

Authenticity or Illusion? Exploring the Impact of Influencer Marketing on Gen Z's Purchase Decisions

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Abstract

The rise of social media platforms has changed the whole architecture of modern marketing, and influencer endorsements have become a primary mechanism through which brands try to influence the consumer behaviour. But the success of influencer marketing is built on the perceived authenticity. This research explores the influence of influencer marketing on purchasing behaviour of Generation Z (Gen Z) with a focus of perceived authenticity, influencer credibility, trust, and engagement. This study proposes a conceptual model which includes five connected constructs and seven testable hypotheses based on Source Credibility Theory, Parasocial Interaction Theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model. The proposed quantitative methodology uses Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) with survey data from 450 respondents of Gen Z. This study aims to address a long-standing conceptual dilemma in the existing literature: whether the persuasive power of influencer material signals real audience involvement or is a purposefully constructed illusion. The Findings of the study are predicted to indicate that perceived authenticity regulates the connection between influencer credibility and purchase intention, and parasocial interaction moderates the trust–engagement nexus. On the theoretical front, the study helps to integrate previously segregated frameworks and on a practical level, it offers advice which is actionable for brand managers and content strategists working in an era of increased consumer mistrust.

Keywords: Influencer marketing, Gen Z, perceived authenticity, source credibility, Purchase intention, parasocial interaction, social media.

Introduction

The digital economy has brought about a exemplary change in communication of brands, with traditional advertising formats becoming increasingly marginal in the consumption of younger populations. In such a changing landscape, influencer marketing has become a multi-billion-dollar industry, with a global estimation of USD 21.1 billion in 2023 and projected to surpass

the USD 32.5 billion by 2025 (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024; Statista, 2024). The social media ecosystem is at the core of this expansion. People with large followings, often called influencers, co-create and share branded content on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Snapchat. Influencer marketing, in contrast to traditional celebrity endorsement, is persuasive because it is perceived as relatable, intimate, and, most importantly, authentic (Audrezet et al., 2020; Enke & Borchers, 2021). Generation Z, broadly defined as those born between 1997 and 2012 (Twenge, 2017), are the major target group for marketing pushed by influencers. Gen Z customers are digital natives, never having seen a world without the internet, and as such, they display unique patterns of media consumption, brand appraisal and purchasing behaviour. Gen Z is more sceptical of overt commercial messaging than Millennials, more positive about transparency and social consciousness in brand identities, and more likely to privilege peer and influencer recommendations over institutional advertising (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; McKinsey & Company, 2023). Influencer content is believed to have a significant impact on Gen Z's purchase intentions, and understanding the mechanisms behind this is not just an academic pursuit but also a strategic commercial imperative (Bloomberg, 2021). Their global purchasing power is estimated at USD 360 billion and is projected to grow substantially in the next decade.

The scholarly literature suggests a tension yet to be fully theorised: the boundary between genuine participation and contrived illusion in influencer material. While a body of research demonstrates that perceived authenticity has a positive effect on consumer trust and purchase intention (Audrezet et al., 2020; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020), much less attention has been paid to the conditions under which such authenticity perceptions are formed, contested, or strategically manufactured. The increasing commercialisation of influencer content, as evidenced by undisclosed sponsored posts, inflated engagement metrics, and algorithmic amplification, has produced what scholars increasingly refer to as a “parasocial illusion” (Tukachinsky & Sangalang, 2022), in which the affective bonds that consumers form with influencers are structurally asymmetric and instrumentally managed.

Prior studies have studied separate dimensions of this phenomenon in relative isolation. Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) investigated the impact of Instagram influencers on purchase decisions of young female consumers and found that perceived authenticity and opinion leadership were major determinants of credibility. Lou and Yuan (2019) explored the mediating effect of informativeness and entertainment value in influencer advertising; Sokolova and Kefi (2020) showed that parasocial interaction and physical attractiveness are important predictors of follower purchase intentions on YouTube and Instagram. Extending this investigation, Ki, Cuevas, Chong, and Lim (2020) studied the effect of self-congruity and identification with influencers on brand attitude. Nevertheless, these studies, though significant in their own right, do not constitute a coherent explanatory model that tackles the authenticity–illusion duality as a contingent outcome of influencer credibility, trust calibration, and engagement architecture. The motivation and contribution of the present investigation is this lacuna.

Objectives:

1. The significance of perceived authenticity in influencer marketing among Gen Z customers.

2. To study the effect of influencer credibility and trust on purchase intention.
3. To explore whether influencer marketing generates real engagement or an illusion of it among Gen Z.
4. To create and test a conceptual model describing the influence of influencer marketing on the purchasing decisions of Generation Z.

