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**The Impact of Digital Influencer Marketing on Brand  
Loyalty among Generation Z Consumers**

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## **Abstract**

The exponential growth of digital influencer marketing has fundamentally shifted brand communication, yet a critical gap remains in understanding how short-term consumer engagement translates into enduring brand loyalty, particularly among Generation Z consumers. This study proposes to empirically investigate the relationship among influencer credibility, brand trust, and purchase intention as drivers of brand loyalty within the highly digitalized Gen Z cohort. Utilizing a quantitative, cross-sectional research design, data will be collected via an online survey administered to 150–200 Gen Z consumers who actively follow social media influencers. The research will test hypotheses asserting a positive sequential relationship where influencer credibility fosters brand trust, which in turn leads to higher purchase intention and, ultimately, brand loyalty. Specifically, the study examines brand trust as a key mediator in this chain of effects. Findings are expected to yield significant theoretical insights into the behavioral dynamics of digital-native consumers and provide practical, evidence-based guidance for marketers seeking to optimize influencer strategies to cultivate authentic and long-term consumer relationships in the competitive digital marketplace.

# **1 Introduction**

The evolution of social media platforms has fundamentally reshaped marketing strategies, enabling businesses to engage with consumers in more personalized and interactive ways. Among these emerging strategies, digital influencer marketing has become one of the most effective approaches for enhancing brand awareness, trust, and loyalty, particularly among younger demographics. Influencer marketing leverages individuals who have established credibility and substantial followings on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter), allowing brands to reach target audiences through authentic, peer-like recommendations rather than overt advertising. This paradigm shift represents a move from traditional, one-way marketing communication toward a more participatory, trust-based form of brand-consumer interaction. Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012) is considered the first truly digital-native cohort. They have grown up immersed in technology and social media, developing distinct consumption behaviors and values that differ significantly from previous generations. Members of Gen Z are characterized by their desire for authenticity, transparency, and social engagement with brands. Traditional advertising often fails to capture their attention or trust, leading marketers to rely increasingly on influencers who embody these values. Consequently, influencer credibility-comprising authenticity, expertise, attractiveness, and trustworthiness has become a pivotal factor influencing consumer perceptions and decision-making. Although influencer marketing has proven successful in generating awareness and engagement, its long-term impact on brand loyalty remains underexplored. Many brands struggle to convert initial consumer interest into enduring relationships. This gap underscores the need to examine how influencer credibility shapes deeper psychological and behavioral responses, such as brand trust and purchase intention, which in turn drive brand loyalty. By understanding these relationships, companies can craft strategies that foster sustained consumer commitment rather than one-time transactions. Existing research has highlighted that influencer credibility plays a significant role in building trust and influencing purchasing behavior. However, most studies have focused on short-term metrics such as clicks, impressions, or immediate purchase intent. Limited attention has been given to the mediating mechanisms such as trust formation and emotional connection that transform temporary engagement into lasting loyalty. Moreover, Gen Z's unique social media habits and value orientations warrant a focused analysis distinct from other age groups. Therefore, this study aims to bridge the gap by empirically

investigating how digital influencer credibility impacts brand trust, purchase intention, and brand loyalty among Gen Z consumers. By exploring these interrelationships, the research contributes both theoretical and practical insights, offering marketers evidence-based guidance to optimize influencer strategies and cultivate loyal, long-term consumer relationships in the rapidly evolving digital marketplace.

## **2 Research Problem Statement**

Despite the widespread adoption of influencer marketing, many organizations face challenges in transforming short-term consumer engagement into lasting brand loyalty. While previous studies confirm that influencer credibility affects consumer attitudes, limited empirical research has explored how credibility translates into brand trust and purchase intention, particularly among Gen Z audiences. Moreover, the specific mechanisms through which influencer characteristics such as authenticity, expertise, and trustworthiness foster loyalty remain unclear. Therefore, this study addresses the critical question: How does influencer credibility affect brand trust, purchase intention, and ultimately brand loyalty among Generation Z consumers?

## **3 Importance of the Research**

This research is significant for both academic and managerial contexts. Academically, it contributes to existing literature on digital marketing, consumer psychology, and brand management, offering insights into the behavioral dynamics of Gen Z consumers. From a managerial perspective, findings will assist marketers in designing evidence-based influencer strategies that not only generate awareness but also enhance trust and long-term loyalty. Given the dominance of social media in Gen Z's decision-making process, understanding these factors is vital for sustaining competitive advantage in the digital economy.

## **4 Research objectives**

1. To explore how influencer credibility influences brand loyalty among Gen Z consumers. (This is the overarching goal mentioned in the Introduction).
2. To examine the relationship between influencer credibility and brand trust among Gen Z consumers. (Corresponds to H1).
3. To investigate the effect of brand trust on purchase intention. (Corresponds to H2).
4. To determine the influence of purchase intention on brand loyalty. (Corresponds to H3).

