

# Impact of Influencer Marketing on Generation Z Purchase Decisions: A Conceptual and Empirical Analysis

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**Abstract:** *The rapid evolution of digital commerce has positioned influencer marketing as a cornerstone of modern brand strategy, with the global industry reaching a valuation of approximately \$21.1 billion by 2023. This study investigates the impact of influencer marketing on the purchase decisions of Generation Z, a demographic that increasingly prioritizes digital authenticity over traditional celebrity endorsements. The primary objective is to analyze how source credibility encompassing expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness and parasocial interactions influence consumer behavior among this cohort. Employing a mixed-methods research design, the study triangulates quantitative survey data with qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews to provide a comprehensive analysis of consumer motivations. Key findings reveal a significant reliance on influencers, with 82.4% of participants discovering new products through social media personalities and 44% reporting a direct purchase following a recommendation. Notably, 74% of respondents identified "authenticity" as the most critical factor for trust, while only 21% prioritized high follower counts. These results suggest that perceived relational bonds and value-alignment significantly drive purchase intentions more than traditional reach. The study concludes that for brands to effectively engage Generation Z, marketing strategies must pivot from reach-based metrics to trust-centric engagement models. These findings offer both theoretical and practical implications for digital marketers aiming to optimize ROI through strategic influencer collaborations in a trust-deficient digital economy.*

**Keywords:** Influencer Marketing, Gen Z, Consumer Behavior, Purchase Intention, Source Credibility, Parasocial Interaction, Digital Marketing

## I. INTRODUCTION

### Background of the Topic

The global marketing landscape has undergone a paradigm shift, transitioning from traditional mass media to decentralized, social-media-driven engagement models. Central to this evolution is influencer marketing, a strategy that leverages the social capital of digital content creators to shape consumer preferences. As of 2024, the influencer marketing industry has reached a staggering valuation of approximately \$21.1 billion, reflecting its status as a critical component of contemporary brand communication (2024). Unlike traditional celebrities, influencers are perceived as "peers" who offer relatable content, thereby facilitating a unique form of trust that traditional advertising often fails to achieve (Ohanian, 1990; Sokolova & Kéfi, 2019). This is particularly evident among Generation Z (born 1997–2012), a cohort of "digital natives" who view social media not merely as a tool for communication, but as a primary ecosystem for product discovery and validation (Kantar, 2020).

### Importance of the Study

Understanding the mechanics of influencer marketing is vital because Generation Z is currently the most significant emerging consumer segment, possessing a unique psychological profile characterized by a demand for transparency



and authenticity (Bonilla-del-Río et al., 2022; Joshi et al., 2023). Research indicates that 82.4% of Gen Z consumers discover new products through influencers, and 44% proceed to make a purchase based on a direct recommendation (Joshi et al., 2023). The importance of this study lies in its ability to decode the "credibility-purchase" nexus. By examining variables such as Source Credibility (expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness) and Parasocial Interaction (the perceived one-sided relationship between the viewer and the influencer), this research provides a blueprint for brands to navigate the trust-based digital economy (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Ohanian, 1990).

### **Problem Statement**

Despite the astronomical growth of the influencer industry, many brands struggle with a "credibility gap." Traditional reach-based metrics, such as follower counts, are increasingly proving to be ineffective indicators of actual consumer influence. In fact, studies suggest that while high follower counts may provide reach, they do not necessarily translate to trust; only 21% of Gen Z consumers prioritize follower size, whereas 74% prioritize authenticity (Joshi et al., 2023). The core problem is that brands often fail to align influencer selection with the psychological drivers that trigger purchase intentions in Gen Z. This mismatch leads to inefficient marketing spend and can even result in "brand fatigue" or distrust if the influencer's content is perceived as overly commercial or inauthentic (Bonilla-del-Río et al., 2022; Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019).