Literature Review

Influencer marketing as an academic construct is conceptually grounded in the two-step flow of communication model (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), which suggests that the effects of mass media are mediated by “opinion leaders” who filter, interpret, and pass on information to broader social networks. In the digital age, this model has been radicalised: the thresholds for opinion leadership have dropped, the magnitude of influence has grown exponentially, and the feedback relations between influencers and followers have become bidirectional and algorithmically mediated (Enke & Borchers, 2021; Freberg et al., 2011). One of the first comprehensive conceptualisations of the ‘social media influencer’ was presented by Freberg et al. (2011), who defined such an individual as a new sort of independent third-party endorser who influences audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and other social media applications. The term has been updated by contemporary studies to take into account the multiplicity of influencer typologies. Mega-influencers (>1 million followers), macro-influencers (100,000-1 million), micro-influencers (1,000-100,000), and nano-influencers (<1,000) have different credibility profiles, audience reach and engagement rates (Hudders et al., 2021; Veirman et al., 2017). Follower count and perceived credibility are related in a non linear way (Veirman et al., 2017). Campaigns may want to consider micro-influencers, who often generate higher engagement rates and more positive changes in brand attitude than macro-influencers. Taken together, this body of study implies that scale is not synonymous with influence, but rather the quality of the influencer-follower connection – defined by trust, intimacy, and perceived congruence – is the major predictor of persuasive impact.

However, the literature is still debated about the differentiation between influencer marketing and traditional celebrity endorsement. In a comparative experimental study, Schouten et al. (2021) found that influencers created higher levels of identification and purchase intention than traditional celebrities. They explained the differential by the greater perceived parasocial closeness and authenticity associated with influencer content. However, this benefit depends on the fact that, as the frequency and financial importance of influencer-brand partnerships increase, the differences between real endorsement and commercial advertisement are less clear, and consumer mistrust increases (Audrezet et al., 2020; Campbell & Grimm, 2019). Source Credibility Theory is the theoretical basis of influencer credibility research. It was originally developed in the context of attitude change and persuasion by Hovland, Janis and Kelley (1953). The theory suggests that two main characteristics influence the persuasiveness of a communication source: competence (the extent to which the source is seen as competent and knowledgeable) and trustworthiness (the extent to which the source is seen as honest and unbiased). The model was later modified by scholars to include attractiveness as a third factor (McGuire, 1985), resulting in a tripartite model that has since been widely used in advertising and celebrity endorsement studies.

Source credibility has been adapted for the participative and relational nature of social media

interactions in influencer marketing environments. Lou and Yuan (2019) investigated the determination of influencer advertising value by using a modified source credibility framework and found that informativeness and entertainment are significant predictors of advertising attitude and purchase intention, mediated by credibility. Their study noted that, unlike typical advertising environments, the credibility of an influencer is formed dynamically through prolonged content interaction and is not a static trait displayed by an endorser. Ki et al. (2020) further muddled this picture by revealing the moderating effect of self-congruity – the fit between a follower’s self-concept and their view of the influencer’s identity – in the impact of credibility on brand attitude formation.

A major shortcoming of the source credibility concept, however, is the assumption that credibility perceptions are largely consistent across consumption situations. This assumption is challenged by a burgeoning literature on sponsored content disclosure. Campbell and Grimm (2019) found that obligatory disclosures of compensated collaborations – such as those mandated by regulators like the U.S. The Federal Trade Commission and the UK’s Advertising Standards Authority paradoxically undermine the apparent legitimacy of the recommendation by foregrounding the business motivation underpinning the endorsement. This is consistent with the work of Boerman et al. (2017), who demonstrated that the activation of persuasion knowledge, i.e., the consumer’s awareness of being the target of a persuasion attempt, diminishes the positive effects of influencer endorsements, particularly for more media-literate audiences, such as Gen Z.

Authenticity is the most frequently mentioned and the least theoretically explored construct in the influencer marketing literature. Drawing on existentialist philosophy (Taylor, 1991), and subsequently used in marketing by the concept of brand authenticity (Beverland, 2005; Morhart et al., 2015), perceived authenticity in the context of influencers is defined as the consumer’s judgement that an influencer’s content truly expresses his or her personal values, experiences and expertise, rather than being driven mainly by commercial reasons (Audrezet et al., 2020; Enke & Borchers, 2021).

Audrezet et al. (2020) performed a detailed qualitative study investigating how influencers themselves navigate the tension between authenticity and commercialisation, identifying four strategic approaches: transparency (declaring brand partnerships while retaining an authentic voice), filtering (only endorsing brands that align with personal values), compartmentalisation (keeping commercial and personal content separate), and performance (creating an authentic persona that is itself a strategic artefact). These strategies demonstrate that authenticity is not a binary property but a performative achievement, which is consistent with Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical model of self-presentation and raises fundamental questions about the epistemological status of claims to authenticity in heavily mediated digital environments.

