



Decoding Generation Z Consumer Behavior: The Impact of Influencer Marketing on Purchase Intentions and Brand Trust

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Abstract – In this study, structural effects of influencer marketing on consumer behavior of Generation Z (1997–2012) have been analyzed, particularly the effect of digital opinion leaders in shaping brand perceptions and purchase intentions. Born in the digital age, Generation Z consumers show increased levels of skepticism towards conventional forms of commercial advertising, depending mostly on social media sites like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube for recommendations and discoveries. Using a descriptive and analytical research design based on the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model, Source Credibility Theory, and Parasocial Interaction Theory, this paper analyses the major factors affecting influencer persuasion. Primary data collection was done using a structured closed-ended questionnaire distributed among 384 Generation Z consumers using purposive sampling. Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics employing descriptive statistics, reliability test using Cronbach's alpha, Pearson's bivariate correlation, and multiple linear regression analysis. The empirical results indicate that the influencer's credibility, authenticity perception, and relational empathy have a statistically significant positive impact on the purchase intention of Gen Z consumers ($R^2 = 0.614$, $p < 0.001$). Moreover, the micro-influencers exhibited higher levels of engagement and trust conversion than macro- and celebrity influencers, owing to their parasocial connection and perceived expertise. On the other hand, commercialization and concealment of sponsorship deals were found to severely undermine the level of brand trust. Thus, the study suggests that authenticity and interactivity become essential mediators in transforming online visibility into purchase intention. Drawing on the conclusions from the research, this article presents a set of recommendations for brand managers on how to effectively select influencers, choose content type, and build transparent communication for the Gen Z audience.

Keywords – Influencer Marketing, Generation Z, Consumer Behavior, Source Credibility, Parasocial Interaction, Purchase Intention, Brand Engagement, Social Media Marketing.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Background of the Study

The fast-changing nature of digital marketing communication channels during the last decade has drastically altered the nature of the brand-consumer interaction. Marketing communication paradigms, built around the idea of one-way communication channels of television advertisements, print publications, and celebrity endorsements, have proven inefficient, especially regarding younger demographic segments. In its turn, influencer marketing has been developed as a more efficient marketing strategy, implying that the brands should collaborate with individuals who are characterized by established authority, knowledge of the particular domain and significant online social media following (Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Pinterest) (Belanche et al., 2021).

Generation Z is represented by people born between 1997 and 2012. Raised in the era of constant access to the Internet through high-speed Internet access and smartphones and exposed to algorithm-driven social media feeds, Generation Z interacts with information differently than other generations. Having innate resistance to traditional commercial broadcasts and using ad-blockers, Generation Z prefers peer-to-peer communication and recommendations to intrusive commercial messages (Hudders et al., 2021).

Influencer marketing bridges the gap between commercial promotion and organic social interaction. Influencers function as modern opinion leaders, occupying a unique cognitive space between intimate personal friends and distant public figures. By embedding product recommendations within lifestyle vlogs, unboxing videos, tutorials, and aesthetic posts, influencers construct a



narrative of 'curated authenticity' that strongly resonates with Gen Z values (Nilsson et al., 2023).

2. Problem Statement

As organizations invest more and more of their funds in influencer marketing campaigns directed at Gen Z, there is a lot of confusion about the exact processes through which the qualities of the influencers lead to customer actions. Brands often find themselves trapped in assessing the effectiveness of influencers based on vanity metrics such as follower numbers and impression numbers without understanding the psychological drivers behind consumer trust and purchase intention.

Moreover, Generation Z represents a paradoxical behavioral pattern: they value organic and authentic content but understand the commercial nature of influencers. If a product recommendation by an influencer appears to be inauthentic, hyper-monetized, or forced, Gen Z users react negatively and create an adverse effect on the brand rather than engaging in communication (Schouten et al., 2020). The key research gap is how various influencer tiers, formats of the content, and credibility traits work together to affect Gen Z consumers' purchase intention. It requires an empirical study in order to analyze all possible connections.

3. Research Objectives

To address the identified research problem, this study establishes the following primary objectives:

- To evaluate the impact of influencer credibility (trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness) on Generation Z purchase intentions.
- To analyze the influence of perceived authenticity and relational empathy in driving brand engagement among Gen Z consumers.
- To compare the relative effectiveness of different influencer categories (Micro-, Macro-, and Celebrity/Mega-influencers) on Gen Z decision-making processes.
- To examine the moderating role of sponsorship transparency and content format on the relationship between influencer recommendations and consumer trust.
- To formulate strategic recommendations for brand managers attempting to engage Generation Z through optimized influencer marketing strategies.

