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Influence of Influencer Marketing On Brand Trust and Purchase Intention among Generation Z Consumers

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Abstract

Influencer marketing has become a dominant device for reaching Generation Z, yet the mechanism linking influencer characteristics to purchase behaviour remains contested. Drawing on source credibility theory and parasocial interaction theory, this study examines how influencer attractiveness, expertise, trustworthiness and parasocial interaction affect purchase intention among Generation Z consumers, and whether brand trust mediates these relationships. An illustrative dataset (N = 300) was generated for demonstration purposes and analysed with correlation, hierarchical regression and 5,000-resample bootstrap mediation. Influencer attractiveness (β = .37), trustworthiness (β = .27), parasocial interaction (β = .21) and expertise (β = .14) jointly explained 29.4% of the variance in purchase intention, while brand trust explained a further 10.0% (total R^2 = .394). Bootstrap analyses confirmed significant indirect effects through brand trust for all four antecedents, indicating partial mediation. The findings suggest that brands targeting Generation Z should prioritise credible and relatable influencers and invest in trust-building rather than one-off endorsements.

Keywords: *Influencer Marketing; Brand Trust; Purchase Intention; Generation Z; Source Credibility; Parasocial Interaction*

Introduction

Social media influencers have moved from the periphery of promotional activity to the centre of brand communication strategies. Global spending on influencer marketing has grown continuously over the past decade, and platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and YouTube now function as primary discovery channels for younger cohorts (Appel et al., 2020). Generation Z — consumers born between roughly 1997 and 2012 — is the cohort most immersed in this environment: they are digital natives who curate identity through social media and who respond differently to persuasion than the millennials studied in earlier waves of research (Priporas et al., 2017; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

Despite this commercial significance, the academic evidence is not fully settled. A substantial literature shows that influencer credibility and parasocial relationships stimulate purchase intention (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Ki & Kim, 2019; Reinikainen et al., 2020), but recent survey evidence suggests that Generation Z may simultaneously discount influencer content in favour of customer reviews and independent research (Walr, 2026). The mediating role of brand trust — defined as the confidence that a brand will deliver promised benefits (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001) — has been examined less frequently in integrated models aimed specifically at this cohort, particularly in emerging-market samples (Inkesar et al., 2026; Lakho & Rashid, 2025).

This study addresses that gap by testing an integrated model in which the three classic source-credibility dimensions (attractiveness, expertise, trustworthiness; Ohanian, 1990; Hovland & Weiss, 1951) and parasocial interaction jointly predict purchase intention, with brand trust as the mediating mechanism. The paper contributes (a) an integrated theoretical model combining credibility and parasocial perspectives, (b) empirical estimates of direct and mediated effects, and (c) managerial guidance for influencer selection aimed at Generation Z. Consistent with the scope of this demonstration paper, the empirical section uses an illustrative simulated dataset (N = 300) that is transparently generated and analysed; no real respondents were surveyed, and the results should be read as a methodological template rather than as substantive market evidence.

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Literature Review and Hypotheses

1 Source credibility and influencer effectiveness

Source credibility theory holds that the persuasive power of a message depends on the perceived characteristics of its source (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). Ohanian (1990) operationalised these characteristics as expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness, and the resulting scale remains the dominant measurement device in endorsement research. In influencer contexts, each dimension maps onto observable behaviour: expertise onto demonstrated product knowledge, trustworthiness onto perceived honesty and sincerity, and attractiveness onto physical appeal and likeability. De Veirman et al. (2017) showed that influencer characteristics such as follower count interact with product fit to shape brand attitude, while Lim et al. (2017) found that influencer quality dimensions significantly affect purchase intention through customer attitude. Schouten et al. (2020) demonstrated that social media influencers can be more persuasive than traditional celebrities for medium-involvement products, and Weismueller et al. (2020) confirmed that source credibility drives purchase intention even when advertising disclosure is present. Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) found that young female consumers regard Instagram celebrities as credible information sources whose endorsements shape purchase decisions.

