

Athleisure in the Age of Influence: Analysing the Role of Celebrity and Influencer Endorsement in Shaping Cross-Generational Consumer Behaviour in India's Digital Marketplace

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Abstract

With increasing health awareness, changes in workstyles and the emergence of digital and social commerce, “athleisure” — clothing that can be worn from gym to workspace to everyday leisure has emerged as one of the hottest trends within India's fashion economy. Brands tend to use celebrity and influencer endorsement as their primary means of gaining consumers' attention, trust and purchase intent for the brands – frequently taking advantage of celebrity and influencer endorsements in both national and digital-first campaigns. The aim of this paper is to explore the interplay between celebrity and influencer endorsement and generational identity (Gen Z, Millennials, and Gen X) in the context of brand trust and purchasing in India's athleisure market. Using secondary data, industry reports, as well as literature on source credibility, celebrity – brand congruence and generational consumption, a conceptual model is developed that investigates the relationship between endorsement type, platform behaviour and the characteristics of the generational cohorts and to purchase outcomes. The paper suggests that the Millennial generation is more likely to be influenced by aspirational celebrity association and hybrid endorsement cues; the Generation Z generation more likely to be influenced by micro-influencers who they relate to and short-form content that is authentic; and the Generation X more likely to be influenced by functional attributes and price, and endorsements are mainly used as a legitimacy signal. The findings are part of the themes of the conference – Digital Transformation and Sustainable Business Practice – and are presented as a conceptual framework diagram and comparative tables showing India's Athleisure Market Growth and Generational Response Patterns. Finally, the paper presents recommendations for management and discusses the scope and limitations of a study based on secondary data and suggests some future research avenues for empirical studies on Indian athleisure consumers.

Keywords: Athleisure Industry, Celebrity Endorsement, Influencer Marketing, Generational Consumer Behaviour, Digital Marketing, Gen Z, Millennials, Brand Trust.

Introduction

The concept of “athleisure”—clothing that works well for sports but looks great for casual or semi-casual occasions—has slowly evolved, leading the industry to a new fashion category that fits both sports and everyday wear. The global athleisure market is expected to surpass USD 400 billion by 2025 and grow at double digits, including India, from Asia-Pacific (Grand View Research, 2026). As per various industry estimates, fitness consciousness, urbanisation, increasing disposable incomes and young,

digitally savvy consumers are expected to fuel the growth of the fitness market in India, with several fitness market analyses projecting a compound annual growth rate exceeding 10% till early 2030s (IMARC Group, 2025; Market Research Future, 2026). As this expansion has continued, apparel brands have seen a change in the way they communicate, with traditional advertising giving way to a more influencer-led and celebrity-driven approach to digital marketing through sites like Instagram and YouTube. The year-on-year growth of online sports apparel demand has been robust, directly tied to influencer marketing and brand collaborations (Maximize Market Research, 2025). The athletic lifestyle is highly reliant on endorsement because, essentially, consumers are purchasing an image of an active lifestyle, rather than a piece of clothing.

Meanwhile, India's consumer base is multi-generational in nature, which is significant for marketing planning. Generation Z has no memory of a world before mobile phones or algorithms, Millennials have some memory of the early internet but they still have some residue of brand prestige, and Generation X was not as much a part of the athleisure movement as Millennials, but has a stronger functional and price attachment to brands than a higher prestige one (Wolburg & Pokrywczynski, 2001; Singh & Singh, 2025). So one endorsement approach will not be effective for all groups. At a time when a number of designers are digital natives, the marketing tool that frames the category differently (celebrity/influencer endorsements) and the generational context in which that tool is operating are interwoven into this paper, which is responding to the conference's call to action around digital transformation, AI-driven marketing ecosystems, and sustainable business practice.

Review of Literature

- **Celebrity Endorsement and Source Credibility**

The research underlying celebrity endorsement is largely based on source credibility and source attractiveness models that suggest credibility of a message source and attractiveness of that source are important. McCracken (1989) has suggested the meaning transfer model which suggests that meaning is transferred from the celebrity to the endorsed product and then to the consumer. The match-up hypothesis (Till & Busler, 2000) suggests that endorsement effectiveness relies heavily on the perceived fit between the celebrity image and the image of the product, which is especially important in the case of athleisure products, where the celebrity is seen as having a higher fitness association. A recent empirical study on sports products also found that attractiveness and knowledge of the sport(s) of the endorsers impact brand passion and loyalty, albeit differently depending on the product and market (Kim et al., 2020; Mirabi et al., 2021). Despite the evolution of platforms to reach consumers from print and television to digital and social media, in the Indian context, studies focusing on the effectiveness of celebrity endorsement (Surana 2008) and subsequent studies focusing on the congruence and the perceived credibility of the celebrity brand for younger consumers suggest that congruence and perceived credibility continue to play a significant role in the purchase attitudes of the consumers.