Perceived authenticity has been empirically related to favourable consumer outcomes. In a study of YouTube and Instagram users, Sokolova and Kefi (2020) showed that authenticity, as a sub-dimension of parasocial interaction, was among the strongest predictors of purchase intention. Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) found that female Instagram users between 18 and 35 years judged influencers who were authentic as substantially more credible and purchase-intention-inducing than those who appeared excessively commercial. More recently, Pilgrim

and Bohnet-Joschko (2019) showed that health-related influencer content perceived as authentic resulted in higher behaviour change intentions than comparable institutional content. This suggests that authenticity premiums might be especially strong for high involvement product categories.

But the construct validity of perceived authenticity is still debated. One major criticism raised by Tukachinsky and Sangalang (2022) is that the 'authentic' influencer behaviour that consumers experience is often the product of complex brand management, algorithmic optimisation and performative vulnerability – what they call the 'authenticity paradox'. This paradox is especially common with Gen Z, who are not only receptive to authenticity but have the digital literacy to identify and comment on its construction. An empirical resolution of this conundrum, i.e., whether Gen Z's perceptions of authenticity are systematically skewed by parasocial investment, is a notable lacuna in the existing literature.

Horton and Wohl (1956) created Parasocial Interaction Theory (PSI) to explain the one sided, pseudo-intimate interactions media audiences develop with individuals they encounter through mediated communication. Initially developed to describe television characters, PSI has been widely updated to explain the more interactive and bidirectional nature of social media relationships (Labrecque, 2014; Tukachinsky & Sangalang, 2022). In the literature on influencer marketing, PSI has been identified as a core concept that mediates the influence of influencer content on customer attitudes and actions.

Labrecque (2014) first systematically applied PSI to social media marketing. He developed a scale to quantify parasocial contact and relationship on Twitter and found that the perceptions were significant predictors of brand attitude and buy intention. These associations have been validated in later investigations on several platforms and product categories (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Xiao et al., 2018). Importantly, PSI has been found to modify the credibility-trust link. Followers with high levels of parasocial connection to an influencer tend to ignore signals of commercial motivation that would otherwise impair perceived credibility (Bond, 2021).

The consequences of PSI for the authenticity-illusion argument are nontrivial. If parasocial investment reduces consumers' vulnerability to signs of inauthenticity such as forced enthusiasm, mismatched product endorsements, or undisclosed sponsorships, then the 'illusion' of authenticity may be structurally sustainable in ways that traditional advertising relationships are not. This hypothesis has been partially supported by Giles (2002), who stated that parasocial interactions can protect media people from reputational damage in ways true social relationships cannot. In the context of Gen Z influencer consumption, a theoretically important and practically consequential research topic is to understand when PSI amplifies or attenuates the perception of authenticity.

Several distinguishing elements characterise Generation Z's connection with digital media that set them apart from earlier generations and merit specific theoretical attention. Gen Z are the first generation to have been socialised in a multi-platform, always-on digital environment and display a sophisticated, often sardonic interaction with commercial content (Twenge, 2017; Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Unlike Millennials, who were early adopters of social media and thus had to gain media literacy in retrospect, Gen Z has absorbed critical frameworks for assessing digital information as part of their developing socialisation.

Research has repeatedly identified a number of Gen Z-specific features that have direct consequences for the effectiveness of influencer marketing. The predilection of Gen Z for short-form video material (TikTok, Instagram Reels), as opposed to long-form text or image-based content, has consequences for the nature of influencer relationships that are likely to be developed and maintained (Vrontis et al., 2021). Second, Gen Z consumers are more sensitive to value alignment, far more inclined to engage and buy from brands that publicly align to social, environmental and political causes they support (Deloitte, 2023; McKinsey, 2023). Third, community validation is an important factor in the purchase decisions of Gen Z, with peer networks and online communities (e.g. Reddit, Discord, Xiaohongshu) being used to interrogate and contextualise influencer claims, creating a kind of distributed authenticity verification running in parallel with their individual credibility assessments (Seemiller & Grace, 2019).

Crucially, Gen Z is not a monolith, and there's a great deal of heterogeneity within the generation by gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic level, and platform choice (Twenge, 2017). Research that considers Gen Z as a homogeneous section risks overlooking variability in authenticity calibration mechanisms and varied vulnerability to parasocial illusion in the subgroups. Future research, including the present study, must recognise and address this variance in research design and interpretation.

Research Gap

Combined, the extant literature provides a firm empirical basis for several propositions: that influencer credibility positively influences consumer trust (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Ki et al., 2020); that perceived authenticity mediates the influence of credibility on purchase intention (Audrezet et al., 2020; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020); and that parasocial interaction is an important mechanism through which the influencer–follower relationship acquires and sustains its persuasive power (Labrecque, 2014; Bond, 2021). So, there are three major gaps.

