows 75.826 upon running the factor analysis. Findings provide insight for marketers seeking to leverage SMIs in targeting young, post-pandemic consumers.

Keywords: Social Media Influencer; Theory of Planned Behaviour; Young Consumer

1.0   Introduction

The proliferation of social media influencers (SMIs) has redefined contemporary marketing strategies, particularly among younger audiences. Following the COVID-19 crisis, many young consumers began exercising increased financial restraint, with studies indicating that 43% of Generation Z reduced discretionary expenditures, while over half prioritised financial stability amid rising living costs (Mintel, 2023). Beyond financial shifts, the pandemic triggered significant psychological and behavioural changes, prompting greater attention to personal health and hygiene, which, in turn, influenced consumer habits (Das, Sarkar, & Debroy, 2022).

Simultaneously, global data shows a surge in social media use, especially among individuals aged 16–34, with users frequently engaging across 7–8 platforms monthly (Kemp, 2023). This heightened digital engagement provides fertile ground to examine how SMIs shape consumer behaviour in this cohort. Understanding the attitudinal and behavioural drivers behind young consumers' interactions with SMIs is crucial for reactivating purchasing intent in this segment. In this context, there is an opportunity to explore the potential role of social media influencers in influencing an increase in

purchasing power among young consumers. This study explores these dynamics and aims to identify the underlying factors influencing buying decisions under SMI exposure.

This study applies the Theory of Planned Behaviour to examine how attitudes, social norms, and behavioural control influence UK young consumers' purchasing decisions. Findings from this study are expected to provide insights for marketers aiming to engage young consumer audiences more effectively and to enrich theoretical understanding of digital consumer behaviour in a post-pandemic context.

1.1 Problem Statement

The purchase behaviour of young consumers decreased post-COVID-19, with 43% of Gen Z consumers cutting back on non-essential spending and 51% choosing to prioritize their finances due to rising prices (Mintel, 2023). The pandemic inflicted psychological and behavioural changes, allowing consumers to become sensitive toward health and hygiene, ultimately redefining their purchasing behaviour (Das et al., 2022). However, the pandemic increased the usage of social media, with Global Web Index's (GWI's) research indicating that social media users between the ages of 16 and 24 use 7.7 platforms per month, whereas users aged 25 to 34 use an average of 7.9 (Kemp, 2023). In this context, there is an opportunity to explore the potential role of social media influencers in influencing an increase in purchasing power among young consumers. Thus, understanding young consumers' motivations, attitudes, and behaviour toward social media influencers can catalyse and rejuvenate purchasing behaviour among the younger demographic.

1.2 Research Questions

i. What are the primary attitudes and perceptions held by young consumers towards social media influencers (SMI)?

ii. To what extent do young consumers perceive social norms and experience social pressures in their interactions with SMI?

iii. What factors contribute to the perceived behavioural control of young consumers when making purchasing decisions influenced by SMI?

iv. What factors influence of SMIs on purchasing decisions among young consumers?

1.2 Research Objectives

i. To identify and analyse the key attitudes young consumers associate with SMI.

ii. To investigate the perceived social norms and pressures young consumers experience in their interactions with SMI.

iii. To assess the factors that contribute to young consumers' perceived behavioural control when making purchasing decisions influenced by SMI.

iv. To uncover the latent factors underlying the young consumer's intention in purchasing decisions influenced by SMI.

2.0 Literature Review
2.1 Social Media Influencers' (SMI's) Impact on Purchasing Behaviour

Social media influencers (SMIs) have emerged as trusted and relatable figures, often perceived as more authentic than traditional celebrities. Their accessibility allows deeper connections with audiences, ultimately enhancing consumer engagement and purchase intention (Dinh & Lee, 2021). The application of social comparison theory provides insight into this phenomenon, suggesting that individuals tend to assess themselves compared to others they admire or identify with. This often leads to aspirational purchasing behaviour, where consumers emulate influencer lifestyles and consumption patterns. Consequently, brands benefit from influencer partnerships by tapping into these emotionally driven consumer behaviours.

