

## **How Does Instagram Influence Consumerism and Spending Patterns Among Adolescents Aged 14/18, Through the Lens of Veblen's Theory of Conspicuous Consumption**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores how social media, Instagram specifically influences consumerism and spending patterns among adolescents, through the lens of Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption. By looking deeply into influencer marketing, fear of missing out, impulsive buying, and algorithm driven purchasing this paper shows how Instagram is a platform for adolescents to take part in status signaling and pecuniary emulation. This research contributes to understanding the psychological and social contributions behind youth consumerism.

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## INTRODUCTION

Instagram has become a significant part of the daily lives of teenagers in India, influencing their social interactions, self-perception, and mental health. With over 230 million users in India, a substantial portion of the youth population engages with the platform regularly. The average Indian teenager spends about 2.4 hours daily on platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. Recently these two major platforms have been on the radar for its adverse effect on the youth. According to the American economist Thorstein Veblen, consumerism is defined as the desire to show-off wealth and social status. Articles have shown a relationship between increased usage of social media, and increases the purchases made by the individual.

## ROLE OF INSTAGRAM IN SHAPING CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

**Influencer Marketing:** Influencers create aesthetically appealing content that resonates with their audience leading to purchases through the platform. Research indicates that consumers are more likely to purchase products recommended by influencers they perceive as genuine and relatable. Influencers after a while soon start to represent role models rather than advertisers. This credibility is built through constant engagement with followers and the presentation of aspirational lifestyles, which may sway adolescents.

**FOMO (fear of missing out):** FOMO is a phenomenon that persuades consumers to make purchases to avoid missing out on trends or experiences shared on social media. Users often feel compelled to act quickly when they see their peers or influencers engaging with certain products, leading to impulsive buying

behaviors. This urgency is further added on to by the content that Instagram promotes, which evokes strong emotional connections and leads to impulsive purchases.

**Impulse Buying** For many teenagers, following these trends is just as much a matter of personal style as it is of social acceptance. The "buy now" mentality is an example of impulse buying, in which the buyer purchases something without giving it much thought because they want to avoid missing out on a passing trend. Because of the nature of Instagram material, what is fashionable now may become outdated tomorrow, which increases the need to buy rapidly in order to stay up to date.

**Influence of the algorithm:** Instagram's algorithm examines historical purchases, engagement trends, and behaviors. Because of this, users are more likely to encounter articles and posts that correspond with their interests and previous interactions; they frequently include influencer content and targeted advertisements that advertise particular products.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Thorstein Veblen (1899) theorized that people, mainly the rich, often purchase goods to merely display social status. Instagram has re-thought of Veblen's ideas in today's day and age, driving adolescents to engage in conspicuous consumption by showing branded products, travel, and experiences for followers and peers.

Studies show that over 85% of Gen Z acknowledge social media influences their purchasing decisions with clothing, accessories, and cosmetics coming from the most consumed categories. Peer influence along with recommendations from friends was seen as the most vital factor in purchasing choices,

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validating Veblen's theory that consumption is social.

The 2025 study by Park et al., titled "How social media affects youth luxury consumption," published in a peer-reviewed marketing journal, provides evidence linking Instagram usage patterns to conspicuous consumption behaviours. Their mixed method study used both quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews across adolescent populations, luxury consumption on Instagram is less about intrinsic product value and more about symbolic communication to peers in a virtual social hierarchy. The study adeptly compares "likes" and "comments" as modern replacements for Veblen's concept of public visibility in consumption, substantiating the social rewards that motivate teens to display conspicuous consumption.

A unique take on Park et al.'s work is their exploration of the algorithmic reinforcement mechanism, which repeatedly pushes adolescents towards aspirational content, therefore intensifying materialistic desire and spending. This focus on the feedback loop between user psychology and the way the apps are designed, brings relevance to Veblen's theory in the modern day and age.

Moreover, Park et al. highlights the physiological checks in teens for example, identity exploration, peer conformity and sensitivity to approval. This insight suggests that conspicuous consumption among adolescents is not just economic signaling but also an essential part of shaping teens identity, forming opinions and validation among algorithmically curated digital groups.

