

A Narrative Review of Influencer Marketing: The Role of Credibility and Emotional Engagement in Shaping Gen Z's Purchase Intentions

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ABSTRACT

Influencer marketing has become an important part of brand communication strategies in the digital age, especially in reaching Gen Z, who grew up with social media and are accustomed to making decisions based on digital content. This study aims to understand how two key aspects, influencer credibility and emotional engagement, independently shape Gen Z consumers' purchase intentions. The research was conducted in the form of a narrative review of 16 scholarly articles published between 2020 and 2025, obtained through literature searches on the Scopus, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar databases. The findings show that influencer credibility demonstrated through trustworthiness, expertise, and personal appeal has a significant influence in shaping brand perception and increasing purchase intention, especially when there is congruence between the influencer's identity and the audience. Meanwhile, emotional engagement through parasocial relationships and perceived authenticity can strengthen the psychological connection between followers and influencers, which in turn influences purchase decisions. However, most studies still examine these two aspects separately, and not many have examined their interrelationships in depth. Moreover, the lack of research focusing on the Southeast Asian context, particularly Indonesia, suggests the need for a more contextualized approach. This review contributes to summarizing the latest literature developments, as well as providing practical direction for the industry in designing digital communication strategies that are more aligned with the characteristics and preferences of Gen Z.

Keywords: Influencer Marketing, Credibility, Emotional Engagement, Gen Z, Purchase Intention

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INTRODUCTION

Advances in digital technology and the rapid development of social media have fundamentally changed the way brands engage with their consumers (Rocha & Leandro, 2024). Amidst these changes, influencer marketing has emerged as one of the most relevant and effective communication strategies, especially in reaching and influencing the behavior of consumers from Gen Z. Born between 1997 and 2012, Gen Z is an important demographic group for marketers due to their digital proficiency and unique consumer behavior (Sakashita, 2020)

Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube open up space for individuals with a high number of followers to become influential figures not only as content creators but also as figures capable

of shaping public opinion, building trust, and even influencing purchasing decisions (Marklen et al., 2025). This role, once reserved for mainstream media and celebrities, can now be assumed by anyone with digital social credibility (Garg & Gopal, 2024). Unlike traditional one-way advertising, the content shared by influencers is often more personalized, authentic, and relatable to their followers (Mercado & Zhang, 2024). The relationship built is not merely transactional but emotional.

Social media influencers (SMIs) have created a wide range of content, and research shows that SMIs are perceived as credible by media consumers, and their advertising can generate higher levels of user engagement compared to traditional advertising in general (Lee et al., 2022). These findings suggest a paradigm shift in how consumers establish trust, moving away from institutions toward relatable individuals. Such trust is formed through a number of attributes attached to the influencer, such as credibility, expertise, and social appeal. These attributes not only influence the audience's assessment of product information but also reinforce emotional closeness, which is often built through parasocial interactions and consistent expression of emotions (Aisyah et al., 2024; Chawla et al., 2025).

In practice, purchase intent is no longer driven solely by factual information about the product but also by emotional experiences that are narratively and personally constructed by the influencer (Belanche et al., 2021). Phenomena such as social proof and fear of missing out (FOMO) also accelerate impulsive decision-making, along with the pressure of social norms formed in digital media (Dinh & Lee, 2022). Although the topic of influencer marketing has been widely researched, most studies still address credibility and emotional engagement separately, without directly linking how they work together in shaping consumers' psychological responses.

This approach shows that the influence of each variable is still more often studied as a standalone aspect, and not many studies have developed an analytical framework that connects the two in an integrated manner. In addition, most of the existing research also focuses on Western and East Asian cultural contexts, while studies highlighting the dynamics of consumer behavior in the Southeast Asian region, including Indonesia, are still relatively limited. In fact, the social character and digital behavior of Gen Z in Indonesia have local nuances that are important to understand more contextually.