Han and Balabanis (2024) conducted a meta-analysis of studies on social media influencers. They found that source credibility attributes such as expertise, trustworthiness, and congruence with the endorsed brand are decisive in shaping consumer trust. Their findings confirm that credibility predicts positive consumer outcomes, including trust, purchase intention, and loyalty. Similarly, a study published in the Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services (2024) examined TikTok as a platform. It demonstrated that influencer credibility directly enhances consumer trust, translating into stronger purchase intentions and repeat loyalty. Adding further evidence, Fikri (2024) reviewed literature from 2015 to 2024 and highlighted that trust acts as a mediator between influencer credibility and brand loyalty, showing that when influencers are perceived as authentic and reliable, consumer trust strengthens brand–consumer relationships. Gökerik (2024) added nuance by investigating consumer cynicism, arguing that when influencer credibility is perceived as low, consumers become sceptical and resistant, undermining trust and loyalty. Finally, Mohamad Salleh et al. (2024) offered empirical

evidence from Malaysia showing a strong positive relationship between influencer credibility and consumer trust, ultimately influencing online purchasing decisions. These studies emphasize that influencer credibility is a critical driver of consumer trust, which serves as the foundation for online consumer behaviour.

2.2 Young Consumer Behaviour Patter

Younger consumers, especially Gen Z and younger millennials, demonstrate a strong affinity for digital engagement. Social media serves as a channel for

entertainment and a critical source of information, self-expression, and social validation (Skues et al., 2012). These platforms influence how young consumers form opinions, shape preferences, and make purchasing decisions. As a result, SMIs occupy a central role in the decision-making journey, often functioning as informal advisors or opinion leaders.

Djafarova and Foots (2022) applied the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) to explore Generation Z's ethical consumption in digital contexts, finding that this cohort's online shopping patterns are highly influenced by attitudes towards sustainability, subjective norms from peers, and perceived behavioural control over online purchases. Ryu, Fortenberry, and Warrington (2023) focused on omnichannel shopping and highlighted how young consumers demand seamless integration across digital platforms, reinforcing that convenience and smooth transitions between online and offline channels drive purchasing. Recent work on live-streaming commerce (Luo et al., 2024) showed that younger consumers are particularly susceptible to impulse buying when exposed to highly credible and engaging influencers in live-stream settings, suggesting that digital interactivity strongly shapes their behaviour. Complementing these studies, Zhang et al. (2023) reviewed definitions and antecedents of trust in social media, demonstrating that trust significantly shapes young consumers' engagement and decision-making in digital platforms. These studies portray young consumers as digitally savvy, socially influenced, and engagement-driven, with trust and seamless digital experiences playing crucial roles in shaping their behaviours.
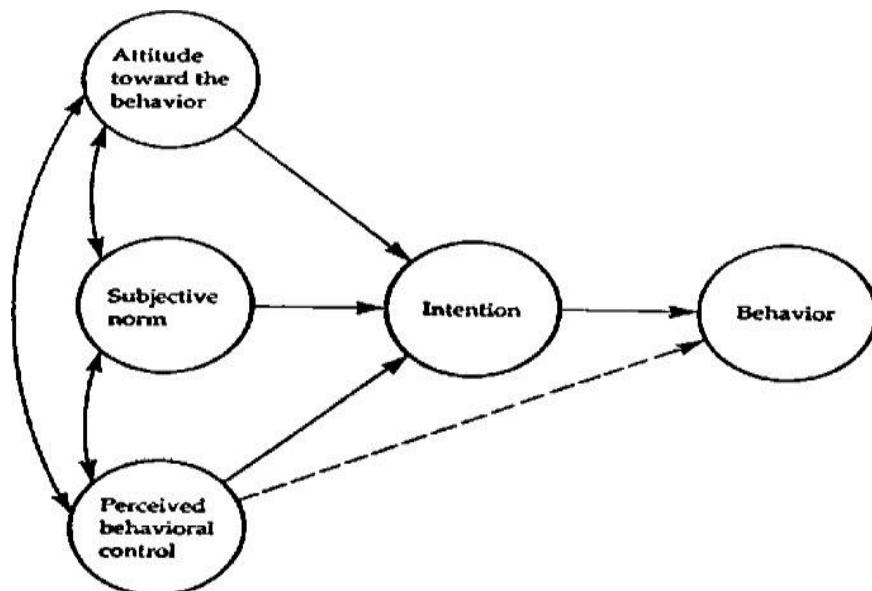
2.3   Young Consumer Behaviour Patter