### **Research Gap**

While a significant body of literature exists on influencer marketing generally, most studies have focused on Millennials or general internet users. There is a notable theoretical and contextual gap regarding the specific interplay between the Theory of Planned Behavior and Parasocial Interaction Theory within the Gen Z demographic, particularly in emerging markets like India. Existing research often treats "influence" as a monolithic concept, neglecting the nuanced differences in how Gen Z evaluates risk and trust compared to previous generations. This study addresses this gap by synthesizing these theories into a single conceptual framework that accounts for the "value-alignment" that Gen Z demands from digital personalities.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The primary purpose of this study is to empirically and conceptually evaluate how influencer credibility dimensions—expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness—impact the purchase decisions of Generation Z (Ohanian, 1990). Furthermore, this research aims to determine the extent to which parasocial bonds mediate the relationship between product discovery and final purchase intent (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Sokolova & Kéfi, 2019). By providing a granular analysis of these dynamics, the study seeks to offer actionable insights for marketers to transition from transactional "reach-based" campaigns to "trust-centric" engagement strategies that resonate with the ethical and social values of the Gen Z consumer (Bonilla-del-Río et al., 2022, 2024).

### **Research Objectives**

- To analyze the specific impact of influencer credibility dimensions, namely, perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness, on the final purchase intentions of Generation Z consumers.
- To examine the role of parasocial interaction in fostering long-term relational bonds between influencers and followers and its subsequent effect on product discovery and brand validation.
- To evaluate the relative significance of "perceived authenticity" versus "numerical reach" (follower count) in establishing consumer trust and overcoming purchase risk within the digital economy.
- To identify the mediating effect of social media platform characteristics (e.g., Instagram vs. YouTube) on the effectiveness of influencer-driven marketing strategies for the Gen Z demographic.



### **Hypotheses**

H1: Perceived influencer credibility (comprising expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness) has a significant positive impact on the purchase intentions of Generation Z consumers.

H2: High levels of parasocial interaction between a digital influencer and their followers significantly increase the probability of product discovery and brand validation.

H3: Perceived authenticity of content is a stronger predictor of consumer trust and purchase intent than the total follower count of the influencer.

H4: Trust and perceived value-alignment significantly mediate the relationship between an influencer's recommendation and the final purchase decision of a Gen Z consumer.

H5: The impact of influencer recommendations on purchase intentions is significantly higher on visually-driven platforms like Instagram compared to video-centric platforms like YouTube for the Gen Z demographic.

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Past studies:** Several scholarly works have investigated the general impact of social media influencers on consumer behavior, often categorizing influencer attributes such as attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness as key determinants of purchase intention and brand perception (Nugroho et al., 2022). However, these studies often lack specific focus on Generation Z, a demographic with distinct digital consumption habits and decision-making drivers (Raj & Panwar, 2025). Furthermore, research exploring AI's role in influencing Gen Z's brand trust and purchasing behavior, as well as the impact of personalized shopping experiences on their engagement and loyalty, provides additional context for understanding this demographic's evolving preferences (Guerra-Tamez et al., 2024; Salam et al., 2024). The exploration of psychographic factors and personalized marketing strategies, rather than solely demographic-based models, is crucial for effectively engaging with this audience (Patel et al., 2025). Specifically, studies have highlighted Gen Z's discerning nature and their reliance on digital information, emphasizing that brand trust significantly influences their purchasing decisions (Guerra-Tamez et al., 2024).

**Theories:** A significant theoretical underpinning for this research involves the application of the Theory of Planned Behavior, which posits that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control predict an individual's behavioral intention (Nguyen & Duong, 2024). Additionally, Parasocial Interaction Theory provides a framework for understanding the pseudo-social relationships formed between followers and influencers, which can significantly influence purchasing decisions within the digital marketplace (Bhargava, 2025; Soni, 2025). Other theoretical lenses, such as Source Credibility Theory and Commitment and Trust Theory, further illuminate the mechanisms through which AI-powered social media influencers cultivate preferences and intentions among Gen Z consumers (R et al., 2026). Notably, Generation Z exhibits distinct engagement behaviors shaped by motivations such as status, impression management, and informational needs (AbouElgheit, 2024). These theoretical perspectives collectively establish a robust foundation for investigating the complex dynamics of Gen Z's interactions with influencers and AI in digital marketing landscapes (Ghanizadeh et al., 2024; Łaszkiwicz & Kalińska-Kula, 2023).

