



Instagram Influencers and Youth Perceptions: A Study of Rural College Students in Quepem, Goa

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Abstract:

Instagram influencers have become visible figures in contemporary digital culture, shaping perceptions of lifestyle, success, and identity through their carefully curated images and narratives. This study examines how rural college students in Quepem perceive Instagram influencers and whether they view influencer content as inspiring, pressuring, or largely insignificant. This study approaches influencer content as a form of everyday digital storytelling that communicates particular social values and identity ideals. The study was conducted among undergraduate students using a structured questionnaire and short, written responses. Students were inquired about their patterns of Instagram use, the types of influencers they follow, and their views on influencer content related to appearance, lifestyle, success, and authenticity. The responses were analysed to identify recurring attitudes such as admiration, aspiration, scepticism, or resistance, and to examine how students relate influencers' narratives to their social realities. This study is expected to reveal diverse and sometimes contradictory responses, with influencers serving as sources of motivation for some students while generating emotional pressure or disengagement for others. By focusing on student perceptions rather than behavioural outcomes, this study contributes to broader discussions on storytelling, identity formation, and social influence in digital spaces, with specific reference to rural youth contexts.

Keywords: Instagram Narratives, Rural Youth, Social Media, Digital Culture

Introduction:

Social media platforms have significantly influenced young people's encounters with narratives of success, beauty, and identity. Platforms such as Instagram rely heavily on visual storytelling, where influencers present carefully edited versions of their everyday lives. These narratives often distort the boundaries between personal experiences, entertainment, and marketing. Influencers often build large followings by sharing content related to lifestyle, fashion, fitness, beauty, travel, and personal growth, thereby positioning themselves as relatable and aspirational figures (Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget, 2020). Recent studies

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indicate that consumers are more likely to trust influencers' recommendations than traditional advertising because influencers are perceived as more credible and relatable (Barari et al.). Therefore, influencer marketing has become a dominant strategy for brands seeking to shape attitudes and engagement, especially among young audiences (Safare et al.).

While a growing body of research explores the impact of influencers in urban and metropolitan settings, fewer studies focus specifically on rural youth and their perceptions of influencer culture. Research from Kerala and Rajasthan shows that rural and semi-urban students increasingly recognise and respond to influencer content, particularly for fashion, beauty, and lifestyle products (Karikkan and Vaisakhi; Sharma, Pareek, and Goswami). However, these studies have largely examined purchase behaviour. This study shifts the focus to perceptions of how rural college students interpret influencer content and how they relate to it emotionally and cognitively. Understanding perception is essential because it reveals how young people negotiate their identity, aspirations, and self-worth within digital environments.

Literature Review

Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget demonstrated that influencer endorsements generate higher levels of trust and identification than celebrity endorsements because followers perceive influencers as more similar to themselves. Identification and credibility are key mediating factors in shaping attitudes and purchasing intentions.

Barari et al. conducted a meta-analysis of 71 studies and found that social media influencers significantly affect consumer engagement. Their findings also showed that influencer credibility and attractiveness indirectly shaped consumer responses.

Safare et al. emphasised the importance of influencer credibility and authenticity, showing strong correlations between these traits and consumer trust and engagement. Micro-influencers generate higher engagement because of their relatability.

Regional studies have reinforced these patterns. Karikkan and Vaisakhi found that authenticity and perceived expertise were the strongest factors shaping trust among university students in Kerala. Similarly, Sharma, Pareek, and Goswami report that rural youth in Rajasthan not only recognise influencers but also consider them important in pre-purchase decision-making.

Beyond marketing outcomes, psychological research highlights the potential negative effects of Instagram content. Castellanos Silva and Steins demonstrate that exposure to hegemonic beauty ideals on Instagram increases body dissatisfaction among young adults, while exposure to body-diverse content reduces it. This suggests that influencer narratives may simultaneously inspire and harm users, depending on the content type and user interpretation. Together, these studies suggest the need to explore influencer culture not only as a marketing tool but also as a narrative environment that shapes young people's self-understanding.