Figure 1: Theory of Planned Behaviour (Source: Ajzen (1991))

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), as proposed by Ajzen (1991), posits that an individual's behaviour is shaped by three primary components:

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attitudes toward the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. Each of these is influenced by respective belief systems, including behavioural, normative, and control beliefs (Mehrabioun, 2024). Attitudes encompass evaluative judgments about the behaviour, while subjective norms involve perceived social pressure to perform or abstain from the behaviour. Perceived behavioural control refers to the individual's belief in their ability to execute the behaviour effectively. TPB has been widely adopted in marketing contexts to study consumer intentions, including those driven by influencer marketing.

3.0   Methodology

Figure 2 shows the adapted and modified TBP framework based on Ajzen (2002), which is related to the purchasing decision intentions among young consumers in the United Kingdom.
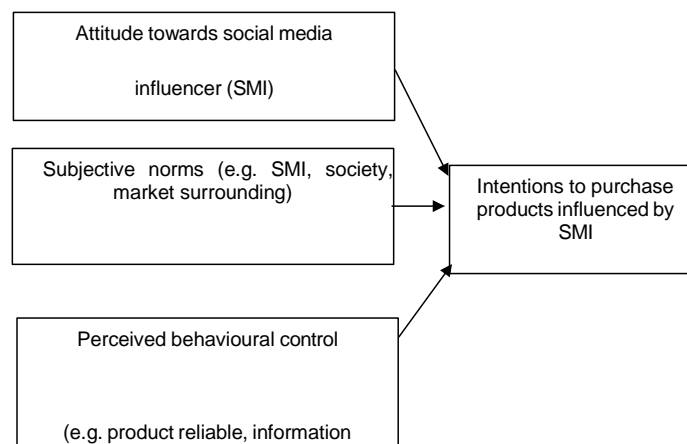

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework of UK Young Consumers' intentions to purchase influenced by social media influencer based on TPB.

This study employed a quantitative research design using a structured questionnaire distributed among 106 young consumers in the United Kingdom, aged 15 to 35. The target population (male and female) including those who actively engage with social media platforms. Participants were selected from online communities and social media networks using a random sampling approach.

Respondents evaluated statements related to attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control, and intentions to purchase under the influence of SMIs. A panel of subject-matter experts including lecturers, industry practitioners and researchers reviewed the drafted items for clarity, relevance,

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and appropriateness. Their feedback was incorporated to refine wording and remove or combine overlapping items. Each item was rated on a 7-point Likert scale, where one denoted strong disagreement and 7 denoted strong agreement.

Descriptive statistics and exploratory factor analysis (EFA) were conducted to validate the measurement model. The principal component analysis (PCA) method was employed to extract underlying dimensions, and internal consistency was assessed through Cronbach's alpha.

4.0 Results and Discussion

To examine the structure of the responses, factor analysis was applied to 29 survey items assessing attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control, and purchase intentions. Before extraction, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity were performed to verify sampling adequacy. The KMO score of 0.803 indicated suitability for factor analysis (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). Four distinct components were extracted that collectively accounted for a substantial portion of the variance in the data. These factors reflect core psychological constructs in the Theory of Planned Behaviour and illustrate the multi-dimensional influence of SMIs on young consumers' purchase decisions. The Cronbach's alpha values for the identified factors demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency, reinforcing the reliability of the results.

