
The Impact of Parasocial Relationships on Risky Consumer Behaviour: A Study of “Blind Buying” Trends Among Gen Z Students in Navi Mumbai

Dr. Rita Khatri¹, Tanish Hazari²

¹HSNC University (HSNCU), ²SIES (Nerul) College of Arts, Science and Commerce (Autonomous)

Abstract

The rapid expansion of social media-driven marketing has fundamentally reshaped the decision-making process of young consumers. Social media influencers have taken on a role that goes well beyond conventional advertising. They are perceived as relatable figures, trusted peers, and lifestyle guides by many Generation Z's. This closeness, which is often built through one-sided emotional bonds, is known as parasocial relationships. It has given rise to a distinctive consumer behaviour called blind buying. Blind buying is the act of purchasing products without reviewing alternatives, verifying quality, or conducting any meaningful product evaluation. This pattern is a very risky as it represents consumption with real financial and psychological consequences for young buyers. This paper examines blind buying behaviour among Generation Z students through the lens of parasocial relationship theory. A mixed-method approach was adopted — combining a comprehensive review of peer-reviewed academic literature and Indian market research reports with primary survey data collected from 81 Gen Z students in Navi Mumbai. The survey measured parasocial engagement, influencer trust, risk perception, fear of missing out (FOMO), and self-reported blind buying behaviour across 24 Likert-scale items.

The findings reveal that while students acknowledged meaningful parasocial connections with influencers, their blind buying behaviour was moderate rather than extreme. It should be noted that their risk awareness was high as respondents strongly agreed that blind buying leads to disappointment and financial risk. Yet this awareness did not consistently translate into cautious behaviour. Trust transfer, emotional attachment, FOMO, and perceived authenticity are identified as the central mechanisms that drive the parasocial-to-blind-buying pathway. The study contributes to consumer behaviour and digital marketing scholarship. It contextualises these dynamics within India's Gen Z student population, with specific reference to Navi Mumbai, and offers actionable recommendations for marketers, educators, and policymakers.

Keywords: Parasocial Relationships, Blind Buying, Generation Z, Influencer Marketing, Risky Consumer Behaviour, India

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

India's digital landscape has transformed at a very fast pace in the last decade. The market is flooded with affordable smartphones, competitively priced data plans, and the near-ubiquitous presence of social networking platforms. These platforms have created an environment where young people spend a significant portion of their daily lives online. Among this generation — broadly referred to as Generation Z, comprising those born roughly between 1997 and 2012 — platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and short-video apps are not simply entertainment channels. These platforms are spaces where identities are shaped, social comparisons are made, and purchasing decisions are influenced.

At the heart of this transformation came the rise of the social media influencers. Unlike traditional brand ambassadors or celebrity endorsers, the influencers present themselves as ordinary people living relatable lives. This relatability is the main reason; a bond is created between the Genz and the Influencers. They cook in real kitchens, struggle with real problems, and enthusiastically recommend products they claim to genuinely love. This perceived authenticity is cultivated over time. Further influenced by consistent content, personal storytelling, and direct audience engagement. This results in a powerful sense of emotional closeness between follower and influencer. This relationship is entirely one-sided. Researchers have termed this a parasocial relationship: an emotional bond formed in the absence of genuine interpersonal connection.

One outcome identified by the researchers, that is increasingly visible - blind buying. It is the practice of purchasing products based solely on an influencer's recommendation, without independently reading reviews, comparing alternatives, or physically examining the product. This behaviour carries tangible financial risk especially for the student population with limited discretionary income. Despite this, it continues to grow, particularly in urban Indian markets where aspirational consumption and social validation play outsized roles in purchasing decisions.

1.2 Research Problem and Gap

Many academic works have examined influencer marketing, purchase intention, and impulse buying, blind buying as a distinct and explicitly risky consumer behaviour has received far less scholarly attention. Most frameworks treat online purchasing within rational or semi-impulsive paradigms. They don't account the heightened vulnerability associated with completely uninformed consumption.

