International Journal of Commerce and Management Studies(IJCAMS)
ISSN 2456-3684, Vol.10,No.04,2025
www.ijcams.com

Impact of Digital Branding and Influencer Cues on Gen-Z Purchase Behaviour: A Neuromarketing Perspective

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Abstract

The rapid growth of digital branding and influencer marketing has significantly transformed the purchase behaviour of Generation Z (Gen-Z), a demographically digital-native and highly perceptive consumer segment. This study examines the impact of digital branding cues and influencer signals on Gen-Z purchase intention in India through a neuromarketing perspective. Using data from 590 Gen-Z respondents across major metropolitan cities, the research investigates how emotional, sensory, and cognitive triggers mediate and moderate the effects of branding and influencer endorsements. Findings reveal that influencer cues are the strongest predictors of purchase intention, followed by digital branding efforts. Emotional engagement partially mediates both relationships, indicating the critical role of psychological and neural responses in decision-making. Sensory triggers significantly moderate the influence of digital branding, highlighting the importance of visual and aesthetic appeal in online environments. The regression model explains 67% of the variance in purchase intention, demonstrating high predictive strength. This study contributes to existing literature by integrating neuromarketing insights with digital consumer behaviour and offers practical implications for marketers seeking to enhance engagement and conversion among Gen-Z consumers.

Keywords: Digital Branding; Influencer Cues; Gen-Z; Neuromarketing; Emotional Engagement; Cognitive Triggers; Sensory Triggers; Purchase Intention; Social Media Marketing; Consumer Behaviour.

1. Introduction

The rise of social media, digital branding, and influencer marketing has revolutionized the way Generation Z interacts with brands and makes purchase decisions. Gen-Z, born between 1995 and 2010, is highly digital-savvy and influenced by both visual and emotional cues in online environments. Neuromarketing research provides insights into how brain responses, emotional engagement, and cognitive triggers shape consumer behaviour, particularly in the context of digital branding and influencer endorsements.

Digital branding leverages visual identity, messaging, and interactive experiences to create brand awareness and influence purchase intent. Influencer cues—ranging from celebrity endorsements to micro-influencer reviews—impact consumers by activating social proof, trust, and emotional resonance. Understanding how these factors affect Gen-Z's purchasing behaviour from a neuromarketing perspective is critical for marketers seeking effective engagement strategies.

Despite extensive use of digital branding and influencer marketing, limited research explores the **neuromarketing mechanisms** behind Gen-Z purchase decisions in India. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining how emotional, sensory, and cognitive triggers associated with digital branding and influencer cues shape online purchase behaviour.

2. Review of Literature

1. **Digital Branding and Consumer Behavio**
   Digital branding encompasses online brand identity, visual design, interactive content, and communication strategies that influence consumer perceptions and attitudes (Keller, 2016). Neuromarketing studies show that compelling visual and narrative content can evoke emotional responses, enhance brand recall, and improve purchase intention (Hubert & Kenning, 2008).

2.

3. **Influencer Marketing and Neuromarketing Insights**
   Influencers serve as trusted sources of information and social validation. Research suggests that exposure to influencer content activates mirror neurons and emotional engagement, enhancing persuasion and buying likelihood (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). Authenticity, credibility, and relatability of influencers are critical for generating positive neural and emotional responses.

4. **Gen-Z Consumer Behaviour**
   Gen-Z demonstrates high receptivity to online platforms, micro-moments, and interactive content. Emotional and cognitive biases, such as preference for peer validation and susceptibility to social proof, significantly influence their purchase decisions (Priporas et al., 2017). Neuromarketing studies reveal that emotional arousal, attention, and memory encoding are key drivers of Gen-Z engagement with digital branding.

5. **Neuromarketing Triggers in Online Marketing**
   Neuromarketing tools (eye-tracking, EEG, fMRI) have identified sensory, emotional, and cognitive triggers that affect attention, motivation, and decision-making. Visual appeal, storytelling, and influencer endorsements stimulate reward pathways in the brain, reinforcing brand preference and purchase intention (Plassmann et al., 2012; Smidts et al., 2014).

3. Research Gap

Despite increasing adoption of digital branding and influencer marketing in India:

1. There is limited empirical research on the **neuromarketing mechanisms** behind Gen-Z purchase behaviour.
2. Most studies focus on traditional marketing metrics (likes, clicks, engagement) rather than emotional and cognitive triggers.
3. The interplay between digital branding, influencer cues and neuromarketing responses remains underexplored.
4. India-specific research on Gen-Z's emotional and cognitive reactions to influencer content is sparse.
5. Few studies examine how neuromarketing insights can guide strategy in online retail and social commerce contexts.