5. To test the mediating role of brand trust in the relationship between influencer credibility and brand loyalty. (Corresponds to H4).
6. To identify whether influencer characteristics (authenticity, expertise, and attractiveness) are key predictors of consumer trust and loyalty. (Corresponds to H5).

## **5 Research Hypotheses**

Based on the literature and conceptual framework, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Influencer credibility positively influences brand trust among Gen Z consumers.

H2: Brand trust positively affects purchase intention.

H3: Purchase intention positively influences brand loyalty.

H4: Brand trust mediates the relationship between influencer credibility and brand loyalty.

H5: Influencer authenticity, expertise, and attractiveness are key predictors of consumer trust and loyalty.

## **6 Literature Review**

### **6.1 Overview of Influencer Marketing in the Digital Era**

The rise of social media has profoundly altered the marketing landscape, enabling two-way interactions between brands and consumers that were previously impossible through traditional advertising. Digital influencer marketing emerged as a strategic response to declining trust in conventional advertisements and the increasing desire for authenticity in consumer communication. Influencers individuals who have built credibility and followership on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter) act as brand intermediaries who humanize marketing messages (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2011). Unlike traditional celebrity endorsements, influencers engage directly with their audiences, forming parasocial relationships that foster emotional connections and perceived authenticity (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

## **6.2 Theoretical Frameworks: Source Credibility and Social Influence**

Influencer effectiveness is often explained through Source Credibility Theory (Ohanian, 1990), which posits that the persuasiveness of a communicator depends on perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. In digital contexts, a fourth component authenticity has emerged as essential (Audrezet, De Kerviler, & Moulard, 2018). Authentic influencers who align their values and lifestyles with promoted products are more likely to gain audience trust. Complementary to this is Social Influence Theory, which asserts that people's attitudes and behaviors are shaped by credible social referents. In the case of influencers, their content serves as a powerful form of social proof (Cialdini, 2007), signaling what behaviors or products are acceptable and desirable. This influence is magnified in online communities where consumers identify with influencers, perceiving them as relatable peers rather than distant celebrities. Consequently, influencer credibility becomes a critical driver of trust, intention, and ultimately brand loyalty.

## **6.3 Influencer Credibility and Consumer Trust**

Influencer credibility has been identified as a multi-dimensional construct encompassing expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and authenticity. Ohanian's (1990) original scale remains foundational, yet contemporary research emphasizes authenticity as a defining element in influencer persuasion. Baghel (2024) demonstrated that perceived authenticity acts as a catalyst for brand trust, with transparent and consistent influencers significantly enhancing followers' trust in promoted brands. Similarly, De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders (2017) found that influencers with moderate not excessive follower counts were perceived as more authentic and trustworthy, yielding higher engagement. Trust functions as a psychological mechanism that bridges influencer credibility with consumer behavior (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). When followers perceive influencers as credible and authentic, this trust is transferred to the endorsed brand (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Empirical studies consistently show that trust in influencers mediates the relationship between influencer credibility and purchase intention (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Radita & Latifah, 2025). For Generation Z, who are skeptical of paid promotions, trust is only established when influencers maintain transparency about sponsorships and exhibit consistent ethical behavior (Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Casalo, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2018).

#### **6.4 Purchase Intention as a Mediating Variable**

Purchase intention has been defined as a consumer's likelihood to buy a product based on positive attitudes and perceived value. Influencer marketing impacts this construct by leveraging emotional engagement and parasocial interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1956). When followers identify with an influencer, they experience a perceived friendship that increases persuasion effectiveness (Labrecque, 2014). Lou and Yuan (2019) showed that message value (informativeness, entertainment, relevance) and influencer credibility jointly enhance consumer trust in branded content, leading to higher purchase intention. Similarly, Samanta, Amir, Gupta, and Pant (2025) concluded that influencers influence consumer decisions through both cognitive routes (expertise, product knowledge) and affective routes (relatability and emotional appeal). These findings underscore that trust and intention are sequential outcomes: credibility fosters trust, which fuels intention, which in turn contributes to loyalty formation.

#### **6.5 Brand Trust and Brand Loyalty**

The construct of brand trust has long been recognized as a cornerstone of brand loyalty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Trust reflects consumers' belief in the reliability and integrity of a brand and their willingness to rely on it despite uncertainty. Once established, trust forms the emotional foundation for loyalty, which manifests as repurchase behavior, brand advocacy, and resistance to competitor influence. In the influencer-marketing context, trust in the influencer often precedes and reinforces trust in the brand. Radita and Latifah (2025) found that influencers who maintain long-term relationships with brands (rather than one-off promotions) generate stronger consumer loyalty, as followers perceive this continuity as evidence of sincerity. Similarly, Casaló et al. (2018) demonstrated that trust in social media influencers directly predicts consumers' positive word-of-mouth and loyalty intentions.