There is a widespread application of parasocial relationship theory in media and communication research. It's linkage to risky consumer behaviour withing emerging markets like India remain limited. Studies focusing specifically on Indian Generation Z students are fragmented, and region-specific insights from cities like Navi Mumbai — which combines dense student populations with high social media penetration — are nearly absent from the literature. This study directly addresses these gaps.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this research is to examine how parasocial relationships with social media influencers contribute to blind buying behaviour among Generation Z students. The specific objectives are to:

- Examine the theoretical foundations of parasocial relationships within digital environments;
- Analyse the role of trust, perceived authenticity, FOMO, and risk perception as mediating and moderating factors;
- Present and interpret primary survey findings from 81 Gen Z students in Navi Mumbai;
- Synthesise global and Indian literature on influencer-driven consumption; and
- Propose a conceptual framework and hypotheses to guide future empirical research.

1.4 Significance of the Study

From a theoretical standpoint, this study extends parasocial interaction theory into the domain of risky consumption. The aim is to bridge media psychology with consumer behaviour research. The findings offer practical and actionable guidance for brands, and for the influencers who wish to engage Gen Z ethically. For educational institutions and policymakers, the results indicate that there is a pressing need for digital and financial literacy initiatives within higher education curriculum.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Parasocial Relationships in Digital Media

The concept of parasocial interaction was first introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956). He observed that television audiences frequently developed a sense of familiarity and emotional closeness with on-screen personalities. He observed relationships that mimicked genuine interpersonal connections despite being entirely one-directional. The advent of social media has renewed and deepened academic interest in this phenomenon. Parasocial bonds are intensified due to social media, in ways traditional media simply cannot. Through social media, influencers engage directly with their audiences through comments, polls, Q&A sessions, and live broadcasts. They continuously share domestic routines, personal struggles, and unfiltered opinions in ways that feel genuinely intimate. These connections are further reinforced due to algorithmic personalisation. Due to personalization, media platforms ensure that followers encounter content from their preferred influencers with striking regularity.

Researchers have consistently observed that parasocial relationships formed in digital contexts are stronger and more enduring than those formed through mass media. The followers describe influencers using relational language. They describe the influencers as their friends, mentors, or even family members. This emotional closeness directly impacts consumer behaviour. To simply indicate - when an individual trusts someone, they are more inclined to act on that person's recommendations, even without independent verification.

2.2 Influencer Marketing and Trust Formation

Trust occupies a central position in influencer marketing literature. Scholars have consistently found that trustworthiness, expertise, and perceived authenticity are the key attributes that determine an influencer's persuasive effectiveness. In the Indian context, trust formation carries additional cultural dimensions: influencers who communicate in regional languages, reflect middle-class aspirations, or demonstrate familiarity with local norms tend to generate stronger affective responses among Indian Gen Z audiences.

Research on micro-influencers suggests they often generate higher trust than mainstream celebrities precisely because their relatability is more convincing. Trust transfer theory helps explain what follows: credibility attributed to an influencer extends to the brands they endorse, reducing consumers' perceived risk and increasing purchase likelihood. Among student consumers with limited purchasing experience, this trust frequently substitutes for independent product research, thereby setting the stage for blind buying behaviour.

2.3 Risk Perception, Impulse Buying, and Blind Buying

Perception of risk is a well-established construct in consumer decision making research. Classical models state that if a consumer perceives risk, they will engage in search information to reduce uncertainty. These risks can be financial, social or psychological. The digital environments, however, are structured in such a way that they override the process of risk assessment by the consumers. Impulse buying literature points that emotional arousal, time constraints and social media cues can override deliberative decision making. Blind buying is represented by this extreme point on this spectrum. Here the consumer forgoes all evaluation. The purchases are made solely because of the trust in the social media figure.