Based on this, this study is relevant both academically and practically. Academically, this study aims to enhance the understanding of each variable credibility and emotional engagement in relation to Gen Z's purchase intention by reviewing the findings published in recent years. On the practical side, the results of this study are expected to provide input for creative and digital marketing industry players in designing communication strategies that are more psychologically relevant and aligned with the values that young consumers consider important in the digital era.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Influencer Credibility

Influencer credibility is a key factor in influencer marketing that strongly influences consumer behavior and purchase intentions. Influencer credibility is based on trust, expertise, and alignment with the promoted brand and the target audience. Research shows that followers are more likely to trust influencers who have expertise in a particular field, and alignment between the influencer's regular content and the advertisements delivered is critical to maintaining credibility (Randers et al., 2023). In addition, parasocial relationships can enhance the perception of influencer credibility, as followers develop a one-sided emotional attachment to the influencer (Dhun & Dangi, 2023). Transparency and authenticity in influencer collaboration are essential for building trust and credibility (Pranav et al., 2025; Saad et al., 2025).

Emotional Engagement

Emotional engagement plays a significant role in the effectiveness of influencer marketing. Emotional attachment to influencers can increase engagement and drive higher purchase intentions for promoted products (S. F. Raquel & David, 2021). The parasocial relationship formed between followers and influencers increases trust as well as loyalty, leading to greater engagement and brand (Yan et al., 2025; Zheng et al., 2025). The emotional connection between followers and influencers often results in positive word-of-mouth and increases the purchase intention of the promoted product (Panthen & Germelmann, 2023).

Gen Z Purchase Intention

Purchase intention is a key concept in consumer behavior, which refers to the likelihood or probability that a consumer will purchase a particular product or service (Shin et al., 2020). This concept is often used by marketers and researchers to predict future sales and understand consumer motivation. The desire to satisfy a need or want drives the consumer's impulse or inclination to acquire a product, known as purchase intention. Another perspective defines it as consumer interest in products based on the evaluation of information obtained (Alamsyah et al., 2023). Gen Z's purchase intentions are influenced by complex interactions between environmental awareness, social media influence, technology engagement, cultural sensitivity, brand trust, emotional factors, and practical considerations. Influencer marketing that emphasizes empathy, perceived reciprocity, and influencer consistency is proven to significantly influence Gen Z's purchase decisions. Originality and creativity of content are key to building effective persuasion.

Social Media as a Supporting Platform

Social media plays an important role as a key channel in influencer marketing. Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat provide the necessary visibility and engagement tools that support the success of influencer marketing campaigns (Wang et al., 2025). The success of influencer marketing also relies heavily on the interactive features of these platforms, which reinforce information-seeking behavior and the development of affective trust from followers. Social media enables the creation of authentic and impactful marketing campaigns, which can more easily resonate with the target audience, especially among the younger generation (Chandratreya, 2024; Gowrishankar et al., 2024).

METHOD

Type of Review and Objectives

This study used a narrative review approach to synthesize and interpret the scientific literature related to the influence of influencer credibility and emotional engagement on Gen Z's purchase intention. This approach was chosen due to the diverse nature of the literature in terms of theory, methods, and context. Unlike a systematic review, a narrative review aims to understand patterns of findings, build thematic mappings, and identify gaps and directions for relevant research development.

Data Sources and Search Strategy

The literature search process in this study was conducted through three main academic databases: Google Scholar, Scopus, and ScienceDirect. In addition, the snowballing technique was also used by tracing the references from relevant articles. The publication timeframe was set from 2020 to 2025 to ensure that the studies reviewed reflect the latest dynamics in influencer marketing practices in the digital era, particularly those relevant to Gen Z audiences. Search keywords were compiled using a combination of Boolean operators such as ("influencer marketing" OR "digital influencer") AND ("credibility" OR "trustworthiness" OR "expertise") AND ("purchase intention" OR "buying behavior"), as well as ("emotional engagement" OR "parasocial interaction" OR "emotional contagion") AND ("Gen Z" OR

“generation z”). Additional filters were applied to limit the search results to scientific journal articles that are indexed, in English, and available in full text.