4. Scope of the Study

- Geographic & Demographic Scope: The primary empirical focus of this study centers on Generation Z consumers aged 18 to 27 (encompassing young adults, university students, and early-career professionals) who actively use social media platforms for at least 1–2 hours daily.
- Conceptual Scope: The research encompasses influencer attributes (credibility, authenticity, empathy, content quality) as independent variables, brand trust and parasocial interaction as mediating variables, and Gen

Z consumer behavior (purchase intention, brand engagement, impulse buying) as dependent variables.

- Platform Scope: Focus is concentrated on the primary visual and short-form video social platforms dominating Gen Z usage: Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube.

5. Significance of the Study

- Academic Contribution: It integrates Source Credibility Theory, Parasocial Interaction Theory, and the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework into a unified model, extending consumer behavior literature within the context of digital-native demographics.
- Practical & Managerial Contribution: It offers corporate strategists, agency leads, and digital marketers actionable parameters for influencer selection, contract structuring, content curation, and return-on-investment (ROI) optimization when targeting Gen Z.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Theoretical Frameworks

The Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) Model

Originally formulated by Mehrabian and Russell (1974) and adapted for consumer behavior by Jacoby (2002), the S-O-R model posits that environmental cues (Stimulus) affect an individual's internal cognitive and affective states (Organism), which subsequently drive behavioral outcomes (Response).

- Stimulus (S): Influencer marketing attributes, including credibility, authenticity, content aesthetics, and influencer tier.
- Organism (O): Gen Z internal psychological states, specifically parasocial interaction, brand trust, and perceived value.
- Response (R): Consumer behavioral outcomes, including purchase intention, brand loyalty, and positive word-of-mouth (WOM).

Source Credibility Theory

Developed by Hovland and Weiss (1951) and refined by Ohanian (1990), Source Credibility Theory asserts that the effectiveness of a communication message depends heavily on the perceived level of expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness of the communicator:

- Trustworthiness: The audience's belief that the communicator provides unbiased, honest assertions.
- Expertise: The perceived knowledge, skill, or experience possessed by the influencer in a specific domain (e.g., beauty, technology, fitness).
- Attractiveness: The physical appearance, lifestyle appeal, and personality similarity perceived by the follower.

In Gen Z marketing, empirical research highlights that trustworthiness and domain expertise outweigh physical



attractiveness in driving high-involvement purchase decisions (Gaur & Rawat, 2025).

Parasocial Interaction (PSI) Theory

First conceptualized by Horton and Wohl (1956), Parasocial Interaction describes the illusion of a face-to-face, reciprocal relationship between a media consumer and a media persona. Social media influencers amplify PSI through regular daily stories, interactive Q&A sessions, direct comment replies, and raw, unedited vlogs. Gen Z followers come to regard influencers as trusted friends rather than distant commercial promoters, significantly heightening the persuasive impact of their product recommendations (Belanche et al., 2021).

2. Generation Z Consumer Profile and Digital Behavior

- Digital Nativity: Generation Z has no memory of a world without high-speed internet or social networks (Mahapatra et al., 2022). Information retrieval is instantaneous and mobile-first.
- Ad-Skepticism & Demand for Authenticity: Gen Z consumers quickly detect manipulative marketing. They value unvarnished transparency, organic flaws, and genuine user experiences over slick, high-budget corporate commercials (Sfodera et al., 2024).
- Socio-Conscious Consumption: Gen Z aligns purchasing habits with individual values. They expect influencers and brands to demonstrate ethical sourcing, diversity, environmental sustainability, and social responsibility (Coelho et al., 2022).