The article titled "The effect of social media influencers' on teenagers Behavior: an empirical study using cognitive map technique"

by Karima Lajnef (2023) provides an analysis of how social media influencers shape adolescents' behavior, attitudes, and purchasing decisions.

Lajnef's study integrates cognitive mapping techniques to reveal the complex and interconnected ways influencers affect teenagers' mental models. The study also discusses algorithmic reinforcement on platforms, where machine learning personalizes and amplifies influencer content, creating a loop that intensifies consumption.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption explains that people buy and display luxury goods to signal wealth and social status rather than to satisfy practical needs. Key ideas under it include, status signaling and pecuniary emulation. Status signalling is where people only consume as a public display of economic power. Pecuniary emulation means individuals imitate the consumption habits of higher social classes to gain acceptance.

This theory is a great way to analyze Instagram-induced spending because Instagram acts as a platform for public display, highlighting status signaling through photos and videos of branded goods and lifestyles. Platforms also fuel pecuniary emulation by exposing adolescents to content driving competitive consumption, as teens seek social validation through material possessions.

## THE PSYCHOLOGY BEHIND IT

Instagram exerts influence on spending patterns of adolescents aged 14-18 largely driven by various mechanisms that align closely with Thorstein Veblen's of conspicuous consumption. Teens are exposed to designer clothing, and

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affluent lifestyles through the app and their peers, that slowly but steadily make them seem as a status symbol for most.

Adolescents seem to associate influencers to role models and naturally wish to imitate their mannerisms and behaviour. This phenomenon is reinforced through para social relationships which intensify teens susceptibility to influence culture and product endorsements. This cycle is amplified by peer pressure: seeing and observing peers getting social approval for luxury purchases, drives competition and envy between companions.

Instagram's integration of shopping to the app makes it even easier for teens to fall into the trap of consuming products on their feed. Teens are encouraged to equate ownership of trending products with belonging and popularity, prompting greater spending. These strategies most likely lead to compulsive buying driven by aspirations for social approval.

Teens go through rapid development in the prefrontal cortex and limbic system, making them more likely to give in to rewards, and social approval. Instagram's like and follow culture activate neural reward circuitry reinforcing consumption as a means to gain social approval.

Social exclusion triggers compensatory behaviours, and conspicuous consumption is an easy way to start fitting into society. In summary, Instagram's influence on adolescent consumerism is due to physiological changes in the adolescent brain and social media targeting the shortcomings, rewarding instant feedback, and amplifying emotional issues such as self-uncertainty, anxiety, and the need for social approval.

## DRUNK ELEPHANTS ADOLESCENT'S CRAZE - A CASE STUDY

Beginning in 2023, Drunk Elephant captured massive attention from adolescents all around the world through social media, pushed by influencer marketing and user-generated content. The brand's vibrant, colorful and aesthetically appealing packaging attracted younger customers, and its place on wishlists shot up, often surpassing toys or fashion. Videos showed elaborate skincare routines and "hauls" displaying the brand's product becoming popular among children as young as eight. Parents reported that tweens were frequently begging for Drunk Elephant products, which cost upwards of \$50 each and were not always suitable for young skin.

Drunk Elephant's viral and sudden fame was marked by compulsive buying and increased popularity of make-up stores among children. It was marked by compulsive buying and frequent visits to retailers like Sephora, where groups of young kids would repeatedly test products in stores and absolutely ruin the store's presentation. This has led to some stores removing testers altogether. Studies and media coverage show that 55% of children wanted to buy something simply because an influencer used or recommended it, and nearly half trusted those influencers. Some children described feelings of anxiety or exclusion if they were unable to participate in beauty trends centered around Drunk Elephant.

As dermatologists and parents openly voiced concerns, Drunk Elephants founder and official communications advised young adolescents to avoid their products, stressing that their skin simply did not require it. Critics accused Drunk Elephant of oversaturating the youth market and contributing to

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misinformation, overconsumption, and risky skincare habits among kids.

Drunk Elephants' success with teens was just not just a result of effective marketing but reflected deeper societal behavioural trends. The adolescent urge for group conformity coupled with the feeling of social status drives consumption.

Drunk Elephant's rise and partial decline highlights the complexities of social media induced addiction, boundaries with age-appropriate marketing and physiological pressure for status and belonging.