First, the literature has not theorised enough about the conditions in which Gen Z consumers identify actual authenticity from its purposeful simulation. Most studies operationalise authenticity as a consumer perspective (i.e. perceived authenticity) without examining the cognitive processes by which this view is produced, challenged or updated in the light of disconfirming data. Second, current conceptual models tend to see trust as a consequence of credibility instead of a dynamic, situationally sensitive relational state that may be built up or broken down through repeated exposure to sponsored content. Third, although there are some studies that have studied distinct predictors of purchase intention individually, few studies have evaluated a holistic model that integrates credibility, authenticity, parasocial interaction, trust, and engagement as a causal system. The present study closes these three gaps through theoretical synthesis and empirical specification.

Conceptual Framework and Hypothesis Development

Overview of Proposed Model

The conceptual framework for this study is based on three theoretical foundations – Source Credibility Theory (Hovland et al., 1953), Parasocial Interaction Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956), and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), which provide

the theoretical basis for the mechanisms through which influencer marketing influences Gen Z purchase decisions. The model consists of five major constructs: Influencer Credibility (IC), Perceived Authenticity (PA), Trust (TR), Engagement (ENG) and Purchase Intention (PI). The structural links among these constructs are depicted in Figure 1 and are discussed and supported through hypothesis building below.

The ELM is very advantageous in the present framework. It identifies two pathways to persuasion, the central route involving careful, effortful development of message arguments, and the periphery route dependent on heuristic indicators such as source attractiveness, social proof and emotive valence. This distinction has direct implications for influencer marketing. Consumers who process an influencer's content centrally (i.e., engage deeply) are more likely to form durable assessments of trust and credibility. Those who process peripherally (e.g., scrolling, passive viewing) are more susceptible to illusion effects based on surface signals of authenticity. Thus, the model predicts a moderating effect of elaboration depth on the authenticity – illusion tension, with high involvement as a proxy of central route processing.

Hypotheses

Credibility and Perceived Authenticity of Influencer

Source Credibility Theory argues that perceived knowledge and trustworthiness of the message source are the main precursors of persuasive impact. Credibility, including expertise in the endorsed domain, perceived objectivity, and communication skills, has been theorised as a significant antecedent of authenticity perception in influencer scenarios. Followers who see an influencer as an expert, honest and consistent with their endorsed domain are more likely to regard an influencer's material as a real expression of personal belief rather than a performance influenced by commercial interests (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Ki et al., 2020). This logic aligns with Morhart et al. (2015), who showed that perceived brand authenticity increases when the brand's claims are backed by credible expertise signals.

H1: Influencer credibility has a favourable relationship with perceived authenticity among Gen Z customers.

Consumers' Perceived Authenticity and Trust

The link between perceived authenticity and trust has been theorised in a number of consumer behaviour areas, such as organic food (Napolitano et al., 2008), handcrafted products (Beverland, 2005), and more recently, social media influencing (Audrezet et al., 2020). It is hypothesised that perceptions of authenticity mitigate the cognitive confusion surrounding the influencer's motives and serve as a trust signal. Gen Z consumers are more willing to extend trust, which serves as a heuristic for purchasing decisions (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020), when they think that an influencer's endorsement is a true reflection of personal experience and values (rather than a contractually mandated performance). On the other hand, authenticity violations (e.g. undeclared sponsorships) lead to trust erosion with possibly long-term effects on the influencer-follower connection.

H2: The perceived authenticity has a beneficial effect on consumer trust in influencer endorsements.

Consumers' Trust and Purchase Intention

Trust has been widely acknowledged as a key mediator between marketing stimuli and

behavioural reactions (Moorman et al., 1993; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In e-commerce and social commerce environments, trust is important in reducing perceived risk and increasing purchase intention by providing cognitive confidence that the recommender's suggestions are trustworthy (Kim & Peterson, 2017). In the context of influencer marketing, Sokolova and Kefi (2020) showed that trust, operationalised as belief in the influencer's authenticity, was a strong predictor of buy intention in both YouTube and Instagram contexts. This will probably be particularly the case for Gen Z, who are sceptical of institutional advertising, but have a high tendency to act on trusted peer-like influencer recommendations.

H3: Purchase intention is favourably related to consumer trust in influencer recommendations.

Consumer Trust and Influencer Credibility

In addition to the indirect approach through perceived authenticity, the positive effect of influencer credibility on customer trust is theorised. This direct route suggests the operation of heuristic processing (the peripheral route in ELM terms): consumers lacking the motivation or ability to deeply process influencer content might rely on credibility cues – follower counts, verified status, polished aesthetics, cues of domain expertise – as proxies for trustworthiness without engaging in complex authenticity assessments. This is especially crucial in information-rich, low-attention scrolling contexts, which are typical for using TikTok (Vrontis et al., 2021).

H4: Consumer trust is positively related to influencer credibility, regardless of perceived genuineness.

Engagement and Real Authenticity

In this study, engagement is operationalised as behavioural (likes, shares, comments, saves) and cognitive (elaborative processing of material) and hypothesised as both an antecedent and consequence of perceived authenticity. As to the ELM, increased engagement should enhance the perception of authenticity by prompting more detailed processing of content cues, and authentic information should be more prone to inspire engaged reactions since it resonates with the values and experiences of followers. Xiao et al. (2018) found that the quality of engagement, defined as the depth and reciprocity of interaction between influencers and their followers, was a stronger predictor of purchase intention than the quantity of engagement (i.e., raw interaction metrics), indicating that algorithmic inflation of engagement figures does not substitute for the persuasive role of authentic interactive engagement.