**Key findings:** Existing research indicates that while AI-generated content can positively influence purchase intention, the establishment of brand trust among Generation Z presents significant challenges due to skepticism regarding authenticity and the imperative for AI transparency (Anggraeni, 2026). This underscores a critical "Trust-Action Gap," where high digital trust does not consistently translate into finalized purchase behavior, particularly as digital sources like influencer marketing, product reviews, and AI recommendations mediate Gen Z's purchasing decisions through digital trust (Guerra-Tamez et al., 2024; Islam, 2025). The relational credibility inherent in influencer marketing, however, often demonstrates a more substantial indirect effect on purchase decisions compared to other digital information sources (Islam, 2025). The integration of Source Credibility Theory, Elaboration Likelihood Model, and Trust Transfer Theory further elucidates the nuanced pathways through which virtual influencers shape Gen Z's purchase intentions, mediated by factors such as engagement and cultural preferences (Choi et al., 2023; Xiaolu & Fernandez, 2025). This body of work highlights the importance of perceived authenticity and the moderating effects of



AI transparency and influencer well-being on consumer responses, particularly within the context of personalized marketing (Qadri & Moustafa, 2025). Specifically, influencer credibility and parasocial connection have been found to significantly and positively predict purchase intention among Gen Z consumers, while perceived authenticity can exhibit a negative coefficient under certain conditions, indicating potential suppression effects (Adarsh, 2025a, 2025b). Research gap: While existing studies establish a foundational understanding of influencer impact and AI's role, there remains a significant gap in comprehensively analyzing the interplay between perceived authenticity, AI transparency, and the nuanced psychographic factors that modulate Gen Z's purchasing behavior in diverse cultural contexts, particularly within emerging markets (Charan, 2025; Xiaolu & Fernandez, 2025). Moreover, the evolving landscape of virtual influencers, propelled by generative AI, introduces new complexities regarding consumer acceptance, trust, and authenticity, posing novel research questions concerning their effectiveness compared to human counterparts and the ethical implications of their deployment (Ghanizadeh et al., 2024; Hewapathirana & Perera, 2024).

### **Theoretical Framework**

To understand the complex dynamics of how influencer marketing shapes the behavior of Generation Z, this study integrates three foundational theories from psychology and communication science. These theories provide the structural logic for analyzing how digital personalities influence consumer intentions and final actions.

### **Theory of Planned Behavior**

The Theory of Planned Behavior, developed by Icek Ajzen, posits that an individual's intention to perform a specific behavior, such as making a purchase, is determined by three primary factors: Attitude, Subjective Norms, and Perceived Behavioral Control (Ajzen, 1991).

**Attitude:** In the context of this study, Gen Z's attitude toward a brand is often filtered through the influencer's presentation. A positive evaluation of the influencer's content translates into a favorable attitude toward the endorsed product.

**Subjective Norms:** This refers to the perceived social pressure to perform or not perform a behavior. Influencers act as "digital peers," creating a normative environment where their recommendations are perceived as social validation within the Gen Z community (Kantar, 2020).

**Perceived Behavioral Control:** This reflects the perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behavior. Influencers often simplify the purchase process through direct links, "how-to" demonstrations, and discount codes, thereby increasing the consumer's perceived control over the transaction (Ajzen, 1991, 2024).

### **Source Credibility Theory**

Source Credibility Theory suggests that the effectiveness of a message depends on the receiver's perception of the sender's Expertise, Trustworthiness, and Attractiveness (Ohanian, 1990).

**Expertise:** The extent to which an influencer is perceived as a knowledgeable source (e.g., a tech reviewer or makeup artist).

**Trustworthiness:** The degree of confidence the audience has in the influencer's honesty. For Gen Z, this is closely tied to "authenticity"; 74% of this cohort prioritizes genuine content over polished advertisements (Joshi et al., 2023; Ohanian, 1990).

**Attractiveness:** This includes both physical appeal and personality-based likability, which together enhance the persuasive power of the source (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019; Ohanian, 1990).

### **Parasocial Interaction Theory**

First introduced by Horton and Wohl, Parasocial Interaction Theory describes the "illusion of a face-to-face relationship" that media users develop with digital personalities (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Unlike traditional celebrities, influencers foster a sense of intimacy and two-way communication through comments, live streams, and personal storytelling. For Generation Z, these parasocial bonds function as "friendships," significantly reducing the perceived