- **Emergence of Influencer Marketing**

Influencer marketing is based on the idea of people who have made no name for themselves outside of social media, but have gained followers' trust through consistent, personality-driven content. Cauberghe, de Veirman, and Hudders (2017) determined that there is a tendency for the larger number of followers to be seen as more likeable, but popularity does not equate opinion leadership, and that Instagram influencers' popularity may not always benefit them, especially when the product promoted is not consistent with their content niche. It is worth clarifying that there is a distinction between macro and micro influencers: the former has a wider reach while the latter creates more engagement due to their closer relationship and niche credibility with the audience (Guled & Rajkumar, 2025). More specifically, a meta-analysis that combined the findings of 62 studies and 176 effect sizes revealed that entertainment value had the highest average effect on customer engagement whereas credibility had the highest average effect on purchase intention (Ao et al., 2023). It is especially important when it comes to athleisure, where customers look toward influencers for domain credibility instead of overall fame, as well as authenticity, engagement, and empathy that each have been correlated to boost brand familiarity and credibility amongst younger viewers (Hapsari et al., 2024).

- **Generational Consumer Behaviour**

There is an increasing body of research which views generational cohort as an effective segmenting variable in digital consumer behaviour. Comparative studies conducted with Generation Z and Millennials, including India, suggest that Generation Z is more likely to be impulsive, digital-first, and

brand conscious whereas Millennials are more likely to value for money and experiential consumption (Singh & Singh, 2025). This impulsivity is not only seen in emerging markets: A UK based study revealed that the marketing features of Instagram have a marked effect on impulse buying behaviour among the generation Z; the gender difference in expression of such behaviour has been highlighted (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Similarly, Priporas, Stylos and Fotiadis (2017) defined Generation Z as a group that has a greater preference for innovation and is more expecting of interaction and technology in retail. Other research emphasizes the importance of online reviews and content from influencers and the need for transparent and ethically conscious brands among this group (Bulante et al., 2025; Jain, 2024). Other studies report that Gen Z's engagement with influencers is often motivated by the absence of something, whereas for Millennials, the factors that matter more are perceived competence and follower numbers and the notion of lifestyle signalling (Kaur, 2025).

Combining all of the above, three conclusions can be drawn. First, the effectiveness of fashion endorsements is heavily dependent on the endorser–product congruence in fashion categories. Second, “influencer marketing” isn't doing away with the need for celebrity endorsement, just providing an additional avenue that's more engagement oriented. Third, the generational cohort significantly influences the reception of endorsement content, but few of these studies have been used specifically to study India's rapidly expanding athleisure segment.

Research Gap

Celebrity endorsement theory is well established, but in the past five years, research on influencer marketing has been surging, yet the two strategies are seldom brought together with a generational perspective in a single fast-growing category like athleisure. Existing India-specific athleisure market reports mainly offer a size-up of the market, product segmentation, and macro-economic growth drivers – with IMARC Group (2025) and Market Research Future (2026) being the key market sizing reports, and existing endorsement literature being either celebrity-based or influencer-based, with little overlap; moreover, existing literature is also not explicitly correlated with Gen Z, Millennial, and Gen X cohort, within the Indian context of athleisure specifically. In this paper, an integrative, conceptual relationship among endorsement type, platform behaviour and characteristics of generational cohorts and athleisure purchase behaviour in India has been developed to fill this gap.

Objectives

The study aims to explore the benefits that may result from the project.

- To explore the evolution of the athleisure segment in India and what are the major demand drivers of the segment in the background of digital transformation and changing lifestyle trends.
- To understand the comparative effect of celebrity endorsement and social media influencer marketing on consumer attitudes towards athleisure brands.
- To compare and contrast the reaction of the Gen Z, Millennial and Gen X consumers to celebrity versus influencer-led athleisure marketing.
- To suggest a conceptual approach and management solutions for a generation specific endorsement strategy in the Athleisure industry in India.