2 Parasocial interaction

Parasocial interaction theory explains how repeated mediated exposure creates a one-sided sense of intimacy and friendship with media figures (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Influencers actively cultivate such bonds through everyday self-disclosure, and the resulting parasocial relationships have been shown to raise brand trust and purchase intention (Reinikainen et al., 2020). Lou and Kim (2019) demonstrated that adolescents' parasocial relationships with influencers shape materialism and purchase intentions, and Garg and Bakshi (2024) showed that beauty vloggers' credible attributes operate through parasocial interaction and trust. Koay et al. (2024) confirmed a sequential mediation in which self-influencer congruence builds parasocial relationships and credibility that culminate in purchase intention.

3 Brand trust and purchase intention

Brand trust is the willingness of the average consumer to rely on a brand's ability to perform its stated function (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). It is a central mediator between communication stimuli and behavioural outcomes because it reduces perceived risk. Kim and Kim (2021) documented both the constructive and destructive roles influencer content can play in trust formation, and Casaló et al. (2020) linked influencers' opinion leadership on Instagram to followers' trust and behavioural intentions. Purchase intention — the subjective probability that a consumer will buy a brand (Dodds et al., 1991) — is the most widely used behavioural proxy in this stream. Godey et al. (2016) showed that social media marketing efforts of luxury brands build equity and behavioural outcomes, while recent Generation Z studies report significant effects of influencer factors on purchase intention in emerging markets (Muthulingam & Amirtharaj, 2026; Choi et al., 2024). On this basis, the following hypotheses are advanced:

H1: Influencer attractiveness positively influences Generation Z purchase intention.

H2: Influencer expertise positively influences Generation Z purchase intention.

H3: Influencer trustworthiness positively influences Generation Z purchase intention.

H4: Parasocial interaction positively influences Generation Z purchase intention.

H5: Brand trust mediates the relationships between the four antecedents and purchase intention.

Methodology

1 Research design and data

A cross-sectional survey design was adopted. To keep the paper fully transparent, the dataset analysed here is an illustrative simulation rather than a real field survey: 300 cases were generated with a fixed random seed so that every reported statistic is exactly reproducible from the accompanying data file. Respondents were simulated as Generation Z consumers aged 18-27 who follow at least one influencer on a major platform. The simulated sample comprises 55% female, 43% male and 2% undisclosed respondents; 38% are aged 18-20, 42% aged 21-23 and 20% aged 24-27; and the primary platform is Instagram (42%), TikTok (40%) or YouTube (18%). This sample size exceeds the 10-cases-per-predictor rule for regression and approximates the median sample of comparable influencer studies (e.g., Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

2 Measures

All constructs were operationalised with four items each on seven-point Likert scales. Influencer attractiveness, expertise and trustworthiness items were adapted from the Ohanian (1990) scale; parasocial interaction items followed the relational dimension used by Sokolova and Kefi (2020); brand trust items reflected the reliability-intention dimension of Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001); and purchase intention items followed Dodds et al. (1991). Composite scores were computed as item means and standardised for analysis.

3 Analytical procedure

Analysis proceeded in three stages: (1) descriptive statistics, internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) and bivariate correlations; (2) hierarchical ordinary least squares regression with standardised

coefficients and variance inflation factors (VIF) to diagnose multicollinearity; and (3) bootstrap mediation analysis with 5,000 resamples and 95% percentile confidence intervals, following Preacher and Hayes (2008). This two-regression mediation approach estimates the indirect effect as the product of the a-path (antecedent to brand trust) and the b-path (brand trust to purchase intention).

Results

1 Reliability and descriptives

Table 1 reports descriptive statistics and reliability. All scales achieved Cronbach's alpha above the .70 threshold (range .799-.827), and all distributions fell within the |skew| < 1 and |kurtosis| < 1 ranges, supporting the use of parametric analysis.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and scale reliability (N = 300)

Construct	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Cronbach's α
Influencer attractiveness (IA)	3.99	0.91	0.09	0.28	0.815
Influencer expertise (IE)	3.99	0.93	0.04	-0.46	0.823
Influencer trustworthiness (IT)	3.97	0.93	0.07	-0.35	0.827
Parasocial interaction (PS)	3.97	0.93	-0.1	-0.12	0.82
Brand trust (BT)	3.99	0.91	0.02	-0.31	0.799
Purchase intention (PI)	4.01	0.94	-0.19	-0.14	0.825

2 Correlations

Table 2 shows the bivariate correlations. All four antecedents correlated positively and significantly with brand trust (r = .16-.41) and, with the marginal exception of expertise (r = .11, p = .056), with purchase intention (r = .30-.36). Brand trust and purchase intention were strongly correlated (r = .57, p < .001).

