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The Effect of Social Media Influencer on Brand Switching Behavior of Millennial and Generation Z

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Abstract	Article Info.
This study examines the effect of social media influencers on brand switching behaviors among Millennials and Generation Z in urban areas of Nepal, specifically focusing on the major cities of Kathmandu and Lalitpur. A sample size of 150 respondents was determined using the rule of 1:10. Data were analyzed using regression analysis to assess the relationships between social media influencers and brand switching. The findings indicate that social media influencers play a significant role in influencing customer decisions regarding brand switching. In contrast, opinion leaders and celebrities did not show any significant influence on this behavior. This suggests that social network users, particularly younger consumers, have a substantial impact on brand switching behaviors. The study also highlights the prevalent use of social media among younger demographics, particularly on platforms like Instagram, reinforcing the importance of social media in shaping consumer choices and opinions. The results have important implications for businesses operating in the digital age. By effectively leveraging social media influencers, companies can better tap into the preferences and motivations of Millennials and Generation Z, ultimately fostering brand loyalty and trust. Overall, this research contributes to the understanding of the dynamics between social media influencers and consumer behavior, emphasizing the need for businesses to adapt their marketing strategies to engage effectively with younger consumers in an increasingly digital marketplace. *Keywords:* social media influencers, opinion leaders, social leaders, celebrity endorsement, brand switching	

Introduction

Social media has emerged as a crucial platform where influencers craft narratives, endorse products, and shape consumer preferences (Coelhoso et al., 2022). These influencers, characterized by their credibility and reach across various platforms, significantly impact their followers' perceptions and purchasing decisions (Hanifati et al., 2019; Nugroho et al., 2022; Bouvier & Cho, 2022). Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat

have transformed from mere communication tools into dynamic marketplaces where influencers wield considerable influence over brand perceptions and consumer behavior. Brand switching, defined as the transition of customer loyalty from one brand to a competitor, is influenced by various factors, including dissatisfaction, variety-seeking behavior, social identification, and the desire for lower prices (Fintikasari & Ardyan, 2018; Gulamali & Persson, 2017; Mazursky et al., 1987). Millennials

and Generation Z (Gen Z) are particularly prone to brand switching. Millennials, born between 1980 and 2000, are known for their quick interest in new products and their in-depth knowledge of offerings before making purchases (Petra, 2016; Ordun, 2015). They utilize social media fluently to research and compile information, making them selective consumers (Berkup, 2014). Gen Z, born between 1995 and 2010, is characterized by a greater comfort with brand switching and a focus on price consciousness over brand loyalty. This generation engages more with brands on social media and values quality and authenticity in their interactions.

Problem Statement

Despite the growing body of literature on the influence of social media influencers (SMIs) on consumer behavior, inconsistencies and gaps remain. While previous studies indicate a significant impact of SMIs on brand switching behaviors among Millennials and Gen Z (Gulamali & Persson, 2017; McCormick, 2016), the motivations behind these behaviors and the effectiveness of different influencer types are not well understood. Additionally, there is limited exploration of the attributes of SMIs, such as attractiveness and expertise, and how they affect purchase intentions and brand image (Nugroho et al., 2018). Furthermore, the role of emerging digital platforms, such as short video applications, in shaping consumer behavior is under-researched. This study aims to address these gaps by examining the effects of social media influencers on brand switching among Millennials and Gen Z. By analyzing the interactions between different types of influencers—opinion leaders, celebrities, and social leaders—and consumer behavior, this research seeks to provide insights into how these influencers shape brand perceptions and loyalty among younger consumers. Ultimately, the study aims to inform businesses and marketers on effective strategies to engage with these demographics in the digital age, leveraging the power of social media to enhance brand loyalty and trust.

Research Objective

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the influence of social media influencers on brand switching behaviors among Millennials and Generation Z in urban areas of Nepal.