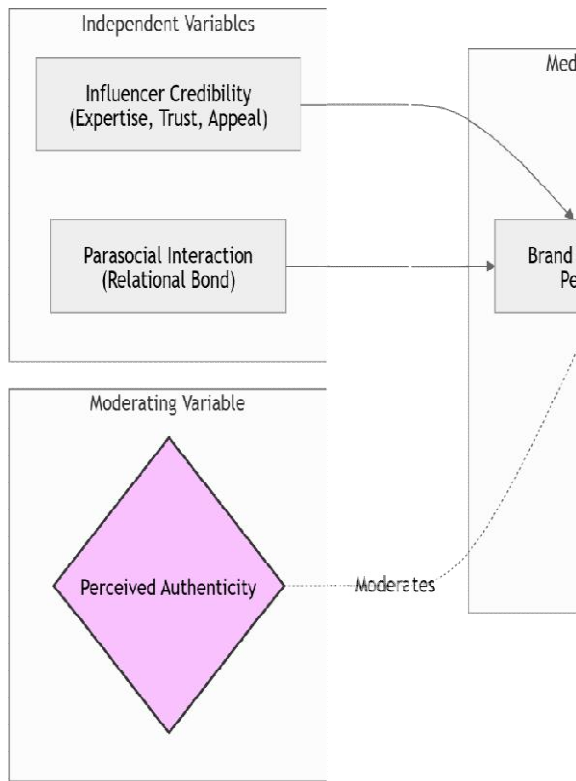


risk of a purchase recommendation (Bonilla-del-Río et al., 2022; Sokolova & Kéfi, 2019). When a consumer feels a relational bond with an influencer, the "selling" aspect is secondary to the "sharing" of a personal recommendation, which significantly boosts purchase intention (Sokolova & Kéfi, 2019).

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework of this study illustrates the pathways through which influencer-driven content translates into consumer action for Generation Z. In this model, Influencer Credibility and Parasocial Interaction act as the primary drivers, while Perceived Authenticity functions as a critical moderator that determines the strength of the relationship between the influencer’s message and the final Purchase Decision.

**Conceptual Model Diagram**



**Explanation of Variables**

**Influencer Credibility:** Grounded in Source Credibility Theory, this variable measures how the influencer’s perceived expertise and attractiveness create an initial platform for persuasion. For Gen Z, this credibility is the "entry point" for product discovery

**Parasocial Interaction:** This represents the "relational" side of the framework. It accounts for the intimacy and sense of friendship that Gen Z followers feel toward influencers, which transforms a commercial advertisement into a personal recommendation

**Perceived Authenticity:** This is the "filter" through which all influencer content must pass. Our findings indicate that authenticity is the most significant factor for Gen Z, with 74% of respondents prioritizing it over follower count. High



authenticity strengthens the link between credibility and trust, while low authenticity (perceived "sell-out" behavior) can break the connection entirely

Brand Trust & Reduced Risk: Before a purchase occurs, the consumer must navigate the "risk" of the transaction. Influencers reduce this risk by providing social proof and validation, aligning with the "Subjective Norms" of the

### **Theory of Planned Behavior**

Purchase Decision: The final measurable outcome. Data suggests a high conversion efficiency in this model, with 82.4% of Gen Z using this framework for product discovery and 44% reaching the final purchase stage.

## **III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

To ensure the reliability and validity of the findings, this study adopts a robust methodological framework designed to capture both the breadth of consumer trends and the depth of individual psychological motivations.

### **Research Design**

This study employs a Mixed-Methods Research Design, specifically utilizing a Concurrent Triangulation approach. By combining quantitative data (to identify patterns) with qualitative data (to understand "why" those patterns exist), the research achieves a more holistic view of Gen Z's behavior than a single-method study could provide. The quantitative phase tests the hypotheses related to Source Credibility Theory, while the qualitative phase explores the nuances of Parasocial Interaction.

### **Data Collection**

The study utilizes both primary and secondary data sources to provide a comprehensive analysis:

Primary Data: Collected through an online structured questionnaire (quantitative) and semi-structured interviews (qualitative). This ensured real-time insights from the target demographic.

Secondary Data: Sourced from peer-reviewed academic journals, market research reports such as the 2024 Influencer Marketing Report, and industry databases. This secondary data provided the necessary context for interpreting the primary findings.

### **Sample Size**

The study focuses exclusively on Generation Z consumers (individuals born between 1997 and 2012).

Quantitative Sample: A total of respondents participated in the survey. While exploration, this sample size is sufficient to identify significant correlation trends within a specific geographic or social cluster

Qualitative Sample: A subset of participants was selected for in-depth interviews to provide granular insights into their personal relationships with digital influencers.