Research Methodology

The paper used conceptual and descriptive research design with secondary data collected from peer-reviewed journal articles, industry market research reports and publicly available statistics on the athleisure and sports apparel industry in India. Literatures were selected and synthesised across three thematic clusters: celebrity endorsement, source credibility theory, and influencer marketing and generational consumer behaviour to develop an integrative conceptual model that connects endorsement strategy, platform and content characteristics with generational cohort attributes to the purchase behaviour of athleisure in the Indian market. This is a conceptual paper and does not report primary survey/ experimental data, rather it sets out a framework and propositions that may be used for future empirical studies such as structured surveys or structural equation modelling studies with Indian athleisure consumers according to generations.

The Athleisure Market in India: A Digital-Age Growth Story

India's athleisure market falls under the broader umbrella of sportswear and casual wear driven by the increasing health awareness among the Indian population, the hybrid working pattern, which values comfort over style, and the young population, which boasts a large purchasing power base for

sportswear and casual wear (Market Research Future, 2026). Industry analysts have predicted double-digit growth or even near double-digit growth rate in the near future, with women's athleisure being the biggest application of the garment and men's athleisure being the fastest-growing segment (Market Research Future, 2026; Ken Research, 2026). Two structural features in particular are relevant here. The first is the influence of online and social commerce on category growth: For example, online sports apparel demand from platforms like Myntra, Amazon, Ajio, and Decathlon has shown significant year-on-year growth, which can be directly attributed to digital shopping trends and the role of influencers (Maximize Market Research, 2025). Second, the marketing of brands has evolved to be a more content-focused venture, with athleisure becoming a more lifestyle-driven than functional purchase, as evidenced by the growing phenomenon of marathon marketing, recreational sporting events, and the fitness culture promoted by social media (Maximize Market Research, 2025). This puts endorsement, whether it's by celebrities or influencers, as a key pillar that helps create the category relevance and trust in Indian athleisure brands.

The figure for the size of the athleisure and sports-apparel segment in India is subject to variations among different sources due to the definition of "athleisure" and the methodology used. Table 1 shows some comparative estimates from four independent sources in the industry, all of which suggested sustained good growth into the early 2030s, and the size of the category.

Table 1: Comparative Estimates of India's Athleisure / Sports-Apparel Market Growth

Source	Base Year Value	Projected Value	Forecast Period	CAGR
Market Research Future (2026)	USD 44.2 Mn (2025)	USD 120.0 Mn by 2035	2025–2035	~10%
IMARC Group (2025)	USD 13,156.1 Mn (2024)	USD 21,250.2 Mn by 2033	2025–2033	5.5%
Statista (2025)	INR 158 Bn (FY2021)	INR 402 Bn by FY2025	FY2021–FY2025	n/a
Ken Research (2026)	INR ~6,000 Cr (current)	USD 3.2 Bn by 2030	2024–2030	8.5%

Note: Figure values are based on publicly available industry market research summaries, which vary with scope of each category (activewear vs. athleisure vs. wider sportswear) and base year methodology; they are provided here for illustrative, directional comparison purposes only, and are not intended to be a single reconciled figure.

Athleisure Marketing through Celebrity and Influencer Endorsements

The endorsement game employed by Athleisure brands in India is a mixture of the old and the new; with celebrities and now digital influencers. With film stars and sports stars still being utilized for their wide-reaching set of aspirations, this is in line with the meaning transfer theory by McCracken (1989) where the celebrity's fitness or sporting ability is transferred symbolically to the brand and ultimately to the consumer wearing it. According to the match-up hypothesis (Till & Busler, 2000), the athletic and active brands prefer celebrities that seem to have a likable athletic or sports connection; because of the successful repetition, congruence has been shown to positively impact brand attitude and purchase intention. Interestingly, this congruence effect is not limited to apparel: a study on celebrity endorsed food products also identified a congruence effect, such that endorsement leads to higher purchase intention when consumers feel there is a credible match between the celebrity and the food product (Calvo-Porrall et al., 2021).

Facing this, brands are hiring fitness micro-influencers, yoga influencers, and lifestyle influencers, who have smaller but more engaged audiences that are thought to be more relatable and trustworthy than far off celebrity faces. Empowering micro-influencers, with their closer parasocial connections, to outperform macro-influencers and celebrities in terms of engagement and perceived authenticity, even when their reach is lower in absolute numbers, corroborates larger trends (Guled & Rajkumar, 2025). Each of these – credibility, empathy, and authenticity – have been shown to increase brand familiarity with digitally engaged customers (Hapsari et al., 2024), indicating that there may be a credibility benefit for influencers' brand content that cannot be achieved by a celebrity endorsement alone, in the case of athleisure specifically. These two approaches are not mutually exclusive — many Indian sportswear companies run a mix of campaigns, with a celebrity on the mass awareness side, and a network of micro-influencers to keep the conversation going, and instill trust at the community level.