Literature Review

The influence of social media influencers (SMIs) on brand switching behavior has become increasingly significant in the digital marketplace. Mishra (2024) highlights the evolution of celebrity endorsements and influencer marketing strategies, which are adapting to meet the changing preferences of consumers, particularly among younger demographics. Influencers possess the ability to shape consumer perceptions and drive brand switching by leveraging their credibility and relatability. This dynamic underscores the importance of understanding how these influencers impact consumer behavior. Research conducted by Mishra et al.(2023) emphasizes the emotional connections fostered through influencer marketing. Their findings suggest that influencers can evoke strong feelings toward brands, leading to impulsive buying and subsequently, brand switching. This emotional engagement is crucial as it not only influences immediate purchasing decisions but also affects long-term brand loyalty. Mishra and Aithal (2021a & b) further explore consumer behavior in the context of technology and marketing strategies, particularly among laptop users in Kathmandu. Their analysis indicates that social media influencers can sway consumer preferences and encourage brand switching by providing relatable content and authentic recommendations. This is supported by Sah and Mishra (2020), who found that relatable influencer content significantly impacts consumer decision-making.In a broader context, Topalova's research on Instagram influencers reveals that both Millennials and Generation Z in Russia exhibit a positive attitude toward influencer marketing, particularly in the fashion industry. The study highlights the importance of authenticity and sustainability in influencer-sponsored content,

indicating that these factors significantly shape consumer behavior and preferences. Notably, both demographics prefer native advertising over traditional sponsored ads, which further influences their purchasing decisions. Hanifawati et al. (2019) investigate the impact of SMIs on brand switching in the food and beverage industry, finding that influencers significantly affect brand-switching behavior among Millennials and Generation Z. Their research identifies variety-seeking as a primary motivation for brand switching, with opinion leaders and social leaders playing crucial roles. The study also emphasizes that visual content from SMIs has a more substantial impact on purchase decisions than verbal content, particularly when influencers possess expertise in the promoted product category. Nugroho et al. (2022) focus on Generation Z's purchasing decisions, revealing that the attractiveness and expertise of influencers directly influence purchase intentions. Their findings indicate that perceived attractiveness positively affects the brand image of endorsed products, with brand image serving as a significant mediator in the relationship between influencer credibility and purchase intention. Bouvier and Cho (2022) examine the influence of virtual social media influencers on the purchasing intentions of Millennial and Gen Z female consumers, specifically comparing fast fashion and luxury brands. Their study highlights the role of influencer credibility and attractiveness in fostering a positive brand image and brand trust. The findings suggest that virtual influencers associated with fast fashion drive more spontaneous purchases, while those linked to luxury brands contribute to long-term brand loyalty. Mishra (2023) investigates the impact of social media influencers on brand loyalty among Generation Z, emphasizing the mediating role of purchase intention. The study, conducted among Instagram users in Indonesia, concludes that influencers significantly influence brand loyalty, with purchase intention being a key factor in this relationship. Research by Pedro Coelhoso Munster, Stavroula Kalogeras, and Mamie Griffin explores the motivations behind Emirati Generation Z

females' following of social media influencers. Their findings reveal that Instagram is the preferred platform, with empathy, entrustment, envy, and enjoyment being key motivations that positively impact following behavior. Danielle Barbe and Larissa Neuburger (2021) highlight the growing trend of marketing to Millennials and Gen Z through digital influencers, particularly in the tourism and hospitality sector. Their research underscores the effectiveness of digital influencers as relatable figures who can sway audience opinions and serve as powerful channels for electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) marketing strategies. Collectively, these studies underscore the significant influence of social media influencers on consumer behavior, particularly among Millennials and Generation Z. However, inconsistencies and gaps in the research warrant further investigation. While both demographics exhibit a positive attitude toward influencers, variability exists in the factors driving this attitude. Additionally, the motivations behind brand switching behavior and the relative impact of different influencer types remain unclear. Moreover, gaps persist in understanding the direct effects of influencer attributes, such as attractiveness and expertise, on purchase intention and brand image, as well as the mediating role of brand image in shaping these relationships (Nugroho et al., 2018). The limited exploration of short video applications in online marketing also suggests a crucial gap in comprehending the impact of emerging digital platforms on consumer behavior (Quadrella, 2018). Addressing these inconsistencies and gaps, this research aims to examine the effects of social media influencers on brand switching behavior among Millennials and Generation Z, providing valuable insights for marketers seeking to engage effectively with these influential consumer segments.

Variable Propositions

Social media influencers, as defined by Glucksman (2017), are independent endorsers who shape audience attitudes through various social media platforms. Khamis et al. (2017) further elaborate, describing influencers as micro-

celebrities who present themselves on social media to attract and engage a large following. These influencers play a crucial role in e-commerce networks, influencing consumer purchasing decisions and disseminating product opinions through word of mouth (Sah & Mishra, 2020). This study seeks as social media influencers are autonomous people that hold enormous control over audience views and consumer decisions by using their online presence to advocate items and engage followers as micro-celebrities across numerous social platforms.