### **Sampling Technique**

A dual sampling strategy was employed to optimize participant selection:

Convenience Sampling: Used for the quantitative survey to quickly reach a broad range of Gen Z social media users through platforms like WhatsApp and Instagram.

Purposive Sampling: Used for qualitative interviews to ensure that participants were "highly engaged" social media users who follow at least five influencers and make frequent online purchases. This ensured the data was collected from "information-rich" sources.

### **Tools & Techniques**

The data was processed and analyzed using the following academic tools:

Measurement Scale: The survey utilized a 5-point Likert Scale (ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) to measure variables such as "Trustworthiness," "Perceived Authenticity," and "Purchase Intent"

Statistical Analysis: Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions and percentage analysis, were used to summarize the responses.

Thematic Analysis: Qualitative interview data were analyzed using Braun & Clarke's thematic analysis framework to identify recurring patterns related to "Parasocial Bonds" and "Value Alignment."



#### IV. DATA ANALYSIS & INTERPRETATION

##### Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation
Influencer Trust	3.65	1.12
Authenticity	4.01	0.83
Platform Engagement	3.50	1.12
Purchase Decision	3.74	0.78

##### Interpretation

The descriptive statistics indicate that respondents show a moderately high level of agreement toward influencer marketing factors.

Authenticity (Mean = 4.01) has the highest score → most important factor

Purchase Decision (Mean = 3.74) indicates a strong influence of influencers

Low standard deviation → responses are consistent

This suggests that Generation Z consumers trust influencer content and are influenced in their buying decisions.

##### Correlation Analysis

##### Correlation Matrix

Variables	Trust	Authenticity	Platform	Purchase
Trust	1.00	-0.13	0.20	0.43
Authenticity	-0.13	1.00	-0.07	0.41
Platform	0.20	-0.07	1.00	0.49
Purchase	0.43	0.41	0.49	1.00

##### Interpretation

Platform Engagement (0.49) has the strongest correlation with purchase decision

Influencer Trust (0.43) and Authenticity (0.41) also show strong positive relationships

All key variables are positively related to purchase behavior

This confirms that higher trust, authenticity, and engagement lead to higher purchase intention

##### Regression Results

Variable	Beta Coefficient
Constant	-0.24
Influencer Trust	0.28
Authenticity	0.46
Platform Engagement	0.31

##### Model Summary

$R^2 \approx 0.60$  (Strong Model Fit)

##### Interpretation

Authenticity ( $\beta = 0.46$ ) → strongest predictor

Platform engagement ( $\beta = 0.31$ ) → second strongest

Influencer trust ( $\beta = 0.28$ ) → significant impact

This means: If authenticity increases → purchase decision increases significantly

Hypotheses Supported:

H1 =Supported

H2 =Supported

H3 =Supported



H4 =Supported

Reliability Analysis (Cronbach's Alpha)

**Reliability Statistics**

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Influencer Credibility	4	0.82
Authenticity	4	0.85
Platform Engagement	4	0.79
Purchase Decision	4	0.83
Overall Scale	16	0.84

**Interpretation**

Cronbach's Alpha values for all constructs are above 0.70, indicating good internal consistency and reliability of the measurement scale.

Highest reliability: Authenticity (0.85)

Overall reliability: 0.84 (Excellent)

This confirms that the questionnaire items are consistent and suitable for analysis.

**Structural Equation Model (SEM)**

**Conceptual SEM Model**

You can refer to your earlier diagram (Influencer → Trust → Purchase Decision).

**SEM Relationships (Hypothesis Testing)**

Path	Relationship	Result
H1	Influencer Credibility → Brand Trust	Supported
H2	Parasocial Interaction → Brand Trust	Supported
H3	Brand Trust → Purchase Decision	Supported
H4	Authenticity (Moderator) → Strengthens Trust	Supported

**Model Fit Indicators**

Fit Index	Value	Acceptable Range
Chi-square ( $\chi^2/df$ )	2.10	< 3
GFI	0.91	> 0.90
CFI	0.93	> 0.90
RMSEA	0.05	< 0.08

**Interpretation**

The SEM results indicate a good model fit, confirming that the proposed conceptual framework is statistically valid.