H5: Perceived authenticity is favourably related to consumer interaction with influencer material.

Parasocial Interaction and Consumer Confidence

Consistent with PSI Theory, the present paradigm proposes that parasocial interaction (the follower's subjective experience of closeness, friendship, and reciprocity with the influencer) enhances the effect of credibility on trust by decreasing the psychological gap between follower and influencer. Labrecque (2014) showed that parasocial connection views on Twitter were positively associated with brand attitude and purchase intention, while Bond (2021) revealed that parasocial ties buffered influencers against trust degradation after sponsored content disclosure. In the current study, PSI is seen as a direct antecedent of trust and a potential

modifier of the authenticity-trust relationship.

H6: Parasocial engagement of influencers is favourably connected with customer trust.

Purchase Intention and Engagement as Mutually Reinforcing Outcomes

Finally, the model indicates that engagement and purchase intention are downstream outcomes of trust and perceived authenticity and are mutually reinforcing. Consumers planning to purchase an influencer-endorsed product are more inclined to actively engage in related content (searching for reviews, comparison information, community validation), and active participation leads to a commitment escalation cycle that strengthens purchase intentions (Cialdini, 1984; Hajli et al., 2017). This two-way relationship is what makes influencer marketing different from traditional advertising, where buy intention does not usually feed back into message engagement modification.

H7: Consumers' involvement with the content of influencers is positively related to purchase intention.

Research approach

Research Design and Philosophical Positioning

The epistemological stance of this study is positivism, which is based on the notion that social phenomena such as consumer attitudes and purchase intentions can be systematically quantified and causal linkages among constructs may be quantitatively identified. Consistent with this ontological position, the current study utilises a quantitative cross-sectional survey design. This type of approach is well-suited to test hypotheses obtained from theory through statistical analysis of numerical data and has been widely used in similar research on influencer marketing (e.g., Ki et al., 2020; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Lou & Yuan, 2019). A cross-sectional method is sufficient for the validation of the conceptual model and forms a basis for future longitudinal inquiry, whereas a longitudinal design would allow for more robust causal inference.

Population Studied and Sampling Method

The target market is Gen Z (born 1997–2012) who are active users of social media and are exposed to influencer material on at least one of the major platforms (i.e., Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, or Snapchat). Operationally, this audience is defined as people who follow at least one influencer account and say that they consume influencer content at least once a week. These inclusion criteria are intended to ensure that respondents have the experiential basis for meaningful attitudinal assessments of influencer credibility, authenticity and trust.

We will use a quota sampling technique to make sure that we have representative responses across important demographic characteristics, such as gender (male/female/non-binary), platform choice and influencer category (fashion/beauty, fitness/health, food/lifestyle, technology, gaming, social justice). The target sample size N is set at 450 based on the analytical criteria of Structural Equation Modelling. Hair et al. (2019) recommend at least ten observations per estimated parameter for SEM. Given the predicted complexity of the model (about 35 free parameters), a sample of 450 gives acceptable statistical power ($1 - \beta > 0.80$) at a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$. Distribution of the online survey will be assisted via academic networks, recruiting posters on social media and collaborations with digital communities that target Gen Z, with a snowball component for hard-to-reach segments.

Measurement Scales and Survey Instrument

The survey instrument is divided into three sections: (1) demographic and social media usage profile; (2) measuring scales of constructs; and (3) open-ended items to elicit qualitative authenticity narratives (included for descriptive purposes only). All latent components were examined with validated multi-item reflective scales modified from existing instruments and measured on a seven-point Likert scale with anchors ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree).

Influencer Credibility (IC) is operationalised with a seven-item scale adopted from Ohanian (1990) and Lou and Yuan (2019) covering expertise (e.g. 'This influencer has a lot of knowledge about the products they endorse'), trustworthiness (e.g. 'This influencer is honest in their recommendation') and attractiveness dimensions. The Perceived Authenticity (PA) construct is measured with six items adapted from Morhart et al. (2015) and Audrezet et al. (2020), such as "This influencer's content reflects their genuine personal values" and "I believe this influencer endorses products they actually use." The Trust (TR) construct is measured with a five-item scale adapted from Morgan and Hunt (1994) and Sokolova and Kefi (2020), with items measuring confidence, reliability, and benevolence attributions toward the influencer. Engagement (ENG) is measured with six items based on the behavioural and cognitive engagement aspects, derived from Xiao et al. (2018) and Hollebeek et al. (2014). Purchase Intention (PI) is measured by a four-item scale adapted from Dodds et al. (1991), including items such as 'I would consider purchasing a product recommended by this influencer'. Parasocial Interaction (PSI) is measured through five items adapted from Labrecque (2014), capturing the sentiment of friendship, intimacy and reciprocal relationship with the influencer. Before comprehensive data collection, the instrument will be reviewed by an expert panel (n = 5 marketing academics) and a pilot study with Gen Z respondents (n = 40) to determine face validity, understanding and reliability of the scale. Items yielding corrected item-total correlations below 0.40 or substantially reducing Cronbach's alpha will be revised or eliminated.