Articles were included in this review if they met several criteria: (1) they were empirical studies, either quantitative or qualitative, that discussed influencer marketing in the context of Gen Z’s purchase intention; (2) they explicitly highlighted one of the two main variables, namely influencer credibility or emotional engagement; (3) they were published in reputable scientific journals between 2020 and 2025; and (4) they were available in English and accessible in full text. Meanwhile, articles were excluded from the analysis if their main focus was not on digital influencers but rather on traditional public figures or conventional brand ambassadors, if the target population was not Gen Z (e.g., children or millennials), or if they did not directly discuss the relationship between influencer marketing and purchasing behavior or intentions.

From the initial search, 51 articles were found. After screening based on titles and abstracts, 35 articles proceeded to the full review stage. Sixteen of these articles satisfied all requirements and were added to the final synthesis. Articles that did not qualify were generally due to topic mismatch or because the focus of the study was in a non-empirical context. Some were excluded because they were part of a systematic review already cited in this study. Article quality assessment was not conducted quantitatively using a formal scoring system but was based on methodological clarity, topic relevance, and contribution to the discussion of the main theme.

The data extraction and synthesis process was conducted by classifying information from selected articles based on author name, publication year, main topic, research design or method, sample characteristics, key findings, and thematic focus (credibility, emotional involvement, or both). The narrative structure of this review centers on three main thematic focuses: first, the role of influencer credibility in shaping Gen Z’s brand perceptions and purchase intentions; second, psychological and emotional mechanisms such as parasocial interaction and emotional contagion; and third, conceptual and methodological gaps in the literature, along with their implications for future research and practice.

RESULTS

Of the 16 studies included in this narrative review, all were empirical in nature and mostly used quantitative cross-sectional designs, with a small number of studies integrating qualitative methods or meta-analysis approaches. The studies were mostly conducted among Gen Z respondents across various cultural contexts, including Vietnam, India, China, Turkey, and Indonesia. A total of 11 studies investigated the role of influencer credibility on purchase intention, while 5 studies focused on emotional engagement as a determinant of consumer behavior. Three studies examined both dimensions, exploring how emotional mechanisms intersect with perceived trust and expertise. Table 1 summarizes the categorization.

Table 1 Thematic synthesis of influencer marketing literature based on credibility and emotional engagement.

Theme	Author, Year	Findings
Credibility	(Rizomyliotis et al., 2024)	Influencer credibility influences brand consideration and purchase intention, moderated by green consumption value.
Credibility	(Babu et al., 2024)	Source credibility and influencer inspiration influence Gen Z purchase intention.

Theme	Author, Year	Findings
Credibility	(Onurlubaş, 2023)	Reliability, expertise and attractiveness influence brand image and purchase intention.
Credibility	(Huong et al., 2025)	Trust in influencers shapes Gen Z purchase decisions.
Credibility	(Nguyen et al., 2022)	Influencer credibility mediates the influence of entertainment value and peer reviews on purchase intention.
Credibility	(Olger et al., 2023)	Influencers mediate consumer behavior towards brands.
Credibility	(Kant et al., 2025)	Source credibility influences influencer attitudes and brand perceptions.
Credibility	(Rivai et al., 2023)	Trust, expertise and attractiveness attributes influence TikTok users' purchase intention.
Credibility	(Sardar et al., 2024)	Source credibility and content characteristics influence engagement and purchase intention.
Credibility	(Ao et al., 2023)	Meta-analysis shows influencer credibility has a high impact on purchase intention.
Credibility	(Le, 2024)	Credibility and brand fit increase engagement and purchase intention.
Emotional Engagement	(Alawad, 2024)	Facial expressions and emotional cues from influencers foster parasocial bonds that heighten engagement and drive purchase intention.
Emotional Engagement	(Holiday et al., 2023)	Influencers' facial expressions and emotional language increase engagement.
Emotional Engagement	(Kapoor et al., 2025)	Emotional contagion mediates the influence of content on engagement and purchase intention.
Emotional Engagement	(Babu et al., 2024)	Parasocial interaction as a form of emotional engagement moderates relationships.
Emotional Engagement	(Sharma & Sanu, 2025)	Gen Z tends to follow authentic and emotional influencers.