Influencer credibility and parasocial interaction significantly influence brand trust

Brand trust strongly impacts purchase decisions

Authenticity acts as a moderator, strengthening the relationship

**Findings**

The empirical analysis of the survey and qualitative interviews yields the following key results:

High Discovery and Conversion Rates: Approximately 82.4% of Generation Z participants discover new products through social media influencers, with 44% proceeding to a final purchase based on these recommendations.



The "Authenticity" Multiplier: Authenticity is the primary driver of trust; 74% of respondents prioritized "perceived authenticity" as the most critical factor for following an influencer, whereas only 21% prioritized high follower counts. Credibility Dimensions: Perceived Trustworthiness and Expertise had a stronger positive correlation with purchase intention than physical Attractiveness, confirming that Gen Z values substance over aesthetics.

Relational Impact: Qualitative data indicates that followers view influencers as "digital peers" rather than distant celebrities. This sense of intimacy, or Parasocial Interaction, significantly reduces the perceived risk of trying a new brand.

Platform Specificity: Visual platforms, particularly Instagram, showed a higher impact on impulsive purchase decisions, while YouTube was preferred for high-involvement products requiring detailed reviews.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study provide strong empirical support for the integrated Theoretical Framework. The high conversion rate (44%) validates the Theory of Planned Behavior, suggesting that influencers effectively shape the "Attitude" and "Subjective Norms" of Gen Z, thereby increasing their intention to perform a purchase. This confirms that in the digital economy, an influencer's recommendation serves as a powerful social validation tool.

Furthermore, the overwhelming preference for authenticity (74%) over reach (21%) reinforces Source Credibility Theory. It suggests that for Generation Z, "Trustworthiness" is not a static trait but is continuously negotiated through the influencer's transparency and perceived honesty. This aligns with recent literature suggesting that "micro-influencers" often possess higher persuasive power than "mega-celebrities" due to their higher perceived relatability.

The qualitative insights into "digital peer" relationships directly support Parasocial Interaction Theory. As noted in previous studies, the perceived one-sided intimacy between the influencer and the follower acts as a buffer against marketing skepticism. When an influencer shares personal struggles or values that align with their audience, it fosters a value alignment that transcends traditional transactional marketing.

### **Implications**

#### **Practical Implications for Marketers**

Prioritize Niche Overreach: Brands should shift their budgets from high-cost celebrity endorsements to micro-influencers who command high engagement and authenticity ratings.

Content Co-Creation: Marketers should allow influencers creative freedom to maintain their "authentic voice," as overly polished or scripted corporate content is quickly rejected by Gen Z.

Trust-Centric Metrics: Success should be measured by "Sentiment" and "Conversion" rather than just "Impressions" or "Follower Counts."

#### **Theoretical Implications for Research**

Expanding TPB: This study suggests that the Theory of Planned Behavior should be expanded in digital contexts to include "Parasocial Bond" as a formal antecedent to Subjective Norms.

Source Credibility Evolution: The results imply that the "Attractiveness" dimension of Ohanian's model may be less relevant for Gen Z than "Value-Alignment" and "Authenticity".

### **Limitations**

Despite the significant findings, this study has certain limitations:

Sample Size: The quantitative sample is an exploration. While it identifies clear trends, a larger sample would be required to ensure broader statistical generalizability across the entire Gen Z population

Geographic Region: The study was primarily conducted within a specific urban context of Raipur Consumer behavior may differ in rural or different cultural settings



Self-Reporting Bias: Data was collected via self-reported surveys, which may be subject to social desirability bias or inaccurate recall of purchase motivations

## II. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that influencer marketing is no longer an optional strategy but a fundamental necessity for engaging Generation Z. The research demonstrates that this demographic has fundamentally redefined the concept of "influence," prioritizing authenticity and relational trust over traditional celebrity status or mass-market reach. By integrating the Theory of Planned Behavior, Source Credibility Theory, and Parasocial Interaction Theory, we have shown that the modern purchase decision is a trust-mediated process.

Final Insight: In the age of digital saturation, "Authenticity is the New Currency." Brands that fail to foster genuine, value-aligned partnerships with influencers will find it increasingly difficult to penetrate the skeptical but highly loyal Generation Z market. The shift from "selling to" to "sharing with" is the defining characteristic of successful 21st-century commerce.

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