Data Quality Procedures and Common Method Bias

The self-report character of the survey instrument offers a possible danger to construct validity because of common method variance (CMV). To minimise this risk, the study will adopt many procedural and statistical precautions proposed by Podsakoff et al. (2012). From a procedural perspective, the survey will be developed to provide psychological separation between predictor and criterion variables. Randomised item ordering and a temporal separation module will be placed between the credibility/authenticity and buy intention sections. Afterwards, a post hoc Harman's single-factor test will be run to statistically analyse the severity of CMV. If considerable common method bias is found, a common latent factor approach within the SEM framework will be used.

To further improve data quality, attention checks will be included in the survey instrument (e.g., "Please select Agree for this item"), and survey responses with a completion time of less than three minutes (showing inattentive responding) will be removed from analysis. Respondent anonymity will be guaranteed by explicit informed consent processes in accordance with the ethical norms of the British Psychological Society (BPS) and the

Declaration of Helsinki.

Analytical Strategy

The analysis of data will be conducted in two stages. 2. The initial stage will involve the use of AMOS 26 to perform Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to assess the measurement model, which comprises construct reliability (Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability), convergent validity (average variance extracted; AVE > 0.50), and discriminant validity (Fornell-Larcker criterion; HTMT ratio < 0.90). Model fit will be assessed using a range of fit indices: Comparative Fit Index (CFI > 0.95), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI > 0.95), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA 0.06) and Standardised Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR 0.08), in line with current methodological best practice (Hair et al., 2019; Hu & Bentler, 1999).

The second stage will examine the seven hypothesised relationships using comprehensive structural model estimation. In testing indirect (mediated) pathways, including hypothesised mediation of perceived authenticity in the credibility-trust purchase intention chain, bootstrapping approaches (n = 5,000 bootstrap samples) will be used (Hayes, 2018). Moderation hypotheses concerning parasocial interaction will be examined utilising interaction terms within the SEM framework, employing the product-of-indicators approach provided by Marsh et al. (2004). All structural routes are presented as standardised path coefficients (β) with matching t-values and p-values. To comment on the practical relevance of significant correlations, effect size estimates (f^2) are computed.

Data Analysis and Expected Results

Profile of the Sample

The expected sample (N = 450) will be quota-controlled to match the distribution of the target population, approximately 52% female, 42% male and 6% non-binary or gender non-conforming participants, in accordance with the gender distribution of active social media users in the Gen Z demographic (Pew Research Centre, 2023). Most of the respondents are expected to be aged between 18 and 24 (about 65%), with the other 35% aged between 25 and 27. Platform preferences are predicted to be spread between TikTok (around 40%), Instagram (35%), YouTube (18%) and other platforms (7%), in line with present trends in platform use among Gen Z in Western and South Asian markets (DataReportal, 2024).

Validity of Measurement Model

The measurement model is expected to provide a satisfactory fit according to the literature and pilot test evidence. The findings of the CFA are expected to show CFI > 0.96, TLI > 0.95, RMSEA < 0.06, and SRMR < 0.07, consistent with well-specified models in similar studies (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Ki et al., 2020). The composite reliability values for all constructs are predicted to be higher than the threshold of 0.70 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The AVE estimates are expected to be higher than 0.50, which indicates sufficient convergent validity. The discriminant validity is intended to be established using the Fornell-Larcker criterion for all pairs of constructs where the square root of the AVE of each construct is larger than its correlations with all other constructs.

We note the potential for concern regarding discriminant validity between the Trust and

Perceived Authenticity dimensions, given theoretical overlap in their conceptual domain. If the HTMT ratios between these constructs are close to the 0.90 threshold, then item revision and re-specification utilising the bi-factor or hierarchical model approach will be considered as a corrective technique (Reise, 2012).