2.4 Generation Z and Social Media Consumption in India

Generation Z in India represents the most digitally immersed consumer cohort in the country's history. This group relies heavily on social media for identity formation, self-expression, and peer validation. Influencers serve as aspirational reference points whose lifestyles define what is desirable. FOMO is a particularly potent driver within this cohort — students who observe peers purchasing influencer-promoted products feel social pressure to conform. Combined with urgency created by limited-time offers and platform-driven hype, FOMO significantly reduces the time available for rational decision making.

2.5 Indian Higher Education Context and Consumption Behaviour

Gen Z in Navi Mumbai display Consumer Behaviour traits which are shaped by limited personal income, proximity to Mumbai's aspirational consumer culture, high social media engagement, and peer comparison dynamics typical of densely populated educational environments. With limited spending power the students are inclined to allocate discretionary income to fashion, beauty and lifestyle products which are endorsed by influencers. This aspiration-driven pattern, combined with the trust deficit in traditional advertising, makes the student population particularly susceptible to parasocial-driven blind buying.

2.6 Digital Ethics, Regulation, and Student Vulnerability

Ethical transparency is challenged due to the expansion of influencer-driver marketing. Recently, the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) has introduced guidelines requiring influencers to clearly disclose paid partnerships. Despite these guidelines, compliance is at its minimum. This is supported by limited awareness in student consumers. Students are more vulnerable due to this regulatory gap. This vulnerability can be reduced by including digital and financial literacy programmes within higher education curricula.

2.7 Identification of Gaps

Despite the substantial body of literature on influencer marketing and parasocial interaction, several important gaps remain. Blind buying has received limited attention as a conceptually distinct form of risky consumer behaviour. The integration of parasocial relationship theory with consumer risk frameworks is underdeveloped, and empirical research within Indian student populations is fragmented. Region-specific insights from Navi Mumbai are largely absent. This study addresses these gaps directly.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-method approach, combining secondary research with a primary quantitative survey. The secondary component involved a systematic review of peer-reviewed literature, Indian market research reports, and credible industry publications. Databases including Google Scholar, Scopus-indexed journals, and Indian academic repositories were consulted. The primary component involved administering a structured questionnaire to 81 Generation Z students from undergraduate and postgraduate programmes at colleges affiliated with HSNC University, Navi Mumbai, between January and February 2026.

3.2 Survey Instrument

The questionnaire comprised two sections. The first captured demographic information including age, gender, level of study, monthly personal spending, and primary platform for influencer content. The second contained 24 five-point Likert-scale items (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) organised across four thematic groups: parasocial engagement, influencer authenticity and trust, blind buying behaviour, and risk perception and FOMO. One duplicate item was identified and excluded from analysis, yielding 23 valid items.

3.3 Respondent Profile

A total of 81 valid responses were collected. The demographic breakdown is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Survey Respondents

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Age	18–20 years	44	54.3%
Age	21–23 years	34	42.0%
Age	24–25 years	3	3.7%
Gender	Female	51	63.0%
Gender	Male	30	37.0%
Level of Study	Undergraduate	70	86.4%
Level of Study	Postgraduate	11	13.6%
Monthly Spending	Less than ₹3,000	38	46.9%
Monthly Spending	₹3,000–₹6,000	27	33.3%
Monthly Spending	More than ₹6,000	16	19.8%
Primary Platform	Instagram	66	81.5%
Primary Platform	YouTube	15	18.5%

3.4 Research Hypotheses

Based on the synthesis of existing literature and the theoretical foundations of parasocial interaction and risky consumer behaviour, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H1: Parasocial relationship intensity has a significant positive impact on blind buying behaviour among Gen Z students.
- H2: Trust in influencers mediates the relationship between parasocial relationships and blind buying behaviour.
- H3: Perceived risk negatively influences blind buying behaviour.
- H4: Fear of missing out (FOMO) positively moderates the relationship between parasocial relationships and blind buying behaviour.
- H5: Perceived influencer authenticity has a significant positive impact on trust formation among Gen Z students.