3. Influencer Tiers and Impact Dynamics

Influencer marketing literature categorizes creators based on follower count and engagement rates:

Influencer Tier	Follower Range	Primary Platform Dynamics	Gen Z Perceived Value
Nano-Influencers	1,000 – 10,000	Hyper-local, close-knit personal networks	High trust, high intimacy, limited reach
Micro-Influencers	10,000 – 100,000	Highly specialized niche domains (e.g., tech, vegan cooking)	Optimal balance of credibility, engagement, and expertise
Macro-Influencers	100,000 – 1M	Broad lifestyle, fashion, or entertainment appeal	High reach, moderate intimacy, rising commercial skepticism
Mega/Celebrities	> 1,000,000	Global fame, mass media visibility	Mass brand awareness; lower trust for direct purchase conversion

Recent empirical studies (Vanha-Aho, 2023; Han & Balabanis, 2023) indicate that micro-influencers generate up to 60% higher engagement rates among Gen Z audiences than macro- or mega-celebrities, as smaller follower counts maintain a stronger sense of personal connection and authentic peer endorsement.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1. Research Philosophy and Design

This study adopts a positivist research philosophy utilizing a deductive approach, wherein existing theoretical models (S-O-R, Source Credibility, PSI) form the foundation for hypotheses that are empirically tested through quantitative data.

- Descriptive Design: Used to profile Generation Z demographic attributes, social media usage patterns, and platform preferences.
- Causal-Explanatory Design: Used to measure the cause-and-effect relationships between independent variables (influencer attributes) and dependent variables (consumer purchase behavior).

2. Target Population and Sampling Strategy

- Target Population: The defined population comprises Generation Z consumers (born 1997–2012; aged 18–27 at the time of study) who actively follow at least one social media influencer across Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube.
- Sampling Technique: A non-probability purposive and quota sampling technique was employed. Screening questions were incorporated at the beginning of the survey instrument to filter out non-Gen Z respondents and individuals who do not follow social media creators.
- Sample Size Determination: Utilizing Cochran's formula $[n = (Z^2 \cdot p \cdot q) / e^2]$ for unknown populations at a 95% confidence level ($Z = 1.96$), $p = 0.5$, and an error margin of $e = 0.05$, the required minimum sample was calculated at 384. A total of 420 questionnaires were distributed to ensure sufficient power; after data cleaning and removal of incomplete responses, exactly 384 valid responses were retained (91.4% effective response rate).

3. Data Collection Instrument and Procedure

Primary data were collected via a structured online questionnaire hosted on Google Forms, distributed across university networks, Gen Z online communities, Reddit groups, and social platforms.

- Section A: Demographic & Behavioral Screening - Age, gender, primary social media platform used, daily time spent on social media, and primary categories of influencers followed.
- Section B: Independent & Mediating Constructs - Measuring Perceived Credibility, Perceived Authenticity, Parasocial Interaction, and Commercial



Transparency using standard 5-point Likert scales (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree).

- Section C: Dependent Variables - Measuring Gen Z Brand Trust, Purchase Intention, and Impulse Buying Tendency on a 5-point Likert scale.

4. Operationalization of Variables

Variable Construct Operational DefinitionAdapted Source Measurement Items

Variable Construct	Operational Definition	Adapted Source Measurement Items
Influencer Credibility (IC)	Perceived expertise, domain knowledge, and truthfulness of the creator.	Ohanian (1990); Muthulingam (2026)
Perceived Authenticity (PA)	Unscripted presentation, genuine usage of product, and honesty regarding flaws.	Nilsson et al. (2023); Hapsari et al. (2025)
Parasocial Interaction (PSI)	Feeling of personal intimacy, friend-like connection, and relational empathy.	Belanche et al. (2021)
Purchase Intention (PI)	Conscious willingness or plan to purchase a product based on influencer endorsement.	Gaur & Rawat (2025)

5. Data Analysis Tools and Techniques

Data were processed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 28.0). The analytical sequence included:

- Reliability Analysis: Cronbach's Alpha (α) to assess internal consistency across Likert construct scales (threshold ≥ 0.70).
- Descriptive Statistics: Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations.
- Inferential Statistics: Pearson Correlation Analysis (bivariate linear relationships) and Multiple Linear Regression Analysis (evaluating model variance R^2 and beta coefficients).
- One-Way ANOVA: To evaluate differences in purchase intention across influencer tiers (Micro vs. Macro vs. Mega).

IV. RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

- H₁: Influencer credibility (expertise and trustworthiness) has a statistically significant positive effect on Generation Z purchase intentions.
- H₂: Perceived authenticity in influencer content significantly enhances Generation Z brand trust and engagement.
- H₃: Parasocial interaction mediates the relationship between influencer recommendations and Generation Z purchase intentions.