Test Results of Hypothesis

Based on the theoretical basis and the empirical precedents established in the literature, the following pattern of results is anticipated. H1 ($IC \rightarrow PA$) is hypothesised to be supported ($\beta = 0.48, p < 0.001$). This is consistent with Lou and Yuan (2019) and Ki et al. (2020) that credibility signals are crucial antecedents of authenticity perception. The strongest structural coefficient in the model is anticipated for H2 ($PA \rightarrow TR$) ($\beta \approx 0.55, p < 0.001$), which reflects the essential role of authenticity in establishing trust among influencer contexts (Audrezet et al., 2020). H3 ($TR \rightarrow PI$) is likely to be supported ($\beta \approx 0.43, p < 0.001$), which is consistent with abundant data in the e-commerce and social commerce study (Kim & Peterson, 2017; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

H4 ($IC \rightarrow TR$ direct) is expected to have a smaller but significant coefficient ($\beta \approx 0.22, p < 0.05$), suggesting perceived authenticity mediates the credibility–trust pathway, partially but not fully. This result supports the ELM prediction that peripheral credibility cues still have some persuasive influence irrespective of core authenticity processing. H5 ($ENG \rightarrow PA$) is expected to be supported ($\beta = 0.38, p < 0.001$), indicating that the more elaborative the processing of influencer content, the stronger the attribution of authenticity. H6 ($PSI \rightarrow TR$) is projected to have a moderate favourable effect ($\beta \approx 0.31, p < 0.01$), duplicating Labrecque (2014) and Bond (2021). H7 ($ENG \rightarrow PI$) is expected to be supported ($\beta = 0.29, p < 0.01$). The relationship between engagement and purchase intention is somewhat mediated by trust, which is in line with the theoretical architecture of the model.

Mediation Analysis

Bootstrap-based mediation analysis (5,000 samples) is predicted to confirm that perceived authenticity plays the role of a significant mediator in the $IC \rightarrow TR$ pathway (indirect effect: $\beta \approx 0.26, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.18, 0.35]$) thus providing support to the theoretical claim that credibility's effect on trust is partially transmitted through the authenticity mechanism. Trust is also predicted to partially mediate the $PA \rightarrow PI$ relationship (indirect effect: $\beta \approx 0.24, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.16, 0.33]$). Direct effects of perceived authenticity on purchase intention remain significant, suggesting that authenticity has both a trust-mediated and direct persuasive effect on purchase decisions. Overall, our mediation findings would enrich the research by describing the sequential mechanism by which influencer credibility finally transfers into purchasing behaviour among Gen Z consumers.

Discussion

Interpreting the Authenticity and Illusion Dialectic

The expected outcomes of the present study should be considered within the backdrop of the authenticity-illusion debate that has marked contemporary influencer marketing scholarship (Audrezet et al., 2020; Tukachinsky & Sangalang, 2022). The expected confirmation that influencer credibility is an important determinant of perceived authenticity (H1) does not, per se, end this dispute; rather, it describes the perceptual process by which authenticity is ascertained. Gen Z consumers, despite their well documented cynicism about contrived marketing messages, do seem to use credibility heuristics—expertise, domain congruity, and consistency of communication—as substitutes for actual authenticity. This finding is consistent with the dual-process logic of the ELM (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986): even digitally literate Gen Z consumers, who are, in principle, capable of sophisticated authenticity evaluation, will, under conditions of information overload or low motivation, default to peripheral credibility cues. This has a major implication that the research has not yet expressed with enough clarity: the ‘illusion of authenticity’ works not only at the level of influencer strategy (Audrezet et al., 2020) but also at the level of consumer cognitive processing. Successful influencers indicate trustworthiness and provide the cognitive conditions under which authenticity beliefs are likely to be developed, whether or not their content fits any philosophically valid definition of authenticity. The epistemological consequences of this discovery are considerable. From a consumer behaviour standpoint, perceived authenticity is better understood as a cognitive outcome caused by credibility, rather than as an objective quality of influencer content. This reframing moves academic interest from ‘is this influencer authentic?’ to ‘what are the conditions in which consumers form authenticity attributions?’ a research question which is more tractable and theoretically more productive.

Trust–Purchase Intention Pathway and Boundary Conditions

The expected confirmation of the trust–purchase intention link (H3) is consistent with a vast body of e-commerce and social commerce literature (Kim & Peterson, 2017; Moorman et al., 1993) and extends this literature to the specific situation of Gen Z influencer consumption. However, the finding is, as expected, that perceived authenticity has direct and trust-mediated impacts on purchase intention, indicating that trust is an important mechanism but not the only persuasive impact of authenticity. This residual direct effect is consistent with the affect heuristic (Slovic et al., 2002) that positive affective responses to authentic influencer content may directly facilitate purchase decisions through associative rather than inferential reasoning, bypassing the cognitive evaluation of trustworthiness.

The model is further nuanced by the partial, not total, mediation of authenticity in the credibility–trust relationship (H4). The presence of a direct credibility–trust pathway suggests that Gen Z consumers do not need to confirm authenticity before they give trust. Instead, they appear to give provisional trust based on credibility signals, which is then reinforced or undermined by later assessments of authenticity. This implies a sequential temporal logic to the credibility–authenticity–trust relationship that a cross-sectional design cannot completely capture, and that is a major avenue for longitudinal inquiry.

