

The Impact of Social Media Influencers on Generation Z's Consumer Buying Behavior: A Conceptual Analysis

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Abstract

This research paper explores the significant influence of social media influencers on the purchasing decisions of Generation Z, a demographic known for its heavy reliance on digital platforms. With the rapid growth of social media, influencers have become key players in shaping consumer preferences and behaviors. This study employs quantitative research methods to examine the complex relationship between social media influencers and the buying behaviors of Generation Z. Focusing on critical factors such as authenticity, ethics, and trustworthiness, the research seeks to uncover the dynamics that drive influencer impact on this digitally engaged cohort. In addition to immediate purchasing decisions, this study investigates the long-term effects of influencer marketing on brand loyalty and consumer attitudes. By examining both short-term and enduring influences, this research provides valuable insights for marketers and businesses aiming to navigate the evolving landscape of influencer-driven consumerism. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of modern consumer dynamics, offering practical guidance for building meaningful connections with Generation Z in an increasingly digital marketplace.

Keywords: Social Media Influencer, Generation Z, Consumer, Digital Marketing, Buying Behavior

Introduction

In the digital age, the evolution of social media has reshaped communication, entertainment, and marketing strategies (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Social media influencers, with substantial followings on platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, have emerged as key figures in digital marketing. Their ability to shape consumer choices and societal attitudes has positioned them as influential players in the digital culture (De Veirman et al., 2017). This research aims to examine the impact of influencer marketing on consumer buying behaviors, with a focus on Generation Z.

Generation Z, defined as those born between 1997 and 2012, has grown up in a world dominated by digital technology (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Their deep engagement with digital platforms makes them an ideal target for influencer marketing strategies. However, there is a research gap specifically addressing how influencer marketing affects their purchasing behavior.

The effectiveness of influencer marketing is largely driven by the perceived authenticity of influencers and the relationships they build with their followers (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Brands increasingly leverage influencers to reach consumers, particularly Generation Z, who view these influencers as trustworthy and relatable. This study explores how key credibility traits of influencers—such as authenticity, trustworthiness, and ethics—affect the purchasing decisions of Generation Z. Additionally, it investigates Generation Z's relationship with social media platforms and influencers, as well as their perceptions of endorsed products.

Grounded in the understanding that social media plays an integral role in shaping consumer decisions (González-Padilla & Tortolero-Blanco, 2020), this research will evaluate the impact of influencer marketing on Generation Z's buying behavior, a demographic crucial to today's consumer market (KPMG, 2019; Varghese & Agrawal, 2021).

Despite the global prevalence of influencer marketing, there is limited research focusing on specific regions, such as Klang Valley, Malaysia. This study seeks to fill that gap by exploring how Generation Z in Klang Valley, Malaysia responds to influencer marketing, particularly in terms of authenticity, trustworthiness, and ethics. The research will contribute to the existing body of literature, offering valuable insights for marketers and businesses aiming to refine their influencer strategies for better engagement with this demographic.

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

Underpinning Theories

Social Credibility Theory

The Social Credibility Theory forms a fundamental basis for understanding consumer behavior in the digital era, particularly in the context of influencer marketing and online interactions. Originally rooted in ancient studies of *ethos*, where credibility was seen as a persuasive force, the theory has evolved significantly. Hovland et al. (1953) first established that the effectiveness of a message depends largely on the source's perceived credibility. In the online world, Metzger et al. (2003) extended this to consider how credibility is socially constructed, particularly through user-generated content, such as reviews and ratings. Fogg (2003) emphasized the multi-dimensional nature of credibility, focusing on key factors like trustworthiness and expertise. This is crucial in the digital age, where user-generated content, including tweets, comments, and peer ratings, plays a dominant role in shaping perceptions of credibility (Cheung & Lee, 2012; Walther et al., 2008). The theory is especially relevant to influencer marketing, where influencers' trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness significantly shape audience perceptions and purchasing behavior (Pham et al., 2021). However, the rise of social media has blurred the lines between credibility and popularity, as platforms like Instagram and YouTube make it difficult to differentiate genuine authority from mere visibility (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). The theory highlights the importance of assessing online credibility carefully, considering the pervasive influence of misinformation (Wardle &

Derakhshan, 2017). In the conceptual framework, Social Credibility Theory supports the idea that trustworthiness, authenticity, and ethical factors influence consumer buying behavior, particularly through the mediation of social influence.