Table 1. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy		.803
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx Chi-square	700.011
	d.f	105
	Significance	<0.001

With the significance level of p<0.000, Bartlett's Test for Sphericity showed the correlation matrix was appropriate for performing factor analysis on the data for each scale. The desired values for the KMO test, which are more than 0.5, are considered satisfactory for the factor analysis. Low values indicate the diffuse correlations with no substantive groupings.

4.2 Quantitative Data Analysis

As mentioned earlier, factor analysis was used to uncover the latent factors underlying the young consumer's intention in purchasing decisions influenced by SMI. Respondents answered 29 statements about their attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control, and intention toward purchasing power decision. A Likert scale of 1 to 7 was used to gauge the respondents' attitudinal response to the statements, where 1 disagreed with the statements and 7 indicated agreement.

The factor loading from the principal component factor analysis was obtained after the varimax rotation was performed on the responses of the young

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consumers to the 29 statements related to their perception of purchasing

decisions influenced by SMI. From the rotated factor matrix, only items with a factor loading of at least 0.50 are considered significant (see Table 2). The factors are then named based on the variables within each factor.

Factor 1 is the attitude towards social media influencers. This factor consists of four sub variables and has a total variance of 22.17%. The four sub variables are a conducive environment shown by social media influencers that encourages me to purchase a product (0.517), followed by I trust product recommendations made by social media influencers. (0.518), I actively seek out reviews made by social media influencers before making a purchase (0.565), and the social media influencers' authenticity influences my perception of a product, service or brand (0.585). The results proved that young consumers have a strong knowledge and a positive attitude toward purchasing decisions influenced by social media influencers.

The second factor is perceived social pressures. This factor has a total variance of 19.47% and consists of three sub variables: I feel societal pressure to align my preferences with the products promoted by social media influencers, (0.513), followed by There is a shared belief among my social group that following the recommendations of a social media influencer is considered trendy behaviour, (0.514). Finally, since some of my friends are social media influencers, they influence me to purchase products/services. (0.922). The results show that the young consumers are more likely to buy if factors influence their behaviour toward a positive performance.

The third factor is perceived behavioural control. This factor has a total variance of 19.17%. The sub variables involved are I believe I have a high level of autonomy in deciding whether to adopt the preferences promoted by social media influencers, (0.517); I feel confident in my ability to find and purchase products recommended by social media influencers, (0.519); If I am being exposed to more social media influencers, I am in favour to make a product purchase, (0.549); I am in control of my ability to resist the influence of social media influencers on my purchasing choices. (0.549) and I will purchase more products if I know that the social media influencers are widely accepted and trusted, (0.566). The results show that if there were strong factors, the consequence of the attitude where attitude strength depends on the importance individuals place on the outcomes associated with the behaviour and their confidence in their beliefs about those outcomes, such matters as their autonomy in deciding, the young consumers are more likely to make the purchasing decision influenced by SMI.

The final factor is intention to purchase. This last factor has a total variance of 15.02%. The three sub variables are Products endorsed by social media influencers are given at a discounted price (0.635); The recommendations social media influencers usually give are within my preferences (0.663), and I

believe it will enhance my lifestyle (0.687).

Table 2. Summary of factor analysis results on the young UK consumer's intention to purchase influenced by a social media influencer

Items	Factor Loading			
	F1	F2	F3	F4
Attitude towards Social Media Influencer (SMI)				
There is a conducive environment that is shown by social media influencers that encourages me to purchase a product	0.517			
I trust product recommendations made by social media influencers.	0.518			
I actively seek out reviews made by social media influencers before making a purchase.	0.565			
A social media influencer's authenticity influences my perception of a product, service or brand.	0.585			
Variance (percent explained)	**22.166**			
Perceived Social Pressures				
I feel societal pressure to align my preferences with the products promoted by social media influencers.		0.513		
There is a shared belief among my social group that following the recommendations of a social media influencer is considered trendy behaviour.		0.514		
Since some of my friends are social media influencers, they influence me to purchase products/services.		0.922		
Variance (percent explained)		**19.473**		
Perceived Behavioural Control				
I have a high level of autonomy in deciding whether to adopt the preferences promoted by social media influencers.			0.517	
I feel confident in my ability to find and purchase products recommended by social media influencers.			0.519	
If exposed to more social media influencers, I am more likely to purchase a product.			0.549	
I am in control of my ability to resist the influence of social media influencers on my purchasing choices.			0.549	
I will purchase more products if I know that the social media influencers are widely accepted and trusted.			0.566	
Variance (percent explained)			**19.172**	
Intention to purchase is influenced by SMI				
Products endorsed by social media influencers are given at a discounted price.				0.635
The recommendations social media influencers usually give are within my preferences.				0.663
I believe it will enhance my lifestyle.				0.687
Variance (percent of explained)				**15.015**
Total percentage of variance				**75.826**