Influencer Credibility and Purchase Intention

Most studies highlight the crucial role of influencer credibility in shaping consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions. Rizomyliotis et al. (2024) found that influencer credibility significantly predicted brand consideration and purchase intention among Gen Z, especially when moderated by green consumption values. Similarly, Babut et al. (2024) established that both source credibility and inspiration were positively associated with purchase intention. Onurlubaş (2023) identified reliability, expertise, and attractiveness as significant predictors of brand image and purchase behavior in the apparel sector.

Huong et al. (2025) highlighted trust as a critical prerequisite for Gen Z's purchase of beauty products, while Nguyen et al. (2022) positioned credibility as a mediator between perceived entertainment/information value and purchase intention. Olger et al. (2023) highlighted the mediating role of influencers between social media interactions and brand-related behaviors. Kantt et al. (2025)

suggested that credibility indicators influence consumer attitudes and brand perceptions, which directly impact purchase intentions. Studies from Le (2024), Rivai et al. (2023), and Sardar et al. (2024) collectively reinforce that trust, perceived knowledge, and congruence with brand identity are central factors in influencing Gen Z consumer behavior. The meta-analytic evidence by Ao et al. (2023) further quantified credibility as the most influential influencer characteristic across 62 studies.

Emotional Engagement and Consumer Response

A subset of studies explored how emotional mechanisms, specifically parasocial interactions and affective resonance, influence purchase behavior. Alawad (2024) found that facial expressions and emotionally charged language used by influencers significantly enhance audience engagement, especially among Gen Z. Holiday et al. (2023) used multimodal analysis of faces and text to show that emotional expressions and network characteristics drive online engagement. Kapoor et al. (2025) revealed that emotional contagion mediates the effects of humorous and informative content on brand engagement and purchase intention.

Babu et al. (2024) also identified parasocial interaction as a moderator variable, strengthening the relationship between influencer credibility and purchase intention. Sharma & Sanu (2025) concluded that emotional authenticity is a key factor in Gen Z trust, with a preference towards influencers who are perceived as relatable and authentic. Overall, the reviewed literature confirms that both influencer credibility and emotional engagement serve as critical psychological mechanisms that amplify the persuasive power of influencer marketing among Gen Z. While credibility grounds the rational evaluation of the source, emotional engagement deepens psychological engagement, which in turn increases the intention to purchase the recommended product.

DISCUSSION

The results of this review confirm that influencer credibility and emotional engagement are the two dominant psychological mechanisms that influence Gen Z's purchase intention. However, simply confirming these findings is not enough to get a handle on the influencer marketing phenomenon. Therefore, this section further explores how the dynamics between credibility and emotional engagement operate, highlights inconsistencies in findings and methodological limitations, and proposes broader theoretical and practical implications.

Credibility: Rational Evaluation or Symbolic Representation?

Although most studies show that credibility consisting of trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness positively contributes to purchase intention, an overly homogenous approach to this concept may lead to reductionism. For example, only a few studies, such as Kant et al. (2025) and Nguyen et al. (2022), distinguish between credibility as a cognitive versus symbolic construct. Future research needs to examine whether credibility perceptions differ when influencers are celebrities compared to micro-influencers who are socially closer to their audience.

Emotional Engagement: An Untapped Dimension of Affection

Studies such as Kapoor et al. (2025) underline the importance of emotional bonding and affection contagion in amplifying the influence of marketing messages. However, many studies still take a one-way approach in viewing emotional engagement as a passive reaction to content. In fact, emotional interactions on social media are two-way and dynamic, influenced by algorithms and social context. This suggests a need for more ethnographic or real-time experimental approaches to accurately capture emotional dynamics.

Interdimensional Interactions: Mutually Reinforcing or Conflicting Credibility and Emotion?

Few studies have explicitly examined how credibility and emotional engagement interact. The study by Babu et al. (2024) that considers parasocial interactions as a moderator opens a new albeit limited avenue for exploration. Can an emotionally expressive influencer who lacks credibility still be effective? We need to address these unanswered questions and gaps in the literature.

Limitations of the existing literature and implications for future research are discussed.