3.5 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework positions parasocial relationship intensity as the primary independent variable. Trust and perceived risk function as mediating mechanisms, while FOMO acts as a moderating variable. Influencer authenticity serves as an antecedent to trust formation. Together, these constructs constitute the pathway through which parasocial engagement influences blind buying behaviour.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Sample Characteristics

The survey was completed by 81 Gen Z students, with the majority falling in the 18–20 age bracket (54.3%) and identifying as female (63.0%). Most respondents were undergraduates (86.4%) with monthly personal spending below ₹3,000 (46.9%), reflecting the financial constraints typical of college-going students. Instagram was overwhelmingly the dominant platform for influencer content (81.5%), followed by YouTube (18.5%). Visual breakdowns of the demographic profile are presented in Figures 1 through 4.

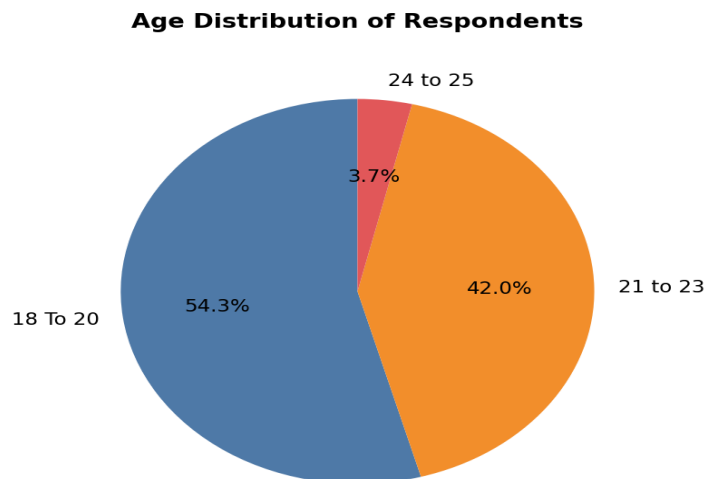


Figure 1: Age Distribution of Survey Respondents (n=81)