Opinion leaders are individuals who influence others' behavior, thoughts, or decisions. They possess characteristics such as high social status, extensive information access, and active knowledge sharing. These opinion leaders, often identified by their high engagement with followers, can also be experts in specific product categories, deeply experienced with products, and capable of presenting objective arguments (Gulamali & Persson, 2017). This study seeks Opinion leaders who use their high social position, access to information, and active knowledge sharing to influence others' behavior and decisions. They are generally defined by competence in certain product categories and the ability to provide objective arguments.

Celebrities, known for their achievements or success, frequently endorse products leveraging their public recognition. This study seeks Celebrities, who are frequently recognised for their achievements, use their popularity to endorse companies, demonstrating a type of social media influence through public acknowledgment. Finally, Gulamali and Persson (2017) describe social leaders as influential members within their social networks, bonded by collective identity. These definitions collectively emphasize the interconnected roles of influencers, opinion leaders, celebrities, and social leaders in shaping attitudes and behaviors within communities and social networks.

Brand switching refers to the phenomenon where customers shift their loyalty from one brand to a competitor (Fintikasari & Ardyan, 2018). This behavior can be influenced by factors such as dissatisfaction, desire for variety, social identification, and the pursuit of maximum benefits (Gulamali & Persson, 2017). Additionally, brand switching may be prompted by incentives like the desire to try something new, seeking lower prices, or availing discounts (Mazursky et al., 1987). This study seeks brand switching occurs when consumers shift their loyalty from one brand to another due to factors such as dissatisfaction, a desire for variety, social identification, and the pursuit of maximum benefits, which are frequently influenced by incentives such as trying something new, seeking lower prices, or taking advantage of discounts.

Brand loyalty, on the other hand, is characterized by customers' emotional or psychological attachment to a brand. It involves a positive attitude and a deep commitment to the brand, leading consumers to support it (Lobschat et al., 2013). Some scholars define brand loyalty as the consistent choice of one brand over others (Yoo & Donthu, 2001), often formed when the brand becomes irreplaceable in consumers' minds (Nugroho et al., 2022). Emotional and psychological attachment to a brand may prompt individuals to share their experiences with others. Thai study seeks brand loyalty is the emotional connection and deep commitment that consumers have to a brand, resulting in consistent support and the brand becoming irreplaceable, frequently prompting individuals to share their experiences, emphasizing the interconnectedness of brand attachment and consumer advocacy.

Brand trust refers to consumers' willingness to rely on a brand's ability to fulfill its promises. Trust in a brand reduces uncertainty and instills confidence in its products. Source credibility, particularly the expertise of influencers, significantly impacts consumers' trust in product reviews on platforms like Instagram. This study seeks brand trust that represents customers' belief in a brand's capacity to deliver on its promises and is impacted by source

credibility, such as the competence of social media influencers, which has a big impact on consumer

trust in product reviews on platforms such as Instagram.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework (Social Media Influencer)
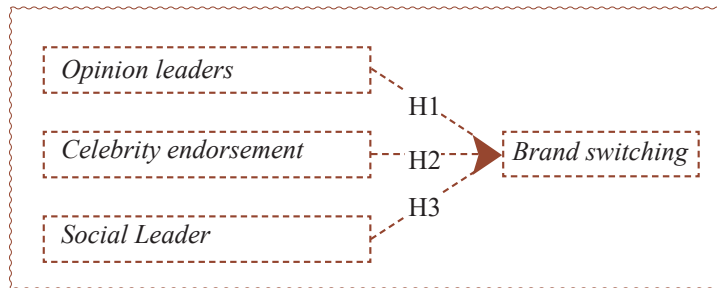
The Conceptual framework for this study is based on the effect of social media on brand switching of Millenial and Gen Z in Nepal. The hypothesis is formulated based on the literature review and the research question.

Hypothesis

Gulamali and Persson (2017) found that opinion leaders had a stronger impact on brand switching when consumers wanted something new or variation needed, and when they were not satisfied. Thus, we extend our hypotheses H1 as:

H1. Opinion leader has significant effects on brand switching

At a particular level, Celebrities often role models by the audience which follows their style, e.g., in fashion, communication, or the brand used. Celebrity characteristics include success and talent, inspiration, and high social status (Gulamali and Persson, 2017) also found that SMI has higher effects as micro-celebrities. Discount offers are found as a useful promotion tool of celebrities, the intention to use the discount code depending on the discount percentage, the product, and ini-tial price. However, if promotion is too commercial or if the celebrity has a negative attitude response of consumers to the celebrity was strongly negative. Thus, we extend our hypotheses H2 as:

H2 . Celebrities have significant effects on brand switching

Social leaders communicate brands effectively; in general, they have a direct connection

with many people in their community. According to Gulamali and Persson (2017), consumer decision-making is influenced by social identification needs and does the same with their social community. In extreme cases, a brand has decided whether someone is part of a particular group or not, meaning if someone wants to be recognized as part of a group, then he/she must buy or even leave a specific brand according to his group's preferences. Then, they explained there are three characteristics of a social leader, namely someone who is known, liked by friends/groups or advice followed often by friends/groups, and can be interconnected. Thus, we extends our hypotheses H3 as:

H3. The social leader has significant effects on brand switching

Methodology

This study used a quantitative research design to analyze the effect of social media on brand switching in urban areas of Nepal. The study focuses on the social media users in Nepal, both those who make purchases and those who don't make a purchase but are updated on social media. The unit of analysis for this study is individual consumers.

To conduct a study on the impact of social media influencers on brand switching, Kathmandu Valley and Lalitpur are identified as prime locations due to their substantial populations and diverse consumer demographics. In 2024, Kathmandu Valley's population stood at 1,622,000, while

Lalitpur's population reached 1,550,000. Following the thumb rule of 1:10, a sample size of 150 respondents is determined. Given the significant urban presence and high internet and social media usage in both Kathmandu and Lalitpur, equal samples will be selected from each city to ensure a balanced representation of urban consumers. Convenience sampling will be employed to select the respondents. Primary sources will be utilized for data collection to ensure the reliability and authenticity of the information gathered. This study aims to explore the dynamics of online consumer behavior and its influence on brand choices within Nepal's urban landscape, utilizing Kathmandu and Lalitpur as focal points for analysis.

A set of questionnaires is developed for this study, containing 15 items representing one independent variable i.e. social media influencers (opinion leaders, celebrities, and social leaders) along with one dependent variable i.e. brand switching (brand loyalty and brand trust). Among this variable dependent variable (brand switching) will be measured using 5-likert scale whereas independent variables (Social media influencers) will be measured using a 7-likert scale. Questionnaires are randomly dis-tributed through social media, such as Whatsapp, Instagram, and Facebook. The internal validity was tested using Cronbach alpha, while external validity was tested by screening and sorting the buyer's response or mission response.

Similarly, after collecting the information of an individual, the researcher does the coding in the SPSS. For the purpose of data analysis, the tools being used are descriptive analysis, ANOVA, and Chi-Square. Descriptive analysis gives the description of the data collected through various variables of our study using tools like mean, median, and mode. Similarly ANOVA provides results that help determine, whether there exists a relationship between demographic factors and the behavioral biases. Chi-Square analysis provides results that help determine whether behavioral biases are dependent on the demographic factors.

Table 1

Description of Demographic Variables

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	F5	40.6
Female	61	56.9
Other	4	2.5
Total	160	100
Gen z or Millennial		
Gen z	127	79.4
Millennial	23	20.6
Total	163	100
Monthly Income		
Less than 20.000	84	52.5
20.000-40.000	37	23.1
40.000 and more	39	
Total	160	100

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Most Used Social Media		
Instragram	117	73.1
Youtube	21	13.1
Tikktok	14	8.8
Facebook	8	5
Total	160	100.
Time Spent on Social PAW ill		
Less than 2 hrs	21	13.1
2-6 hrs	118	73.8
More than 10	21	13.1
Total	160	100
Influence- You Follow		
Under 10	77	48.1
11 - 20	39	24.4
21-30	16	W
31-40	8	5
over 4]	20	12.5
Total	163	100

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of respondents, highlighting key statistics. The data indicates that 40.6% of respondents are male, while 56.9% are female. In terms of income, 52.5% earn less than 20,000 per month, 23.1% earn between 20,000-40,000, and 24.4% earn between 40,000 and more

Furthermore, the data reveals that the most commonly used social media app among respondents is Instagram (73.1%), followed by YouTube (13.3%), TikTok after ban (8.8%), and Facebook (5%). A significant portion of respondents spends 2-6 hours on social media daily (73.8%), with 13.1% spending more than 10 hours and 13.3% spending less than 2 hours. Additionally, 48.1% follow under 10 influencers, while 24.4% follow 11-20, and 12.5% follow more than 40, with smaller percentages following between 21-30 and 31-40 influencers.

Conclusively, the majority of respondents belong to Generation Z (79.4%), with the remaining 20.6% being Millennials.