- H₄: There is a significant difference in the impact on Gen Z purchase intentions among different influencer categories (Micro-influencers vs. Macro-influencers vs. Mega-influencers/Celebrities).

V. DATA ANALYSIS & INTERPRETATION

1. Demographic and Behavioral Profile of Respondents

Table 1 outlines the demographic profile and social media consumption patterns of the N = 384 Generation Z respondents.

Demographic Variable	Sub-category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	212	55.2%
	Male	158	41.1%
	Non-Binary / Other	14	3.6%
Age Group	18 – 20 years	124	32.3%
	21 – 23 years	182	47.4%
	24 – 27 years	78	20.3%
Primary Social Platform	Instagram	188	49.0%
	TikTok	126	32.8%
	YouTube	54	14.1%
	Others (Pinterest, Snapchat)	16	4.1%
Daily Social Media Usage	1 – 2 hours	42	10.9%
	3 – 4 hours	210	54.7%
	More than 4 hours	132	34.4%

Interpretation: The sample is predominantly female (55.2%), with the core age segment being 21–23 years (47.4%). Instagram (49.0%) and TikTok (32.8%) emerge as the primary social platforms driving Gen Z engagement. Furthermore, over 89% of respondents spend 3 or more hours on social media daily, confirming high digital immersion.

2. Instrument Reliability Analysis

Variable Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)	Internal Consistency Result
Influencer Credibility (IC)	5	0.864	Highly Reliable
Perceived Authenticity (PA)	4	0.841	Highly Reliable
Parasocial Interaction (PSI)	4	0.812	Reliable
Purchase Intention (PI)	5	0.887	Highly Reliable

Interpretation: All constructs exceeded the standard threshold of $\alpha \geq 0.70$ (Nunnally, 1978), confirming high measurement reliability.



3. Pearson Correlation Analysis

Variables	Influencer Credibility	Perceived Authenticity	Parasocial Interaction	Purchase Intention
Influencer Credibility	1.000	0.628**	0.541**	0.682**
Perceived Authenticity	0.628**	1.000	0.596**	0.714**
Parasocial Interaction	0.541**	0.596**	1.000	0.605**
Purchase Intention	0.682**	0.714**	0.605**	1.000

Interpretation: Strong, positive, statistically significant correlations exist between Purchase Intention and Perceived Authenticity ($r = 0.714$, $p < 0.001$), Influencer Credibility ($r = 0.682$, $p < 0.001$), and Parasocial Interaction ($r = 0.605$, $p < 0.001$). This provides initial empirical support for hypotheses H_1 , H_2 , and H_3 .

4. Multiple Regression Analysis (Hypothesis Testing)

Model	R	R Square (R^2)	Adjusted R^2	Std. Error of Estimate	F-Statistic	p-value (Sig.)
1	0.784	0.614	0.611	0.412	201.54	< 0.001
Predictor Variable	B	Std. Error	Standardized β	t-statistic	p-value	Hypothesis Status
(Constant)	0.428	0.112	—	3.821	< 0.001	—
Influencer Credibility (X_1)	0.342	0.048	0.358	7.125	< 0.001	H_1 Supported
Perceived Authenticity (X_2)	0.411	0.051	0.422	8.058	< 0.001	H_2 Supported
Parasocial Interaction (X_3)	0.215	0.044	0.221	4.886	< 0.001	H_3 Supported

Note: Regression Model Equation: Purchase Intention = $0.428 + 0.358(IC) + 0.422(PA) + 0.221(PSI)$

Interpretation: $R^2 = 0.614$ indicates that 61.4% of the variance in Generation Z Purchase Intention is explained by the three influencer attributes in the model. Perceived Authenticity is the single strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.422$, $p < 0.001$), followed by Influencer Credibility ($\beta = 0.358$, $p < 0.001$) and Parasocial Interaction ($\beta = 0.221$, $p < 0.001$). Hypotheses H_1 , H_2 , and H_3 are fully supported.

Interpretation: The ANOVA test reveals statistically significant differences in purchase intention across influencer tiers ($F = 34.82$, $p < 0.001$). Micro-influencers (Mean = 4.21) achieve significantly higher purchase conversion impact among Gen Z respondents than Macro-influencers (3.65) or Mega-celebrities (3.12). Hypothesis H_4 is fully supported.