Gender Distribution of Respondents

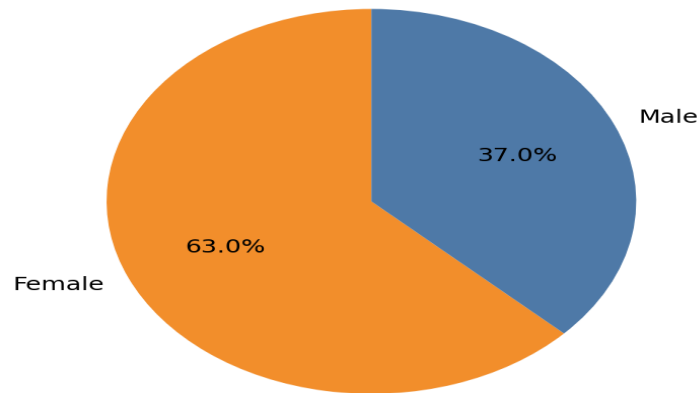


Figure 2: Gender Distribution of Survey Respondents

Average Monthly Personal Spending

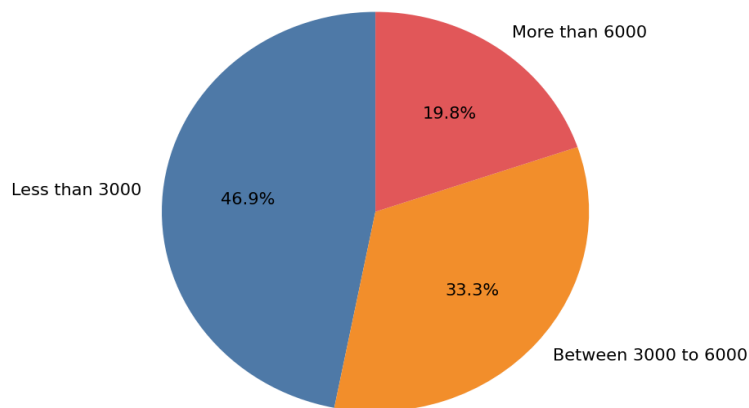


Figure 3: Average Monthly Personal Spending

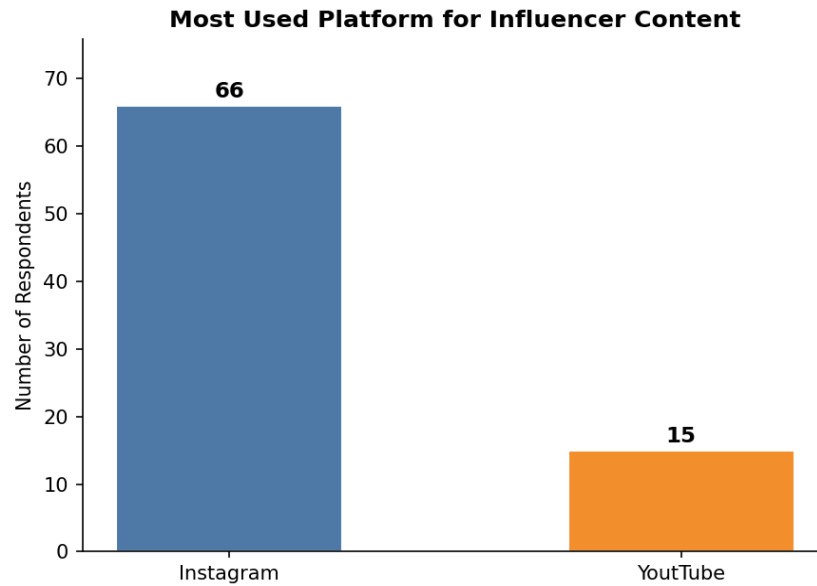


Figure 4: Most Used Platform for Influencer Content

4.2 Parasocial Engagement

Respondents demonstrated a moderate level of parasocial engagement with social media influencers. Trust in influencer opinions scored highest within this section (mean = 2.98), indicating a close-to-neutral but slightly trust-inclined stance. Emotional connection (mean = 2.63) and lifestyle relatability (mean = 2.70) were also present but did not reach the midpoint of strong agreement. The belief that influencers feel like friends rather than advertisers (mean = 2.38) and emotional disappointment when a favourite influencer stops posting (mean = 2.37) were the lowest in this cluster, suggesting that parasocial bonds exist in a nuanced rather than overwhelming form.

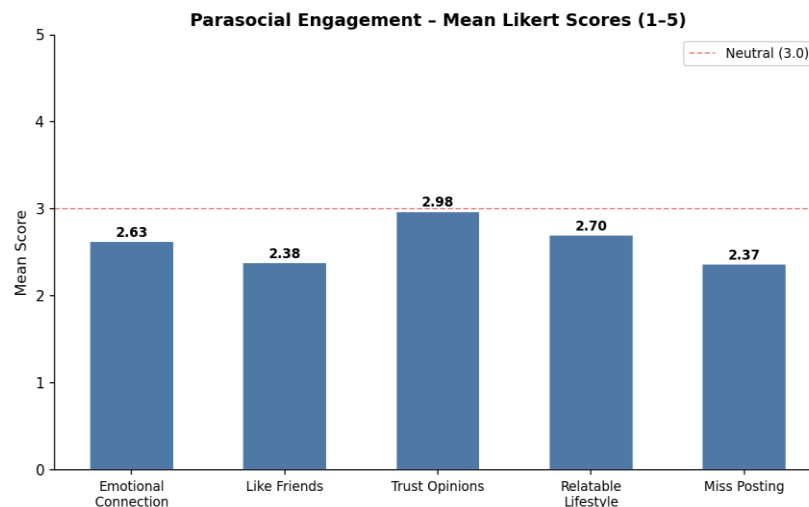


Figure 5: Parasocial Engagement – Mean Likert Scores

Table 2: Parasocial Engagement – Mean Scores and Interpretations

Statement (Abbreviated)	Mean	Interpretation
I trust the opinions of influencers I regularly watch.	2.98	Approaching neutral; moderate trust
I relate to the lifestyle shared by influencers.	2.70	Slight agreement; moderate relatability
I feel emotionally connected to some influencers.	2.63	Slight agreement; moderate connection
I feel disappointed if my favourite influencer stops posting.	2.37	Slight disagreement; limited dependency
Influencers feel like friends rather than advertisers.	2.38	Slight disagreement; limited friend perception