Theory of Planned Behavior

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) provides another essential underpinning for your conceptual framework, offering a robust model for predicting human behavior. Developed by Ajzen (1991), TPB extends the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) by incorporating perceived behavioral control alongside attitudes and subjective norms. This addition allows for a more comprehensive understanding of behaviors that are both volitional and non-volitional. The TPB has been widely validated across different cultures and contexts, showing strong predictive power, especially in consumer behavior studies (Armitage & Conner, 2001). Despite critiques, such as the intention-behavior gap (Sniehotta, 2009), the flexibility of TPB makes it an invaluable tool in understanding behaviors in complex environments like digital commerce. The theory focuses on subjective norms, which reflect the influence of social pressure and the opinions of others, aligns well with the rise of social media influencers and their power to shape consumer intentions (Perloff, 2014). In this context, influencers act as key figures in establishing social norms, which, according to TPB, can strongly sway individuals' buying decisions, even when personal attitudes differ. This aligns with your hypotheses on how social influence mediates the relationship between trustworthiness, authenticity, ethics, and buying behavior.

Expanding further, the social norms component of TPB plays a critical role in understanding the influence of social pressure on consumer intentions. Social norms, as highlighted by Fishbein & Ajzen (1975), are external pressures that can significantly shape behavior, regardless of an individual's personal attitudes. This is especially important in the age of digital media, where influencers and online communities can create strong subjective norms that affect consumer choices. As noted by Terry & Hogg (1996) and Cialdini & Goldstein (2004), group norms and affiliations often drive behavior in collectivist societies or highly connected social networks. In online platforms, influencers amplify these group dynamics, making the endorsement or rejection of products highly influential in shaping consumer actions. TPB's focus on subjective norms explains how social influence can serve as a powerful mediator between the credibility of influencers and consumer buying behavior, particularly in early stages of product adoption (Park & Lee, 2009). This theoretical perspective bolsters the argument that social influence mediates the relationships between trustworthiness, authenticity, ethics, and consumer behavior.

In conclusion, the integration of Social Credibility Theory and Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) offers a solid theoretical foundation for the conceptual framework of this study. Social Credibility Theory explains how digital platforms and influencers construct credibility and trustworthiness, which are critical in influencing consumer decisions. On the other hand, TPB provides a structured model to understand how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived control predict behavior, especially in contexts where social influence plays a pivotal role. These theories support the hypotheses development and contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms that drive consumer behavior in the digital marketplace. Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of this study.