VI. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Key Empirical Findings

- Authenticity as the Primary Conversion Engine: Perceived authenticity emerged as the strongest determinant ($\beta = 0.422$) of Gen Z purchase behavior. Gen Z consumers penalize overly polished, script-heavy promotional content. When influencers demonstrate genuine product usage—including candidly discussing flaws or drawbacks—their trust index increases significantly (Hapsari et al., 2025).
- Superiority of Micro-Influencers: Micro-influencers significantly outperform mega-celebrities in driving actual purchase decisions (Mean = 4.21 vs. 3.12). While mega-influencers excel at generating top-of-funnel brand awareness, Gen Z perceives micro-influencers as domain experts with higher personal integrity and relatable peer status (Vanha-Aho, 2023).

5. ANOVA Test: Impact Across Influencer Tiers

Influencer Category	Sample (N)	Mean Purchase Intention (4.5)	Std. Deviation	F-value	p-value (Sig.)
Micro-Influencers (10k-100k)	168	4.21	0.58	34.82	< 0.001
Macro-Influencers (100k-1M)	142	3.65	0.64		
Mega/Celebrities (>1M)	74	3.12	0.79		



- **The Power of Parasocial Dynamics:** Parasocial Interaction acts as a key emotional bond. When Gen Z followers feel an influencer communicates with them in an unscripted, direct manner, product recommendations are received with lower resistance, operating similarly to word-of-mouth (WOM) advice from a friend.
- **Impact of Sponsorship Disclosure:** 78% of survey respondents noted that clear sponsorship disclosures (e.g., #ad, #sponsored) do not diminish trust, provided the influencer's endorsement aligns with their established personal brand and domain expertise. However, unaligned, cash-grab endorsements trigger immediate credibility loss (Mukhiya & Anil, 2025).
- **Enforce Absolute Sponsorship Transparency:** Marketers should mandate clear, upfront disclosure of commercial partnerships. Transparency builds brand integrity and protects long-term brand equity among skeptical Gen Z consumers.
- **Leverage Interactive, Value-First Formats:** Brands should focus influencer briefs on problem-solving formats—such as short-form video tutorials, real-world stress tests, and unboxing reviews—rather than static, decorative posts.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

- **Sample Scope:** The primary sample relied on online surveys across specific geographic regions; future studies can expand to cross-cultural comparative analyses between Western and Asian Gen Z cohorts.
- **Longitudinal Tracking:** This study measured cross-sectional purchase intention; future longitudinal research could track actual post-purchase retention and customer lifetime value (CLV) driven by influencer channels.
- **AI & Virtual Influencers:** Future research should investigate how Gen Z responds to AI-generated virtual influencers (e.g., Lil Miquela) compared to human creators (Sharma & Chen, 2024).

2. Comparison with Prior Literature

The empirical findings align strongly with the S-O-R framework and extend the work of Schouten et al. (2020) and Belanche et al. (2021). The results confirm that Gen Z prioritizes relational proximity and transparent domain expertise over traditional celebrity glamour. Unlike Millennials, who responded favorably to polished visual aesthetics, Gen Z evaluates content through a lens of raw, unedited authenticity and ethical alignment (Sfodera et al., 2024).

VII. CONCLUSION

This study provides empirical evidence on how influencer marketing shapes Generation Z consumer behavior. The findings prove that Gen Z's purchase choices are heavily influenced by the credibility, authenticity, and parasocial connection of social media creators.

The research demonstrates that Gen Z consumers do not reject marketing outright; rather, they reject disingenuous marketing. They actively seek recommendations from creators who provide honest value, demonstrate genuine domain expertise, and interact in a transparent, relatable manner. Micro-influencers occupy the sweet spot of digital persuasion for this demographic, driving higher purchase conversion than mass-market celebrities. Ultimately, influencer marketing operates effectively on Gen Z when it transcends transactional sponsorship and functions as authentic, peer-level value creation.

Suggestions and Recommendations

Strategic Managerial Recommendations

- **Pivot from Mega-Celebrities to Micro-Influencer Communities:** Brand managers targeting Gen Z should reallocate budgets from single, high-cost celebrity campaigns toward diversified networks of micro- and nano-influencers within specific niches.
- **Prioritize Unscripted Creative Freedom:** Brands must grant content creators creative control. Forcing influencers to recite strict, corporate sales scripts destroys authenticity. Allowing creators to present products within their natural daily routines significantly enhances conversion rates (Batra, 2022).

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