This study addresses these gaps by analyzing how **digital branding and influencer cues** trigger emotional and cognitive responses to influence Gen-Z purchase decisions.

4. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the impact of digital branding cues on Gen-Z purchase behaviour.
2. To evaluate the influence of influencer marketing on emotional and cognitive responses of Gen-Z consumers.
3. To measure the effect of neuromarketing triggers (emotional, sensory, cognitive) on purchase intention.
4. To explore the mediating role of emotional engagement between influencer cues and purchase behaviour.
5. To provide actionable insights for marketers on optimizing digital branding and influencer strategies.

5. Hypotheses of the Study

H1: Digital branding cues positively influence Gen-Z purchase intention.
H2: Influencer cues positively affect emotional engagement in Gen-Z consumers.
H3: Emotional engagement positively impacts purchase intention.
H4: Cognitive triggers mediate the relationship between influencer cues and purchase intention.
H5: Sensory triggers moderate the effect of digital branding on purchase intention.
H6: Emotional engagement mediates the relationship between digital branding and purchase intention.

6. Research Methodology

6.1 Research Design

This study adopts a **descriptive and empirical research design** to examine how digital branding and influencer cues influence Gen-Z purchase behaviour in India from a neuromarketing perspective. A **quantitative approach** was applied to test the relationship between digital branding, influencer cues, neuromarketing triggers (emotional, sensory, cognitive), and purchase intention.

6.2 Population and Sampling Technique

The target population comprises **Indian Gen-Z consumers** (aged 18–28) who actively engage with social media platforms, online retail websites, and influencer content.

A **non-probability purposive sampling technique** was employed to select respondents with prior exposure to digital branding and influencer marketing. This ensures that participants have relevant experience for evaluating neuromarketing triggers.

6.3 Sample Size

A total of **590 valid responses** were collected from Gen-Z consumers across major Indian cities, including Mumbai, Delhi NCR, Bengaluru, Chennai, Kolkata, and Hyderabad. Data were gathered via online surveys distributed through social media, messaging apps, and email.

The sample size is adequate for **advanced statistical techniques** such as correlation, regression, mediation, and moderation analysis.

6.4 Data Collection Instrument

A **structured questionnaire** was developed consisting of two sections:

Section A: Demographic Information

- Age, gender, education, occupation, monthly income, and frequency of online shopping/social media usage.

Section B: Construct Measurement

- All constructs were measured using **standardized multi-item scales** adapted from prior studies. Responses were recorded on a **5-point Likert scale** (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree).

Construct	Sample Items	Sources
Digital Branding	"The online brand presence influences my purchase decisions."	Keller (2016)
Influencer Cues	"Influencer recommendations affect my buying choices."	De Veirman et al. (2017)
Emotional Engagement	"I feel emotionally connected to brands endorsed by influencers."	Priporas et al. (2017)
Cognitive Triggers	"I analyze influencer content carefully before buying."	Smidts et al. (2014)
Sensory Triggers	"Visuals and design elements of online brands capture my attention."	Plassmann et al. (2012)
Purchase Intention	"I intend to purchase products endorsed by influencers or highlighted by digital branding."	Pavlou (2003)

6.5 Reliability and Validity

Reliability

- Cronbach's Alpha values for all construct exceeded 0.70, indicating high internal consistency.

Validity

- Content validity ensured through expert review.
- Construct validity tested via factor analysis.

- Convergent validity confirmed through Average Variance Extracted (AVE ≥ 0.50).
- Discriminant validity established using the Fornell–Larcker criterion.

6.6 Data Analysis Techniques

The following statistical tools and techniques were applied:

1. **Descriptive Statistics** – To summarize demographic variables.
2. **Correlation Analysis** – To examine relationships between variables.
3. **Multiple Regression Analysis** – To measure predictive impact of digital branding and influencer cues on purchase intention.
4. **Mediation Analysis** – To test emotional engagement as a mediator between influencer/digital branding cues and purchase intention.
5. **Moderation Analysis** – To test the effect of sensory triggers as a moderator in digital branding–purchase intention relationship.

All analyses were conducted using **SPSS 26 / AMOS / Smart PLS**.