A Generational Lens: Gen Z, Millennials, and Generation X in Athleisure Consumption

It is not possible to evaluate the efficacy of a particular endorsement independently from the endorsement recipient's generational identity. The literature of generational consumer behaviour is explored to suggest the following comparative characterization which is to be considered as a conceptual framework for the future empirical testing of the Indian context of Athleisure sector.

- **Generation Z**

The literature describes Generation Z (hereafter referred to as Gen Z), which is typically composed of consumers born after the mid-to-late 1990s, as digital-first consumers, impulsive compared to older generations, and sensitive to the influence of social media and online reviews in purchase decision-making (Singh & Singh, 2025; Bulante et al., 2025). This group is labeled as unusually sensitive to authenticity and ethical (or transparent) brand positioning and are also attracted to influencer content through psychological and social processes, including fear of missing out (Jain, 2024; Kaur, 2025). This means that when it comes to athleisure marketing, Gen Z consumers are more likely to engage with content by relatable micro-influencers, demonstrations that feature their peers, or content that is native to the platform like short-form fitness or styling videos, rather than the classic, more distant celebrity endorsement.

- **Millennials**

In comparative studies, millennials have been found to be a group that takes greater heed of value for money, authenticity, and experiential consumption than Gen Z, but is also highly engaged with the digital world (Singh & Singh, 2025). Prior studies on the evaluation of influencers among Millennials have indicated that they are more likely to make purchase-relevant judgements based on the influencer's competence, lifestyle content and number of followers than their younger counterparts, Gen Z (Kaur, 2025). The conclusion is that Millennials in the athleisure segment might respond positively to a mix of celebrity association that establishes brand legitimacy and aspirational value, along with influencers creating content that showcases products in real life, and how they fit into someone's lifestyle.

- **Generation X**

Generation X is a smaller but an economically important group for athleisure shoppers, especially high quality and family-based items. Contrastingly, this generation is not as well researched in the influencer marketing literature discussed herein, but the more general generational marketing literature indicates that Gen-X consumers are more responsive to functional attributes, pricing and well-established brand reputation than to endorser appeal (Wolburg & Pokrywczynski, 2001). Celebrity endorsement might serve as a signal of trust or legitimacy for this group (that the brand is solid, established, and trustworthy) more than as the main motivator for purchase intention.

- **Comparative Summary**

Table 2 summarises the generational comparison elaborated on above in a single reference table, reporting on each generation's preferred endorsement, content focus, platform engagement and purchase drivers, as proposed by the reviewed literature in this paper.

The conceptual Generational Response Framework for Athleisure Endorsement Strategy is set out in **Table 2**.

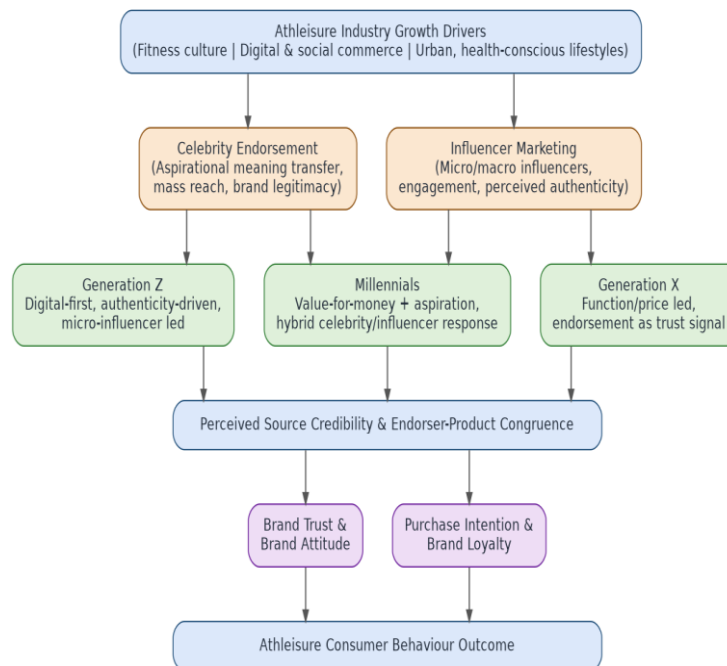
Generational Differences in Endorsement Preferences