## INFLUENCER MARKETING

Influencer marketing uses psychological principles such as trust, authenticity, and social proof to drive consumer behavior and actions. Influencers often appear more relatable than traditional celebrity endorsements, sharing personal experiences that foster a sense of community and loyalty among followers that may or not be fake. This relatability enhances engagement and encourages followers to view influencers as trusted advisors, making them more likely to trust an influencer rather than advertisements.

Research indicates that consumers are significantly more inclined to purchase products endorsed by influencers they perceive as genuine and relatable. This perception is crucial authenticity in influencer content, whether through storytelling or personal narratives can lead to increased purchases. The emotional connection established through consistent engagement also plays a vital role in shaping consumer attitudes towards brands.

## FEAR OF MISSING OUT (FOMO)

FOMO is a powerful psychological driver that compels consumers to act quickly to avoid missing out on trends or experiences showcased by influencers on social media. When users observe their peers or influencers engaging with specific products, they may feel an urgent need to participate, leading to impulsive buying behaviors. The emotional responses evoked by FOMO can be intensified by Instagram's algorithm, which promotes content that resonates strongly with users, further fueling the urgency to purchase.

## IMPULSE BUYING

The fast-paced nature of platforms like Instagram contributes to a "buy now" mentality, where trends can change rapidly. For many young consumers, staying current with these trends is closely tied to social acceptance and personal identity. This environment fosters impulse buying, as users may make purchases without thorough consideration, driven by the desire to not miss fleeting trends. The constant influx of new content can create a sense of urgency that propels quick purchasing decisions.

## METHODOLOGY

### Survey Design

The survey will be structured to include both quantitative and qualitative questions. It will be distributed online to ensure accessibility and convenience for respondents.

### Sample Size

A sample size of approximately 50 respondents aged 14-18. Google form will be used to collect the data for this sample size.

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## Survey Questions

### 1. Demographic Information

- Age:
- Gender:

### 2. Social Media Usage

- How many hours do you spend on social media daily?
  - Less than 1 hour
  - 1-2 hours
  - 2-3 hours
  - More than 3 hours
- Do you follow any influencers on Instagram?
  - Yes
  - No

### 3. Influencer Impact

- How often do you purchase products based on recommendations from influencers on Instagram?
  - Very often
  - Sometimes
  - Rarely
  - Never
- Which types of products have you purchased after seeing them on Instagram? (Select all that apply)
  - Clothing
  - Accessories
  - Beauty products
  - Electronics
  - Other (please specify)

### 4. Impulse Buying

- Have you ever made an impulse purchase after seeing a product on Instagram?
  - Yes
  - No
- If yes, how frequently do you make impulse purchases after seeing products on Instagram?

- Very often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

### 5. Brand Awareness and Preferences

- Which brands do you associate most with Instagram? (Open-ended)
- Do you feel that Instagram influences your perception of brands?
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree

### 6. Spending Patterns

- On average, how much do you spend monthly on products influenced by social media?
  - Less than ₹1000
  - ₹1000-₹5000
  - ₹5000-₹10,000
  - More than ₹10,000

### 7. General Attitudes

- How do you feel about the influence of social media on your spending habits?

After collecting the responses, statistical analysis will be conducted to identify trends and correlations between social media usage and spending patterns. The qualitative responses will be analyzed thematically to gain deeper insights into attitudes towards consumerism influenced by Instagram.

## INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED WITH VARIOUS PROFESSIONALS IN THE FIELD

During my interviews with adolescents and marketing professionals, I found that Instagram has become a powerful influence on

young people's attitude towards shopping and spending. Many teens expressed that they are heavily motivated by the content they see on the platform whether it's posts from peers or influencers showcasing luxury items, travel experiences, or fashionable outfits.

Marketers confirmed that Instagram's highly visual and interactive features, like reels and stories, foster aspiration and drive consumer behavior by linking products with desirable lifestyles. They emphasized how the platform integrates shopping seamlessly into everyday browsing, making impulsive and compulsive purchases more common among youth.

Professionals also noted that Instagram dramatically changes how status and social standing are perceived. Unlike traditional forms of status display involving luxury goods or face-to-face social cues, Instagram provides a digital stage where likes, comments, and followers serve as new markers of prestige.

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