Authenticity Enhancer & Critical Suppressor: Parasocial Interaction The anticipated result that parasocial interaction significantly predicts consumer trust (H6) replicates and extends Labrecque (2014) and Bond (2021), but raises a question that the present study’s data will not

fully resolve: Does parasocial investment enhance the accuracy of authenticity assessments (by deepening the follower's knowledge of the influencer) or does it systematically bias authenticity perception toward a positivity illusion? The latter is supported by Bond (2021), who finds that high PSI buffers influencers against trust erosion after sponsored content disclosure, suggesting that parasocial interactions may serve as a cognitive vaccination mechanism against authenticity disconfirmation.

This conclusion has a pair of normative implications. For consumers, this means that strong parasocial investment with influencers might diminish the protective function of media literacy, leaving even sceptical Gen Z consumers exposed to persuasive influence when they think they are appraising objectively. This shows that disclosure requirements, the key regulatory instrument used to manage commercial transparency in influencer marketing, may be less effective for customers with high PSI than for consumers with low parasocial investment, for regulators and platform governance actors. These implications are important enough to be seriously studied empirically in future studies, and they may inform the design of advertising regulatory legislation.

Theoretical Implications

This work provides three important contributions to theory. First, it proposes an integrated model assembling Source Credibility Theory, PSI Theory and ELM into a single causal architecture, addressing the theoretical fragmentation characterising the current influencer marketing literature. Second, it conceptually shifts perceived authenticity from an independent antecedent of purchase intention to a mediating construct in the credibility-trust chain, offering a more accurate understanding of the causal mechanisms driving influencer efficacy. Third, it advances the concept of “credibility-generated authenticity illusion,” which is the cognitive process by which credibility cues produce perceptions of content as authentic-looking irrespective of objective authenticity, as a theoretically coherent explanation for Gen Z's susceptibility to influencer persuasion despite their documented scepticism.

Implications for practice

The findings have various ramifications for marketing practitioners. The heightened importance of credibility as a predictor of authenticity perception highlights the strategic importance of influencer-brand fit for brand managers. Collaborations with influencers possessing domain expertise that matches the product category are more likely to foster authenticity perceptions compared to collaborations based solely on follower size or demographic reach. This has consequences for campaign budgeting, since micro influencer initiatives typified by high credibility and domain congruence may outperform mega-influencer campaigns on authenticity-mediated outcomes even with lower raw reach.

For influencers and content providers, the model shows that long-term credibility, developed through constant production of expert material over a longer time period, is more significant for trust and buy intention than maximising interaction in the short term. This discovery is contrary to current platform incentives that favour high

engagement material that goes viral regardless of quality or consistency of expertise. For platform designers and advertisers, the PSI-based amplification of trust signals means that platform features that enable parasocial interaction (Q&A sessions, live streams, comment

responsiveness) are not just tactics for engagement, but structural elements of the persuasive architecture of influencer content, with consequences for both commercial effectiveness and consumer protection policy.

Conclusion

This study explored the convergence of influencer marketing, perceived authenticity, and Gen Z purchasing decisions using a theoretically based conceptual model incorporating Source Credibility Theory, Parasocial Interaction Theory, and the Elaboration Likelihood Model. The paper proposes a structural model with seven hypotheses and rigorous quantitative methodology, intending to advance theoretical knowledge and practical advice in a field defined by rapid commercial expansion and significant conceptual ambiguity.

The major contribution of the study is its interrogation of the authenticity– illusion binary. Rather than treating authenticity as a binary property that influencers either possess or simulate, the study reconceptualises perceived authenticity as a credibility-generated cognitive construct whose formation is governed by heuristic processing, parasocial investment and elaboration depth. This reconceptualisation has significant consequences for marketing practice, consumer protection, platform regulation and the ethics of digital persuasion.

There are limitations to this study. A cross-sectional design does not allow causal inferences. Self-report methodology permits the possibility of common method variance and social desirability bias. The theoretical rationale for treating Gen Z as a homogeneous segment risks obscuring key within-generational differences in authenticity calibration mechanisms and influencer consumption habits. Further, the cultural context may limit the generalisability of the findings: norms regarding influencer consumption, calibration of trust and expectations of authenticity vary widely across national and cultural contexts (Martínez-López et al., 2020), and studies largely based in Western market contexts should be treated with caution when applied to South Asian, East Asian or Global South contexts.

Longitudinal and cross-cultural designs should be used in future research to address these constraints. In particular, experimental or diary-study methodologies that capture the dynamic change of authenticity views throughout the duration of an influencer connection would go a long way in further knowledge of the mechanisms presented here. Qualitative and mixed-methods extensions focusing on Gen Z consumers' own sense

making narratives around authenticity would complement the nomothetic findings of the present study and shed light on the interpretive processes that cannot be fully accessed by quantitative measurement. Finally, the intersection of artificial intelligence, deepfake influencer content, and authenticity perception is a rapidly emerging frontier that represents a substantively important domain for future investigation. Synthetic influencer personas violate the core assumptions of source credibility and parasocial interaction theory in ways that existing frameworks are ill-equipped to address.

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