Dimension	Generation Z	Millennials	Generation X
Dominant Endorsement Preference	Micro-influencers, peer-style creators	Hybrid: celebrity + influencer	Celebrity as legitimacy cue
Primary Content Orientation	Short-form, demonstration-led	Lifestyle & experiential narrative	Functional, information-led
Platform Behaviour	Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts	Instagram, YouTube, e-commerce reviews	E-commerce & mainstream media
Core Purchase Motivation	Authenticity, relatability, FOMO	Value-for-money + aspiration	Price, function, brand reputation
Endorsement's Primary Role	Trust & authenticity signal	Awareness + engagement bridge	Brand legitimacy signal

This framework is theoretical and is suggested for future empirical testing in the Indian Athleisure category and is based on the patterns found in the generational consumer behaviour and influencer marketing literature reviewed in Section 2.

Discussion: Towards a Generationally Differentiated Endorsement Framework

To summarize the above discussions, this paper argues that the Indian athleisure brands are functioning in a context where an undifferentiated endorsement strategy is not likely to work best. The data suggests that there's a multi-layered approach to using celebrities and micro- and mid-tier influencers, with these different tiers likely to have different effects: The former is more likely to drive broad awareness, legitimacy, and aspirational meaning transfer (among Millennials and, secondarily, Generation X), whereas the latter is more likely to drive engagement and purchase-stage trust (among Generation Z and increasingly relevant to Millennials). This is summarized in a single conceptual model that shows how industry-level growth drivers drive toward endorsement strategy, which moderates with generation, which in turn influences source credibility, endorser-product congruence, and which ultimately determines brand trust, attitude toward the brand, purchase intention, and loyalty to the brand (see Figure 1).



As illustrated in **Figure 1** below, the reviews of the literature in Sections 2, 7 and 8 led to the development of the conceptual framework that connects Endorsement Strategy, Generational Moderation and Athleisure Consumer Behaviour (Author's own construction).

This structure also overlaps with the themes of the conference. The centrality of algorithmically curated content is tightly linked to digital transformation, an issue that was at the heart of the conference, as the algorithms of the platforms increasingly dictate which content is endorsed to different generations. On the other hand, the incorporation of sustainable, performance-related fabrics in the realm of athleisure, combined with the rising consumer demand, especially from Gen Z, for clothing to be from brands that are truly concerned with ethical issues, brings the topic of sustainability into this conversation. Endorsement strategy is not just a marketing choice anymore and should now align with a brand's digital positioning and sustainability positioning.

Managerial Implications

Several suggestions are offered here for practitioners. The first is for brands to consider celebrity and influencer endorse as complementary, using celebrities for brand-building and influencers for engagement and conversion. Second, there should be a consideration of which platforms are

employed and what sort of content is appropriate – short-form, demonstration content for Gen Z, narrative and lifestyle content for Millennials. Third, brands need to be aware of the potential damage to their reputation when there is a lack of congruence between the brand and the endorser, especially in the case of Gen Z consumers who are more sensitive to perceived inauthenticity. Last but not least, endorsement campaigns that can be considered a reality check for the brand's functional and ecological claims will work better across cohorts than image-only campaigns.

Limitations and Scope for Further Research

This paper is a concept paper, using secondary literature and industry reports, and cannot validate the proposed generational framework on a primary empirical basis. The actual market size estimates for India's athleisure market also differ significantly across the various data providers due to the category definition and methodology used, thus restricting the accuracy level of the quantitative assertions made on market size. The propositions proposed in this research should be tested with structured, survey based research with Indian consumers segmented by generational cohort, preferably with validated measures of source credibility and purchase Intentions, and should include comparative analysis with Indian markets outside of metros, as the rates of digital adoption and reach of celebrity/influencers could vary significantly.

Conclusion

India's athleisure market is at the intersection of several themes that will be the main focus of this conference, such as digital transformation, new business and marketing models and the newfound interest in sustainable, lifestyle-driven consumption. Endorsement by celebrities and influencers has emerged as a key driver of awareness, trust and purchase intentions in this category, albeit not across all generations. This paper has suggested that Millennial and Generation X consumers seem to be more inclined to pay attention to content that is more rooted in the credibility of celebrities and the content's functional and/or value-based messages, whereas Generation Z consumers seem to be more inclined to pay attention to content that is more relatable and authenticity-driven and that comes from micro-influencers. The act of recognising, and designing for this generational difference, instead of using just one endorsement model to all consumers, is a significant opportunity for Indian athleisure brands to enhance digital engagement and brand loyalty. Empirical studies that follow the conceptual framework outlined here can be of great help in converting these propositions into evidence-based marketing strategy.

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