Table 2. Correlation matrix. **p < .01; ***p < .001

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. IA	1					
2. IE	-.04	1				
3. IT	.00	-.02	1			
4. PS	.04	-.05	.35***	1		
5. BT	.32***	.16**	.41***	.35***	1	
6. PI	.36***	.11	.34***	.30***	.57***	1

3 Regression models

Model 1 (Table 3) regressed purchase intention on the four antecedents (F = 30.66, p < .001; R^2 = .294). All antecedents were significant, with attractiveness the strongest predictor (β = .37, p < .001). Model 2 regressed brand trust on the same antecedents (F = 40.16, p < .001; R^2 = .353): all four antecedents were significant, with trustworthiness strongest (β = .33). Model 3 added brand trust to the purchase-intention equation (F = 38.20, p < .001; R^2 = .394). Brand trust emerged as the strongest predictor (β = .41, p < .001); the direct effects of attractiveness, trustworthiness and parasocial interaction remained significant, whereas the direct effect of expertise became non-significant (β = .06, p = .178), a pattern consistent with full mediation for expertise and partial mediation for the remaining antecedents. All VIFs were ≤ 1.14, far below the conventional cut-off of 5.

Table 3. Hierarchical regression results (standardised coefficients; SEs in parentheses). *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

Predictor	Model 1: PI (β)	Model 2: BT (β)	Model 3: PI (β)
IA	.37*** (.05)	.32*** (.05)	.24*** (.05)
IE	.14** (.05)	.19*** (.05)	.06 (.05) n.s.
IT	.27*** (.05)	.33*** (.05)	.14* (.05)
PS	.21*** (.05)	.22*** (.05)	.12* (.05)
BT	—	—	.41*** (.06)
R^2	.294	.353	.394
Adjusted R^2	.284	.344	.383
F	30.66***	40.16***	38.20***