Table 2

Unstandardized Coefficient

	B	Std. Error	t	sig	F	sig	Adjusted R square	R
_								
Constant	2.111	0.188	11.207	<.001	13.475	<.001 A b	0.201	0.466 A a
_								
avg_SMICE	_	-0.028	0.04	-0.712	0.478			
Avg_SMIOL	_	0.199	0.053	3.768	<.001			
Avg_SMISL	0.084	0.043	1.953	0.053				i

Table 2 presents Model 1, where social media influencers are considered as independent variables and Brand Switching as the dependent variable.

The regression analysis reveals an R value of 0.466, indicating a moderate positive correlation between the predictor variables and the dependent variable. Furthermore, the R Square value of 0.217 suggests that approximately 21.7% of the variability in Brand Switching can be elucidated by the linear combination of SMICE, SMIOL, and SMISL.

With models exhibiting a P value < 0.05, we reject the null hypothesis. This underscores the significance of models for the study.

The table reveals the relationship between predictor variables (SMIOL, SMISL, SMICE) and BS. The P value for social media influencer (opinion leader) and social media influencer (celebrity endorsement) is >0.05 so, we do not reject the null hypothesis. This indicates that the social media influencer (Opinion leader) and social media influencer (celebrity endorsement) does not significantly explain Brand Switching. This does not support our hypothesis H1 and H2. However, the P value of Social media influencer (social leader) is <0.05 so, we reject the null hypothesis. This indicates that the SMISL has a significant effect on Brand Switching. This supports our hypothesis H3.

Conclusion

This study primarily aimed to investigate the effects of social media influencers on brand switching behavior among Millennials and Generation Z in urban areas of Nepal. The findings revealed that social leaders play a crucial role in influencing customer decisions, while opinion leaders and celebrities did not demonstrate a significant impact on brand switching. This suggests that social network users, particularly younger consumers, are pivotal in shaping brand loyalty and switching behaviors. The prevalence of social media usage among these demographics, especially on platforms like Instagram, underscores the importance of social media in influencing consumer choices and opinions.

The results of this study contribute to the growing body of literature on the significant influence of social media influencers (SMIs) on consumer behavior. Notably, research by Topalova on Instagram influencers in the Russian fashion industry and Nugroho's investigation into Gen Z's purchasing decisions consistently highlight the positive impact of SMIs on brand switching. Topalova emphasizes the importance of authenticity and sustainability in influencer-sponsored content, aligning with broader findings that these attributes resonate strongly with consumers.

However, despite these consistencies, our study also identified certain inconsistencies and gaps that warrant further exploration. While our findings align with the overall positive influence of SMIs on brand switching behavior, discrepancies arise regarding the relative impact of influencer attributes. For instance, our study indicates that social media influencers as content creators (SMICE) and social media influencers as opinion leaders (SMIOL) do not significantly explain brand switching, contrary to expectations derived from Bouvier's research, which emphasizes the importance of these attributes in fostering a positive impact on brand switching (Bouvier, 2022). This discrepancy suggests a need for deeper investigation into the nuanced roles of influencer attributes and their differential effects on brand switching behavior among Millennials and Gen Z consumers.

Moreover, while our study focused on Instagram as the preferred platform for following influencers, Munster et al.'s study on Emirati Gen Z females highlights the growing popularity of TikTok and Snapchat among participants. This discrepancy underscores the evolving landscape of social media platforms and the necessity for future research to encompass a broader spectrum of digital platforms to fully capture the influence of social media on consumer behavior.

In light of these findings, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The relatively small sample size and the focus on urban areas in Nepal may restrict the generalizability of the results. Future research could benefit from expanding the scope to include a larger and more diverse sample from various regions of the country. Additionally, exploring the interactions between

different types of influencers and their effects on brand switching behavior across various cultural contexts could yield valuable insights.

The implications of this study are significant for businesses operating in the digital age. By effectively leveraging social media influencers, companies can tap into the preferences and motivations of Millennials and Generation Z, ultimately driving brand loyalty and trust. The findings suggest that brands should focus on authentic engagement and collaboration with social leaders who resonate with their target audience.

Furthermore, this study opens avenues for future research to delve deeper into the complex interactions between influencer attributes, platform dynamics, and consumer behavior. As social media continues to evolve, ongoing research in this area will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the role of social media influencers in shaping consumer behavior, informing strategic marketing efforts, and enhancing brand loyalty in an increasingly competitive marketplace. By staying attuned to these dynamics, businesses can better position themselves to meet the needs and expectations of younger consumers in a rapidly changing digital landscape.

Authors Note

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