#### **6.6 Generation Z Consumer Behavior**

Generation Z represents a unique audience segment whose digital behavior, values, and expectations differ substantially from previous generations. Raised in an era of rapid information flow, Gen Z consumers are adept at filtering promotional content and are particularly sensitive to authenticity and transparency (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). They prefer brands that reflect their personal identity, social responsibility, and inclusivity (Turner, 2015). The Nature study by Tang and Huang (2023) showed that social-media trustworthiness significantly predicts brand credibility among younger consumers.

Because Gen Z relies heavily on peer validation and influencer recommendations, credible social sources exert stronger persuasive power than traditional advertising. However, Avramidis (2024) cautioned that while influencer marketing effectively builds awareness, its long-term influence on loyalty is less consistent, suggesting that Gen Z's loyalty may be situational and dependent on continuous engagement and value alignment.

### **6.7 The Role of Authenticity and Transparency**

Authenticity is increasingly viewed as the core currency of influencer marketing. Audrezet et al. (2018) proposed that authenticity emerges from the alignment between an influencer's personal identity and their brand collaborations. When followers perceive this alignment, they interpret promotional content as genuine rather than opportunistic. Conversely, when influencers engage in excessive sponsorships or promote unrelated products, their authenticity erodes, leading to diminished trust and loyalty (Boerman, 2020). Transparency regarding paid partnerships has also been highlighted as essential for sustaining credibility. Research by Evans, Phua, Lim, and Jun (2017) found that disclosure of sponsorships, when presented clearly and honestly, enhances rather than undermines trust, as it aligns with ethical communication values. These findings suggest that authenticity and transparency work synergistically to maintain follower trust and loyalty, especially in markets where consumers are aware of commercial intent.

### **6.8 Gaps in the Literature**

Although considerable research has examined influencer marketing's role in shaping purchase intentions, several gaps remain in understanding its link to brand loyalty, particularly among Generation Z.

1. Temporal limitation – Most studies adopt cross-sectional designs, capturing immediate responses rather than long-term loyalty outcomes. Longitudinal research could better capture how sustained influencer exposure influences loyalty over time (Avramidis, 2024).
2. Mediating mechanisms – While influencer credibility has been shown to affect purchase intention, fewer studies explore the mediating roles of brand trust and intention in forming loyalty (Samanta et al., 2025).

3. Generation specificity – Gen Z consumers unique digital habits, ethical expectations, and value orientations require targeted investigation distinct from older cohorts (Francis & Hoefel, 2018).
4. Attribute differentiation – There remains ambiguity about which influencer attributes authenticity, expertise, attractiveness, or relatability most strongly predict loyalty (Gui et al., 2025).
5. Technological evolution – The emergence of AI-generated influencers introduces new ethical and trust challenges, raising questions about how synthetic personalities influence brand credibility (Northeastern University, 2025).

## **6.9 Summary**

The existing body of literature supports a strong theoretical link between influencer credibility, brand trust, purchase intention, and brand loyalty. The consensus indicates that trust acts as a vital mediator in the relationship between influencer marketing and sustained brand relationships. However, for Generation Z, whose loyalty is contingent on authenticity and social alignment, these relationships may operate differently. This study therefore aims to bridge these knowledge gaps by empirically testing the relationships among influencer credibility, brand trust, purchase intention, and brand loyalty in a Gen Z context, providing both theoretical and managerial insights into optimizing influencer-based strategies for enduring brand relationships.

# **7 Research Methodology**

## **7.1 Research Design**

A quantitative cross-sectional design will be employed to examine relationships among influencer credibility, brand trust, purchase intention, and loyalty.

## **7.2 Population and Sampling**

The study targets Generation Z consumers aged 18 to 27 years who actively follow at least one social media influencer and have made purchases influenced by online recommendations. Sampling Technique: Convenience sampling via online distribution (Instagram, TikTok, university groups). Sample Size: 150 to 200 participants.

## **7.3 Data Collection Tool**

Data will be gathered using a structured online questionnaire consisting of five sections:

1. Demographics
2. Influencer credibility (expertise, trustworthiness, authenticity, attractiveness)  
(adapted from Ohanian, 1990)
3. Brand trust (adapted from Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001)
4. Purchase intention and brand loyalty (adapted from previous marketing scales)

Responses will be measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree).

#### **7.4 Data Analysis**

Data will be analyzed using SPSS software:

- Descriptive statistics for demographic profiling.
- Correlation and regression analyses to test hypotheses.
- Mediation analysis (via regression analysis) to test indirect effects of brand trust and purchase intention.

#### **7.5 Ethical Considerations**

Participation will be voluntary and anonymous.

Informed consent will be obtained.

No personal identifiers will be collected.

Data will be used solely for academic purposes and stored securely.

### **8 Research Limits**

1. Sampling Bias: The study relies on convenience sampling, which may not fully represent all Gen Z consumers.
2. Cross-Sectional Design: Data collected at one point in time limits causal inference.
3. Self-Reported Data: Responses may be influenced by social desirability bias.
4. Platform Limitation: The study focuses on social media influencers (e.g., Instagram, TikTok), which may not generalize across all digital platforms.

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