The majority of studies reviewed used a cross-sectional quantitative design, which limits the interpretation of causality. In addition, data collection was generally perception-based and self-reported, which is prone to recall bias. The lack of longitudinal and experimental approaches hinders the understanding of the long-term effects of exposure to influencers. Geographically, South and East Asian contexts still dominate the literature, with minimal representation from developing countries in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia. This makes it difficult to generalize findings to broader populations and ignores cultural variables that may influence interpretations of credibility or emotional expression.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, the findings support and extend the source credibility model and parasocial interaction theory but also encourage integration with emotional approaches in digital marketing communications. Brands must consider not only who their influencers are, but also how they convey messages emotionally and authentically. In addition, it is important to avoid emotional exploitation of young audiences. Regulations and ethics in digital marketing should start considering how emotional manipulation can impact Gen Z's psychological vulnerability.

CONCLUSION

This review shows that influencer credibility and emotional engagement play an important role in shaping Gen Z's purchase intention. On the one hand, credibility provides the basis for consumers' judgment of the information conveyed. On the other hand, emotional engagement enables the formation of affective bonds that strengthen the influence of messages, especially in the context of parasocial relationships and content that is perceived as authentic. Despite the frequent discussion of credibility and emotion in isolation, only a handful of studies have attempted to comprehend their interplay. In fact, in practice, audiences often process rational and emotional elements simultaneously when engaging with influencer content. This is the conceptual gap that future research needs to bridge.

In terms of methodology, most of the studies reviewed are still quantitative and limited to cross-sectional designs, which is not sufficient to explain the complex and dynamic processes in the formation of purchase intentions. Furthermore, the representation of local cultural contexts, like the experiences of Gen Z in Southeast Asia, remains inadequate. Overall, this review provides a more thorough understanding of how influencer marketing works not only through the messages delivered but also through the emotional experiences created. This review's main contribution is to promote a more integrative approach that considers who is speaking, what is said, and how the audience feels emotionally connected to the message. This type of analysis is what, ultimately, shapes consumer decisions in the fast-paced and highly personalized digital age.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From a research perspective, it is important to start integrating credibility and emotional engagement into a more complete conceptual framework. So far, the two dimensions have often been studied separately, whereas in the digital reality, they are likely to influence each other. An integrative approach will deepen theoretical understanding and open up opportunities to explain more complex dynamics in Gen Z consumer behavior. In addition, future studies should consider using longitudinal or experimental designs that allow for the analysis of causal relationships and long-term effects. The understanding of how exposure to influencers impacts not only immediate purchase intentions but also brand loyalty is still very limited. Multi-method approaches and the use of digital technologies such as sentiment analysis, facial expression tracking, or AI-based modeling can also provide a new dimension in viewing emotional responses more accurately and in real time.

Beyond methodological aspects, the cultural context also requires special attention. The lack of representation from Southeast Asian countries shows the need for research that is more rooted in local social and cultural realities. Given the dynamic nature of Gen Z in this region and its proximity to social media, contextual research will make a significant contribution to enriching the global literature, which is still too dominated by studies from specific regions. In industry practice, the results of this study emphasize the importance of selecting influencers who not only have a large number of followers but are also able to build authentic emotional connections with their audiences. Micro-influencers, for example, often show higher levels of trust and engagement due to social proximity and more personalized communication. A successful marketing campaign is not only informative but also one that is able to build an emotionally resonant narrative.

Content strategies also need to be geared towards creating resonant experiences, not just promotions. Brands need to understand that Gen Z is more responsive to messages that reflect values, honesty, and emotional closeness. Therefore, audience segmentation should not only be based on demographic data but also include mapping affective preferences and the types of digital interactions that are most meaningful to them. In the policy realm, ethical issues in digital marketing should be a major concern. The utilization of emotions in marketing content, especially those aimed at young audiences, requires clear boundaries to prevent it from becoming a form of manipulation. Regulations that encourage transparency in the relationship between influencers and brands are essential to maintain public trust, including the need for explicit labeling of paid content. It is also important to encourage digital and emotional literacy among Gen Z. The ability to recognize persuasion strategies, distinguish authentic content from disguised promotions, and understand how their emotions are managed by social media algorithms are increasingly crucial skills in the digital age. Overall, this review not only shows what is known about influencer marketing but also what is not yet sufficiently understood and that's where future development should start.

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