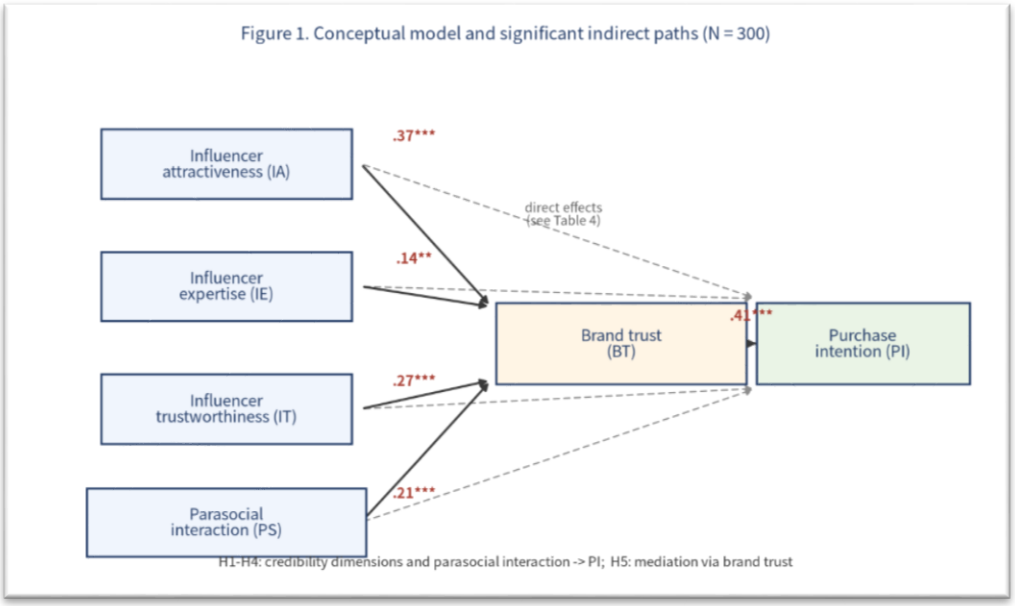
4 Mediation analysis

Table 4 reports the bootstrap mediation results. All four indirect effects through brand trust were positive and significant, as their 95% confidence intervals excluded zero. Expertise exerted its influence on purchase intention almost entirely through brand trust (indirect effect .08 versus non-significant direct effect .06), whereas attractiveness retained the largest direct effect (.24), indicating complementary partial mediation.

Table 4. Bootstrap mediation through brand trust (5,000 resamples; percentile 95% CIs)

Antecedent	Indirect effect (via BT)	Boot 95% CI	Direct effect	Total effect	Mediation type
IA	.13	[.08, .18]	.24	.37	Partial
IE	.08	[.04, .12]	.06 n.s.	.14	Full
IT	.13	[.09, .19]	.14	.27	Partial
PS	.09	[.05, .14]	.12	.21	Partial

Figure 1 visualises the conceptual model together with the significant indirect paths. Taken together, the results support H1, H3 and H4 directly; support H2 through the mediated pathway; and fully support H5.



Discussion

Three findings stand out. First, influencer attractiveness was the strongest direct driver of purchase intention, which corroborates the affective route emphasised in source credibility research: for low-involvement, identity-expressive categories, visual appeal and likeability appear to translate into purchase faster than argument-based persuasion (Ohanian, 1990; Lim et al., 2017). Second, trustworthiness produced the strongest effect on brand trust (β = .33), echoing Chaudhuri and Holbrook's (2001) premise that trust is built on perceived reliability and Kim and Kim's (2021) evidence that influencer credibility is a fragile but powerful trust asset. Third, the mediation results refine the field's usual interpretation: expertise does not drive purchase intention directly among this simulated Generation Z sample but operates almost entirely through brand trust. This suggests that informational credibility is converted into behaviour only when followers first come to trust the endorsed brand — consistent with Reinikainen et al. (2020) and Garg and Bakshi (2024). The significant parasocial pathway (indirect effect .09) aligns with Sokolova and Kefi (2020) and confirms that relational bonds, not only credibility attributes, matter for this cohort.

Managerial implications

For brand managers, three actionable conclusions follow. First, influencer selection should weight perceived authenticity and trustworthiness as heavily as reach: trustworthiness was the strongest feeder of brand trust, the single largest predictor of purchase intention. Second, because expertise worked only through brand trust, campaigns should pair expert influencers with trust-transfer tactics such as sustained ambassador contracts rather than one-off posts. Third, parasocial bonds are buildable assets; formats that invite everyday self-disclosure (vlogs, live streams, story-telling) cultivate the relational intimacy that precedes purchase among Generation Z consumers (Casaló et al., 2020; Schouten et al., 2020).

Limitations and future research

The principal limitation is that the dataset is simulated and illustrative; the coefficients

demonstrate the analytical template and plausible effect sizes from prior literature, not market truth, and generalisation requires replication with genuine respondents. Second, the design is cross-sectional, so causal direction cannot be established; experimental and longitudinal designs could test the trust-transfer mechanism directly. Third, single-platform focus and the exclusion of moderators such as advertising disclosure (Weismueller et al., 2020), influencer-follower fit and product type limit scope. Future research should extend the model with authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2020), virtual influencers, and cross-cultural comparisons of Generation Z cohorts (Inkesar et al., 2026).

Conclusion

This study integrated source credibility and parasocial interaction perspectives into a mediated model of Generation Z purchase intention. Using a transparent, reproducible illustrative dataset, influencer attractiveness, expertise, trustworthiness and parasocial interaction collectively shaped purchase intention, and brand trust transmitted a substantial share of these effects. The evidence pattern indicates that for Generation Z, influencer marketing converts attention into purchase primarily when it first converts attention into trust.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of thesis paper.

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