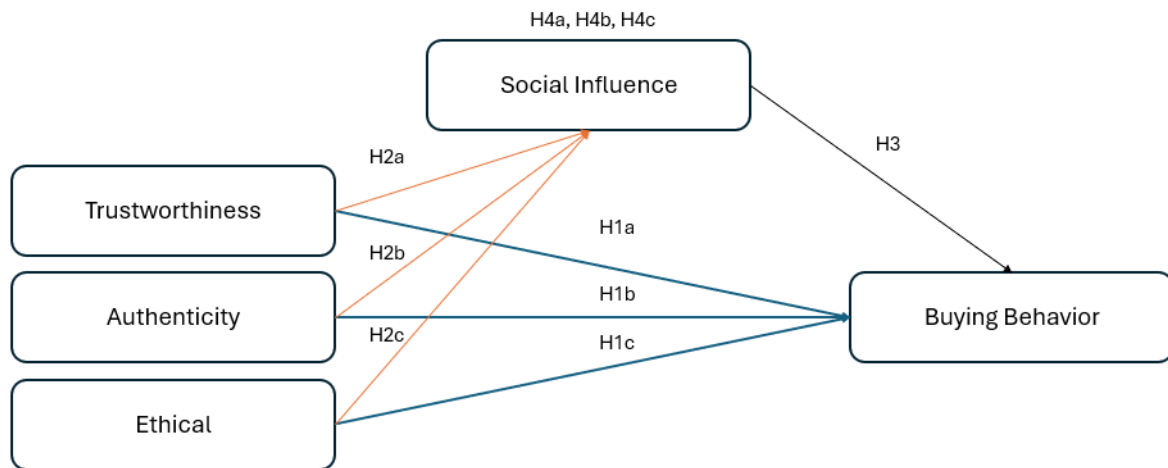


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

Trustworthiness and Buying Behavior

Trustworthiness is a critical factor in influencing consumer buying behavior, as highlighted by Doney & Cannon (1997). In digital commerce, trust is essential due to the virtual nature of interactions, with peer reviews and credible endorsements often guiding consumer trust (Cheung et al., 2009). The link between trustworthiness and repeated purchases, as shown by Garbarino & Johnson (1999), directly supports the idea that trust in influencers can lead to significant buying behaviors. The study by De Veirman et al. (2017) explained that trustworthiness, particularly in the context of influencers, enhances brand-consumer relationships, thus driving purchases. Therefore, it is proposed that:

Hypothesis 1a: Trustworthiness has a significant influence on buying behavior.

Authenticity and Buying Behavior

Authenticity, defined by Gilmore and Pine (2007) as genuine and sincere, plays an increasingly pivotal role in consumer decision-making. The importance of authenticity in the digital era is further reinforced by Bruhn et al. (2012), where authenticity influences how consumers perceive and respond to brand messages, making it a significant factor in shaping buying behaviors. Blazevic and Hammedi (2015) reported that authenticity plays a critical role in modern marketing, as consumers, especially Generation Z, prioritize genuine and transparent influencer interactions. Therefore, it is proposed that:

Hypothesis 1b: Authenticity has a significant influence on buying behavior.

Ethics and Buying Behavior

Ethical considerations have become central to consumer behavior, especially in eco-conscious markets (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001). The relationship between ethical consumption and corporate social responsibility (CSR) affects consumer perceptions, and ethical concerns influence purchasing decisions (Mohr et al., 2001). Generation Z is drawn to brands and influencers who are aligned with ethical standards and practices, leading to increased buying behavior. Therefore, it is proposed that:

Hypothesis 1c: Ethics has a significant influence on buying behavior.

Trustworthiness and Social Influence

Social Credibility Theory underscores the importance of trust in shaping social influence. Hovland et al. (1953) and Metzger et al. (2003) emphasize how a credible source enhances

the persuasiveness of a message, thereby increasing social influence. Trustworthiness is a key attribute that enables influencers to exert significant influence over their followers. Trustworthy influencers are perceived as more credible, enhancing their social influence in digital spaces, as evidenced by Pham et al. (2021). Based on the literature, it is proposed that:

Hypothesis 2a: Trustworthiness has a significant influence on social influence.

Authenticity and Social Influence

Authenticity has been identified as a major factor driving social influence, especially in digital contexts. Consumers are more likely to be influenced by individuals and brands they perceive as genuine and sincere (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). In addition, authentic influencers are more likely to be trusted and followed, increasing their ability to influence consumer behaviors (Blazevic & Hammedi, 2015). Based on the literature, it is proposed that:

Hypothesis 2b: Authenticity has a significant influence on social influence.

Ethics and Social Influence

Ethics and ethical behavior significantly impact social influence, particularly in the context of sustainability and CSR. Consumers are more likely to be influenced by brands and influencers perceived as ethical (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001), which explains the growing importance of ethics in consumer decision-making and the ability of ethical influencers to wield social influence. Based on the literature, it is proposed that:

Hypothesis 2c: Ethics has a significant influence on social influence.