4.3 Influencer Trust and Authenticity

On the subject of authenticity and trustworthiness, results revealed a mixed picture. The perception that influencer recommendations are more reliable than brand advertisements scored highest (mean = 3.07), suggesting influencers retain a comparative trust advantage over traditional advertising. However, the belief that influencers genuinely use the products they recommend was notably low (mean = 2.22), indicating a degree of scepticism about the sincerity of endorsements. Trust in influencers when promoting new brands (mean = 2.47) was also subdued. Students may trust influencer opinions in general while remaining aware of commercial motivations.

4.4 Blind Buying Behaviour

Mean scores across all blind buying items fell below the scale midpoint of 3.0, indicating that outright uninformed purchasing is not the dominant behaviour pattern. The highest-scoring blind buying item was having bought products without knowing full product details (mean = 2.09), followed by purchasing without reading reviews because an influencer recommended the product (mean = 1.96). Comfort with blind buying was the lowest-scored item (mean = 1.78), suggesting students are not at ease with uninformed purchases even when they do make them. These moderate scores likely reflect situational behaviour — occurring during flash sales, limited-edition launches, or trending social media moments — rather than habitual practice.

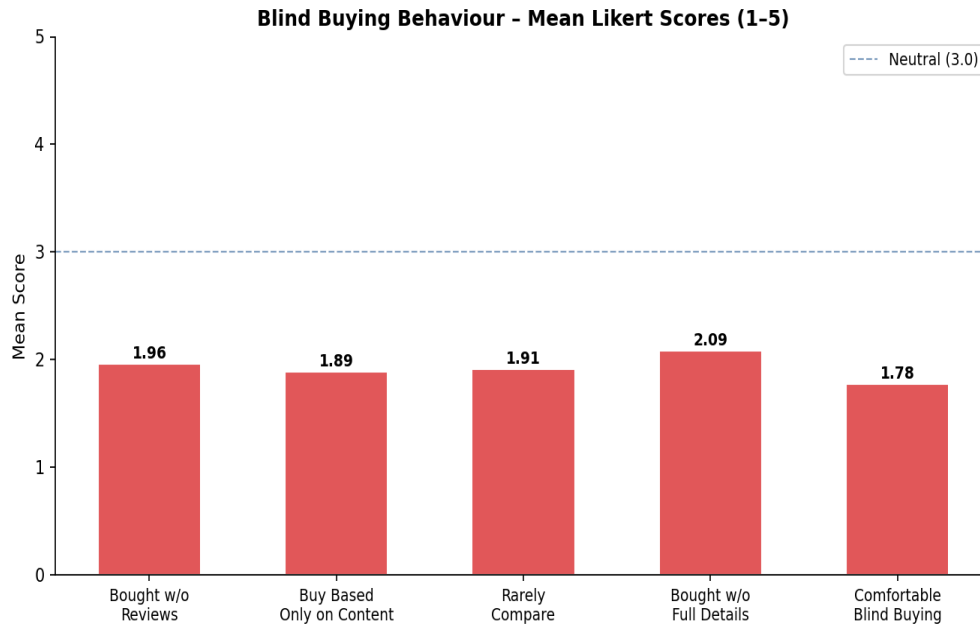


Figure 6: Blind Buying Behaviour – Mean Likert Scores

Table 3: Blind Buying Behaviour – Mean Scores and Interpretations

Statement (Abbreviated)	Mean	Interpretation
Bought products without knowing full product details.	2.09	Below midpoint; situational occurrence
Purchased w/o reading reviews (influencer-driven).	1.96	Below midpoint; limited but present
Buy products based only on influencer content.	1.89	Below midpoint; not a dominant pattern
Rarely compare alternatives before buying.	1.91	Below midpoint; some evaluation occurs
Feel comfortable with blind buying.	1.78	Clear disagreement; discomfort acknowledged