7. Data Analysis & Interpretation

This chapter presents the statistical analysis of data collected from **590 Gen-Z consumers** to examine how digital branding and influencer cues influence purchase behaviour through neuromarketing triggers. Analyses include demographics, reliability, descriptive statistics, correlation, regression, mediation, and moderation tests.

7.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

The demographic analysis provides an overview of the respondents' background, ensuring representation across gender, age, education, occupation, and online engagement.

Table 7.1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 590)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	312	52.9
	Female	278	47.1
Age	18–21 years	210	35.6
	22–25 years	248	42.0
	26–28 years	132	22.4
Education	Undergraduate	198	33.6
	Postgraduate	264	44.7
	Professional/PhD	128	21.7
Occupation	Student	220	37.3
	Private Job	208	35.3
	Govt. Job	72	12.2
	Business	90	15.3
Online & Social Media Engagement	Low	86	14.6
	Medium	224	37.9
	High	280	47.5

Interpretation: The sample includes a slightly higher proportion of males (52.9%) than females (47.1%). The majority (42%) are aged 22–25, reflecting the core Gen-Z segment. Most respondents are postgraduates (44.7%), and students or private job holders dominate the occupational profile. High engagement with online and social media platforms (47.5%) indicates relevant exposure to digital branding and influencer content.

7.2 Reliability Analysis

Reliability testing ensures internal consistency of the constructs.

Table 7.2: Reliability Statistics

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Digital Branding	4	0.89
Influencer Cues	4	0.91
Emotional Engagement	4	0.88
Cognitive Triggers	4	0.86
Sensory Triggers	4	0.85
Purchase Intention	4	0.92

Interpretation: All constructs have Cronbach's Alpha values above 0.85, indicating excellent internal consistency.

7.3 Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables

Descriptive statistics summarize respondents' perceptions of digital branding, influencer cues, and neuromarketing triggers.

Table 7.3: Descriptive Statistics

Construct	Mean	Std. Deviation
Digital Branding	4.14	0.66
Influencer Cues	4.08	0.68
Emotional Engagement	4.12	0.64
Cognitive Triggers	4.05	0.70
Sensory Triggers	4.10	0.67
Purchase Intention	4.20	0.63

Interpretation: All mean values exceed 4.0, indicating strong agreement that digital branding, influencer cues, and neuromarketing triggers positively influence purchase intention among Gen-Z consumers.

7.4 Correlation Analysis

Correlation analysis examines the strength and direction of relationships among variables. **Pearson correlation coefficients** were calculated.

Table 7.4: Correlation Matrix

Variables	DB	IC	EE	CT	ST	PI
Digital Branding (DB)	1	.64**	.62**	.58**	.61**	.70**
Influencer Cues (IC)	.64**	1	.66**	.59**	.60**	.72**
Emotional Engagement (EE)	.62**	.66**	1	.57**	.59**	.74**
Cognitive Triggers (CT)	.58**	.59**	.57**	1	.56**	.68**
Sensory Triggers (ST)	.61**	.60**	.59**	.56**	1	.71**
Purchase Intention (PI)	.70**	.72**	.74**	.68**	.71**	1

Interpretation: All constructs are positively correlated with purchase intention ($p < 0.01$), suggesting that digital branding, influencer cues, and neuromarketing triggers significantly influence Gen-Z consumers' purchase behaviour.

7.5 Regression Analysis: Predictors of Purchase Intention

Multiple regression analysis was performed to identify the most influential predictors of purchase intention.

Table 7.5: Regression Results

Predictor	β (Beta)	t-value	Sig.
Digital Branding	0.28	6.55	0.000
Influencer Cues	0.31	7.12	0.000
Emotional Engagement	0.25	5.88	0.000
Cognitive Triggers	0.20	4.45	0.000
Sensory Triggers	0.22	5.02	0.000

Model Fit: $R^2 = 0.67$, $F = 212.40$, $p < 0.001$

Interpretation: Influencer cues ($\beta = 0.31$) and digital branding ($\beta = 0.28$) emerged as the strongest predictors of

purchase intention. The model explains **67% variance**, demonstrating strong predictive power.

7.6 Mediation Analysis

Mediation analysis was performed to examine **emotional engagement** as a mediator between influencer cues/digital branding and purchase intention.

Table 7.6: Mediation Results

Path	Effect	Result
DB → EE → PI	Significant	Partial Mediation
IC → EE → PI	Significant	Partial Mediation

Interpretation: Emotional engagement partially mediates the effect of digital branding and influencer cues on purchase intention, highlighting the psychological impact of neuromarketing triggers.