5.0   Conclusion

This study enhances our understanding of how young consumers' purchase behaviours are shaped by social media influencers in the post-pandemic era.

Findings suggest that SMIs significantly influence consumer intentions through attitude formation, social pressures, and perceived control over purchasing decisions. This is parallel with Bangun, Suhara, and Husin (2023) who directly applied the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) to online purchase behaviour in Indonesia, finding that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control are significant predictors of purchase intentions, and that perceived value strengthens the TPB model by enhancing intention-to-behaviour translation. However, Bhutto, Soomro, and Yang (2022) extended TPB in the context of sustainable consumption, showing that TPB constructs and self-expressive and environmental values influenced young consumers' online purchasing of energy-efficient appliances. This suggests that TPB can be expanded by incorporating contextual motivations relevant to digital or sustainability-driven markets. Similarly, Djafarova and Foots (2022) demonstrated the relevance of TPB in explaining Gen Z's ethical online consumption, particularly emphasising how social norms and personal values influence purchasing decisions. These studies affirm that TPB remains a robust and flexible framework for explaining online purchasing but gains explanatory power when extended with context-specific constructs such as perceived value, environmental concerns, and digital trust.

Research on social media influencers (SMIs) provides essential insights into their impact on young consumer behaviour, but limitations remain. The cross-sectional design adopted in many studies captures behaviour simultaneously, restricting causal inference and overlooking behavioural changes as social media trends evolve (Thomas, 2022). To strengthen generalisability, future research should adopt longitudinal and cross-cultural approaches, since gratifications of young consumers vary across cultural contexts (Croes & Bartels, 2021).

Although quantitative surveys offer proper evidence, scholars argue that qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, are necessary to uncover underlying psychological mechanisms (Thomas, 2006). For example, such problems as "Fear of Missing Out" (FOMO) and post-purchase remorse have been identified. Yet, the adverse consequences of influencer marketing, including unrealistic expectations and mental health risks, remain underexplored. Addressing these gaps could help marketers design strategies that promote purchase intention and post-purchase satisfaction, particularly as the COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped consumer sensitivities around health and hygiene (Das et al., 2022).

The literature also indicates that influencer following size influences trust and perceived authenticity. However, comparative research on the effectiveness of micro-influencers versus celebrity influencers is limited. Exploring this distinction could clarify the role of relatability versus aspirational appeal in shaping young consumers' decisions. Additionally, the impact of content type, educational, entertaining, or promotional, on purchase intention warrants further investigation to identify formats that resonate most strongly with this demographic.

Overall, evidence suggests that SMIs significantly influence young consumers' purchasing preferences, even as financial prudence has become more salient post-pandemic. Credibility and authenticity remain central drivers of purchase intention, though recommendations aligned with consumer preferences may override doubts about authenticity. Moreover, perceived social pressures compared with SMIs often fuel materialistic desires and impulsive buying behaviour.

These insights are helpful for policymakers interested in regulating influencer marketing to safeguard vulnerable consumers, particularly youth. Furthermore, the findings provide practical implications for marketers seeking to develop ethical and effective influencer strategies that align with young consumers' values and motivations. The application of TPB in this context validates its relevance and provides a framework for future investigations into digitally mediated consumer behaviour.

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