4.5 Risk Perception

The risk perception section produced the study's most striking results. Agreement that blind buying sometimes leads to disappointment scored 4.19 — among the highest scores in the entire survey. Awareness that purchasing without product research involves financial risk registered 4.12, and worry about product quality after blind buying reached 3.90. Respondents are acutely aware of the risks involved in uninformed purchasing, yet this awareness does not appear to function as a reliable deterrent. This disconnect — between high risk awareness and moderate blind buying behaviour — is theoretically significant. It suggests that the affective and social mechanisms driving blind buying (emotional attachment, FOMO, social validation) are capable of overriding cognitive risk assessment under certain conditions, consistent with emotional override models in consumer behaviour literature.

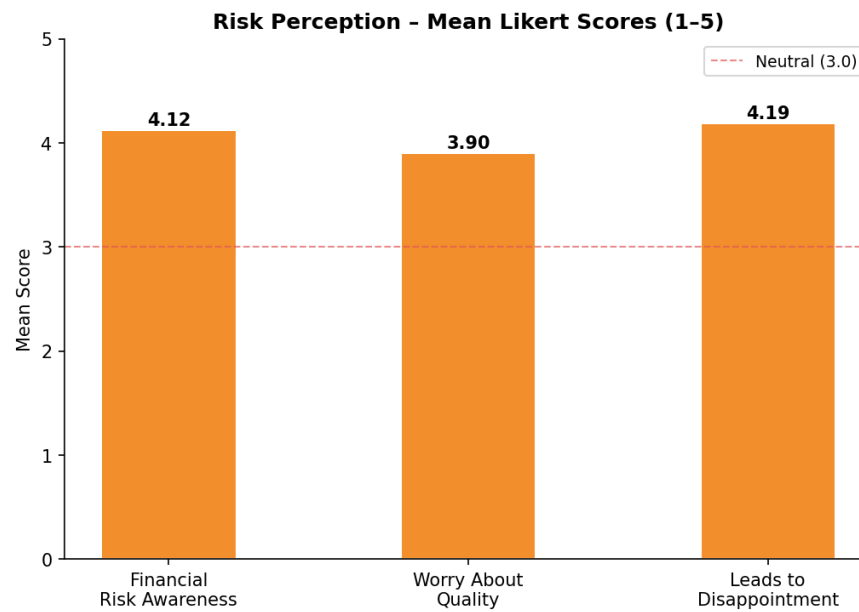


Figure 7: Risk Perception – Mean Likert Scores

Table 4: Risk Perception – Mean Scores and Interpretations

Statement (Abbreviated)	Mean	Interpretation
Blind buying sometimes leads to disappointment.	4.19	Strong agreement; risk widely acknowledged
Buying without research involves financial risk.	4.12	Strong agreement; high financial risk awareness
I worry about product quality after blind buying.	3.90	Agreement; quality concerns present

4.6 FOMO and Social Pressure

FOMO-related scores were moderate. Limited-time influencer offers were the strongest driver of urgency-induced purchasing (mean = 2.52), followed by social media as a general driver of impulsive buying (mean = 2.48). Perceived pressure from trending products registered 2.23, while fear of specifically missing out on influencer-recommended products was lowest at 1.95. This suggests FOMO operates more through offer-urgency than general social anxiety. Notably, the acknowledgement that blind buying is common among students like the respondents (mean = 3.21) crossed the neutral midpoint — indicating students perceive this behaviour as socially normalised within their peer group even if they don't strongly identify with it personally.