7.7 Moderation Analysis

Moderation analysis tested **sensory triggers** as a moderator in the relationship between digital branding and purchase intention.

Table 7.7: Moderation Results

Moderator	Effect on DB → PI	Result
Sensory Triggers	Significant	Positive Moderation

Interpretation: Sensory triggers strengthen the influence of digital branding on purchase intention, indicating that visual and sensory appeal amplifies Gen-Z consumers' purchase behaviour.

8. Findings

Based on the analysis of responses from **590 Gen-Z consumers**, the following key findings were derived:

1. **Digital branding strongly influences purchase intention.**
   Respondents indicated that visually appealing brand campaigns, interactive ads, and online promotions significantly increase their likelihood of buying products.
2. **Influencer cues are the most powerful predictor.**
   Regression analysis ($\beta = 0.31$) shows that endorsements, reviews, and recommendations by influencers strongly impact Gen-Z purchase behaviour.
3. **Emotional engagement mediates brand and influencer effects.**
   Emotional triggers such as excitement, curiosity, and connection partially mediate the relationship between digital branding/influencer cues and purchase intention, emphasizing the psychological impact of neuromarketing strategies.
4. **Sensory triggers amplify the influence of digital branding.**
   Visual and sensory elements (colors, imagery, product aesthetics) moderate the impact of branding on purchase behaviour, enhancing engagement and conversion.
5. **Cognitive triggers also contribute to purchase decisions.**
   Logical reasoning, product comparisons, and informative content affect purchase intention positively, though their impact is slightly lower than emotional and influencer-based triggers.
6. **High overall predictive power.**
   The regression model explains 67% of variance in purchase intention, indicating that digital branding, influencer cues, and neuromarketing triggers collectively predict Gen-Z online purchase behaviour effectively.
7. **Gen-Z shows high receptivity to neuromarketing strategies.**
   Across gender, education, and online engagement levels, respondents consistently responded positively to digital branding and influencer content, confirming the importance of neuromarketing-based approaches for this demographic.

9. Conclusion

This study examined the influence of **digital branding and influencer cues** on Gen-Z purchase behaviour in India

through a neuromarketing lens. Based on responses from 590 participants:

- Digital branding, influencer endorsements, emotional engagement, cognitive, and sensory triggers collectively shape purchase intention.
- Influencer cues emerged as the strongest predictor, followed closely by digital branding.
- Emotional engagement partially mediates the relationship between branding/influencer cues and purchase intention, while sensory triggers amplify the effect of digital branding.
- The findings highlight that effective neuromarketing strategies should combine visual appeal, emotional engagement, and influencer-based messaging to maximize consumer response.

Overall, the study contributes to the understanding of **neuromarketing mechanisms** in the Indian retail sector and provides empirical evidence for leveraging digital and influencer-based marketing to influence Gen-Z purchasing decisions.

10. Suggestions

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are provided for marketers, e-commerce platforms, and brand managers:

1. **Leverage Influencer Marketing Strategically**
    - Collaborate with influencers who align with brand values and Gen-Z preferences.
    - Use authentic and relatable content to enhance credibility and engagement.
2. **Enhance Digital Branding Impact**
    - Develop visually appealing, interactive, and memorable online campaigns.
    - Integrate storytelling and immersive experiences to evoke emotional responses.
3. **Focus on Emotional Engagement**
    - Use content that triggers excitement, curiosity, and empathy to strengthen purchase intention.
    - Integrate gamification, rewards, or interactive features to increase engagement.
4. **Incorporate Sensory Triggers**
    - Optimize visual aesthetics, product imagery, and colour schemes to improve attention and recall.
    - Consider multimedia content, including videos, AR, or interactive visuals, to enhance sensory appeal.
5. **Provide Informative and Cognitive Support**
    - Present clear product information, comparisons, and benefits to satisfy cognitive needs.
    - Combine logical and emotional messaging for maximum impact.
6. **Personalize Brand Experiences**
    - Use AI and data analytics to deliver tailored campaigns that resonate with individual preferences.
    - Continuously monitor consumer behaviour to optimize personalization strategies.
7. **Measure and Monitor Neuromarketing Impact**
    - Track engagement metrics, conversion rates, and consumer feedback to evaluate campaign effectiveness.
    - Adapt strategies based on performance and emerging trends in digital and influencer marketing.

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