Research Gap

Existing studies have predominantly examined influencer marketing in terms of purchase intention, brand perception, and engagement. Limited research has examined how rural youth interpret influencer narratives, particularly regarding identity, pressure, and authenticity. Moreover, few studies have adopted a perception-centred approach that prioritises meaning-making over behavioural outcomes. This study addresses this gap by examining how rural college students in Quepem, Goa, India, perceive and interpret Instagram influencer content.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine patterns of Instagram usage among rural college students in Quepem, Goa.
- To identify the types of influencers students, follow.
- To analyse student perceptions of influencer content related to lifestyle, appearance, and success.
- To explore whether influencer narratives are viewed as inspiring, pressurising, or insignificant.
- To understand how students interpret influencer authenticity.

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive research design. Primary data were collected from undergraduate students at a rural college in Quepem using a structured questionnaire with closed-ended and short-answer questions. Convenience sampling was used because respondents were readily accessible within the college population. The questionnaire comprised four sections.

- Demographic details
- Instagram usage patterns
- Influencer following behaviour
- Perceptions of influencer content

- Data were analysed using simple percentages and thematic interpretations of open-ended responses.

Questionnaire Structure

Section A: Demographic Information

- Gender
- Age group
- Course/Year of study
- Place of residence (village/town)

Section B: Instagram Usage

- How often do you use Instagram?
- Average time spent daily
- Main purpose of use (entertainment/information/socialising/learning)

Section C: Influencer Engagement

- Do you follow any influencers? (Yes/No)
- Types of influencers followed (fashion, beauty, fitness, education, travel, lifestyle, others)
- How often do you view influencer content?

Section D: Perceptions

- Influencers motivate me to improve myself further. (Likert scale)
- Influencer lifestyles seem to be realistic. (Likert scale)
- After watching influencer content, I feel: Inspired/Pressured/Neutral/Irritated/Demotivated
- Influencers present their true selves. (Agree/Disagree)
- Have you unfollowed an influencer? Why?
- Which influences you more: Influencers/Friends/Family/Teachers

Findings and Results

The survey results indicated that the respondents widely used Instagram. Approximately 75% of students reported using Instagram every day, while the remaining respondents used the platform occasionally. The



majority of students indicated that their primary purpose for using Instagram was entertainment, particularly watching reels and short videos, followed by accessing informational and lifestyle-related content. Most respondents reported following at least one media influencer. The most followed categories were fashion, beauty, and lifestyle influencers, suggesting that content related to personal appearance, lifestyle trends, and everyday experiences is particularly popular among students.

In terms of perceived impact, 46.9% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that influencers motivated them to improve themselves in areas such as fitness, personal appearance, and lifestyle choices. However, the responses also indicate the presence of social comparisons. Approximately 30.5% of respondents reported that influencer content sometimes prompts them to compare their lives with those portrayed online, which can create feelings of pressure or inadequacy. Student responses also revealed a degree of scepticism toward influencer authenticity. Only 15.7% of respondents trusted influencer product recommendations, while a large proportion (45.2%) held a neutral view of influencer credibility. This suggests that many students remain uncertain about the authenticity of influencer endorsement.

Qualitative responses further reflect this scepticism. Several students noted that influencers tend to highlight only the positive aspects of their lives while concealing their struggles. Some respondents also believed that influencers exaggerated their success or lifestyle achievements to gain attention and popularity, and several reported having unfollowed influencers in the past. The most common reasons included excessive advertising, perceived inauthentic or “fake” content, and the negative emotional impact of repeatedly viewing highly curated lifestyle content. These responses indicate that students are aware of the commercial nature of influencer content and may disengage when it appears to be overly promotional or unrealistic. Overall, the findings suggest that while influencer content can be motivating for some students, it also fosters critical awareness and, for others, occasional emotional pressure.