Social Influence and Buying Behavior

Studies suggest that in the digital age, social influence, particularly via social media, has magnified its effect on buying behaviors. For instance, platforms like Instagram and YouTube have enabled influencers and peers to shape consumer perceptions, leading to increased conformity in purchasing choices (Verhoef et al., 2015). These platforms allow consumers to observe peer behaviors and endorsements, which often serve as powerful cues for purchasing decisions (Cheung & Lee, 2010). When consumers see others endorsing a product, especially influential figures or people they trust, they are more likely to follow suit (Armitage & Conner, 2001). Therefore, it is proposed that:

Hypothesis 3: Social influence has a significant influence on buying behavior.

Social Influence as a Mediator between Trustworthiness and Buying Behavior

Social Influence Theory (Katz, 1957) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) suggest that social norms and influence play a crucial role in shaping individual behaviors. When influencers are trusted, their recommendations have a stronger impact, making social influence a key mediator between trustworthiness and purchasing behavior (Verhoef et al., 2015). The literature strongly supports the mediating role of social influence, with trustworthiness enhancing social influence, which in turn drives purchasing decisions. Therefore, it is proposed that:

Hypothesis 4a: Social influence mediates the relationship between trustworthiness and buying behavior.

Social Influence as a Mediator between Authenticity and Buying Behavior

Authenticity enhances the social influence of an individual or brand, leading to more persuasive recommendations. The authenticity perceived by followers amplifies social

influence, which can mediate the effect on buying behavior (Thompson et al., 2006). The literature confirms the strong relationship between authenticity, social influence, and consumer behavior, making social influence a key mediator in this context. Therefore, it is proposed that:

Hypothesis 4b: Social influence mediates the relationship between authenticity and buying behavior.

Social Influence as a Mediator between Ethics and Buying Behavior

Ethical behavior can enhance social influence by positioning the influencer or brand as more credible and trustworthy (Mohr et al., 2001). Social influence then acts as a bridge between ethical perception and consumer purchasing decisions. The literature supports that ethical influencers are more likely to gain trust and exert greater social influence, which in turn drives consumer purchasing behavior. Therefore, it is proposed that:

Hypothesis 4c: Social influence mediates the relationship between ethics and buying behavior.

Research Implications

The findings of this study carry significant implications for marketers and businesses seeking to target Generation Z through social media influencers. The research highlights how authenticity, trustworthiness, and ethical behavior in influencers play a critical role in shaping the consumer buying behavior of Generation Z. This generation, being digitally savvy and highly influenced by social media, relies heavily on influencers who they perceive as credible and relatable. As such, businesses can enhance their marketing strategies by carefully selecting influencers who align with these credibility traits. Additionally, the study underscores the importance of understanding social influence as a mediator, suggesting that influencers with a strong social presence can amplify the impact of their endorsements, leading to higher brand engagement and customer loyalty.

Moreover, the implications extend to the broader digital marketing landscape, where businesses must navigate the complexities of maintaining an ethical and authentic presence online. With Generation Z increasingly concerned about corporate social responsibility and ethical standards, businesses that emphasize transparency and socially responsible practices in their influencer marketing campaigns are more likely to establish trust and long-term brand loyalty. This research also provides actionable insights into how brands can harness the power of social influence to drive consumer behavior, suggesting that digital marketing strategies must be adaptable and responsive to the evolving expectations of younger consumers.

Conclusion

This conceptual analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of the impact social media influencers have on the buying behavior of Generation Z. Through the exploration of key factors such as authenticity, trustworthiness, and ethical behavior, the study demonstrates how these attributes shape consumer perceptions and drive purchasing decisions in a digitally connected generation. Furthermore, the research emphasizes the role of social influence as a mediator, illustrating the powerful effect influencers can have in fostering brand loyalty and influencing consumer attitudes.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on influencer marketing, offering valuable insights for marketers looking to effectively engage with Generation Z. By aligning influencer partnerships with credibility traits and ethical practices, businesses can build stronger, more meaningful connections with this demographic. As the digital marketplace continues to evolve, the findings of this research provide a roadmap for businesses to optimize their influencer marketing strategies and adapt to the shifting preferences of a younger, socially conscious audience.

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