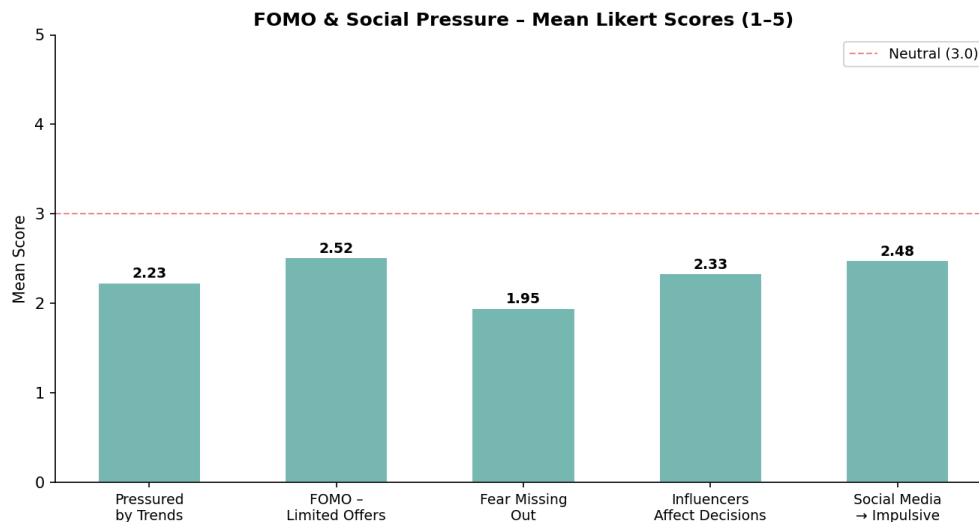


Figure 8: FOMO and Social Pressure – Mean Likert Scores

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Summary of Findings

This study set out to examine how parasocial relationships with social media influencers shape blind buying behaviour among Generation Z students in Navi Mumbai. Drawing on both a comprehensive literature review and primary survey data from 81 respondents, the research identifies a nuanced but consequential relationship between emotional influencer bonds and uninformed purchasing. Parasocial engagement, trust, and FOMO are present among the student population — though not at extreme levels. Blind buying behaviour is moderate, occurring situationally rather than habitually. Most significantly, risk awareness is very high, yet this awareness does not consistently translate into cautious purchasing. This paradox lies at the heart of the parasocial–blind buying dynamic.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions

The study extends parasocial interaction theory beyond media consumption into the domain of economic decision-making. By positioning blind buying as a distinct form of risky consumer behaviour driven by emotional

attachment, trust transfer, and FOMO, the research offers a more fine-grained conceptual framework than existing impulse buying models. The proposed five-hypothesis framework provides a structured foundation for future empirical testing.

5.3 Practical Recommendations

For brands and influencers targeting student populations, the findings underscore the importance of ethical communication. When students are buying products primarily on the basis of emotional trust rather than product knowledge, the responsibility to provide accurate and non-manipulative information falls squarely on content creators and brands. Undisclosed sponsorships exploit a genuine vulnerability among young, financially constrained consumers.

For educational institutions, the study highlights the need to embed digital and financial literacy into curricula. Teaching students to critically evaluate influencer content, recognise commercial intent, and apply basic risk assessment frameworks could meaningfully reduce susceptibility to blind buying. For policymakers and regulatory bodies, the findings reinforce the case for stronger enforcement of ASCI disclosure guidelines and broader consumer awareness campaigns targeting young audiences.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. The sample size of 81 respondents, while adequate for exploratory insights, limits generalisability. The sample was drawn exclusively from HSNL University-affiliated colleges in Navi Mumbai, constraining broader applicability. Social desirability bias may have influenced self-reported responses on blind buying frequency. Future research should employ larger, more geographically diverse samples and consider qualitative methods to capture emotional and contextual dimensions more richly. Structural equation modelling could be used to empirically test the full hypothesised framework, including trust mediation and FOMO moderation.

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