Discussion and Analysis

The findings of the present study highlight the complex and sometimes contradictory roles of social media influencers in shaping rural college students' perceptions. Consistent with earlier research on digital media engagement among youth, influencers appear to function simultaneously as sources of inspiration and psychological pressure. The survey results indicate that a substantial number of respondents perceive influencer content as motivating, particularly regarding self-improvement, lifestyle choices, and personal confidence. Approximately 46.9% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that influencers motivate

them to improve themselves in areas such as physical fitness, skills, and self-presentation. These responses support existing research suggesting that relatable influencer content fosters positive audience engagement.

Previous studies have emphasised the importance of credibility and relatability in influencer marketing. Barari et al. (2025) demonstrated that perceived credibility and authenticity significantly enhance audience engagement and purchase intention. The present findings are consistent with this observation. Students who viewed influencers as genuine and relatable were more likely to interpret influencer narratives as motivational rather than manipulative. Lifestyle and self-development content resonated with respondents seeking inspiration and direction in areas such as fitness, career aspirations, and self-confidence.

Simultaneously, the data reveal rural students' critical awareness of the curated nature of influencer content. Many respondents expressed scepticism about the highly polished, idealised lifestyles portrayed on social media platforms. Several qualitative responses suggested that influencers often "show only the good parts of life" while concealing their struggles and failures. This perception reflects a broader trend identified in social media research, in which audiences increasingly recognise the performative nature of digital self-presentation.

The findings further suggest that influencer content contributes to social comparison and emotional pressure. Approximately 30.5% of respondents reported that influencer posts led them to compare their lives with those of influencers, suggesting that exposure to idealised lifestyles can shape self-evaluation. This pattern aligns with the findings of Castellanos Silva and Steins (2023), who argued that exposure to idealised images on social media can intensify body dissatisfaction and emotional strain among young users. In the present study, some students reported that influencer content occasionally pressured them to emulate similar lifestyles or appearance standards. However, many respondents simultaneously demonstrated awareness that such portrayals are often unrealistic and heavily curated.

This dual response indicates that rural youth do not passively absorb influencer narratives; instead, they actively interpret and negotiate these representations within their social and cultural contexts. Scepticism toward influencer authenticity is also evident in the levels of trust recorded in the survey. Only 15.7% of respondents expressed trust in influencer product recommendations, while a large proportion of respondents (45.2%) remained neutral. This suggests that credibility is a crucial factor in determining whether influencer messages are accepted or rejected.



The coexistence of inspiration and scepticism highlights the dual-edged nature of influencer culture. On the one hand, influencer storytelling can offer aspirational narratives that motivate young audiences to pursue personal development. However, highly curated representations of success, beauty, and lifestyle can produce feelings of inadequacy or social comparison. Therefore, the findings reinforce the argument that authenticity and trustworthiness are central to the effectiveness of influencer communication. When influencers present themselves as relatable individuals who share their successes and struggles, their content is more likely to inspire positive engagement. Conversely, when audiences perceive influencer content as overly commercialised or unrealistic, they tend to disengage or view it critically.

Overall, the results of this study demonstrate that rural Indian students are not passive consumers of influencer culture. Rather, they engage with social media narratives in a reflective and evaluative manner. While influencer content can provide motivation and information, students remain cautious about glamorised portrayals and sponsored endorsements. This pattern is consistent with contemporary research on digital media literacy, which suggests that young audiences increasingly develop critical awareness of online persuasion strategies.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that rural college students in Quepem, Goa, hold complex and varied perceptions of Instagram influencers. Influencers are neither wholly admired nor entirely rejected. Instead, they are interpreted as imperfect storytellers whose content can motivate, mislead, or entertain.

By focusing on perception rather than consumption behaviour, this study highlights the importance of digital literacy and critical engagement with influencer content. Future research may expand the sample size and include qualitative interviews to deepen understanding of how rural youth construct identity in digital spaces.

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