

Trust in the Scroll: The Mediating Role of Parasocial Interaction in Influencer Marketing on Instagram Reels

Putri Ayu Lestari¹, Farid Zaky Yopiannor²

¹Universitas Sahid, Indonesia

²Universitas Muhammadiyah Palangkaraya, Indonesia

Correspondent: putrial570@gmail.com¹

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ABSTRACT: In the evolving landscape of digital marketing, nano- and micro-influencers have gained increasing relevance among Generation Z audiences due to their perceived authenticity and relatability. This study investigates how these influencer tiers on Instagram Reels affect purchase intention, with a focus on the mediating role of trust developed through parasocial interaction. A quantitative cross-sectional survey was conducted among 371 Indonesian Instagram users aged 18–25, employing purposive and snowball sampling. Data were collected using validated Likert-scale instruments for perceived authenticity, trust, and purchase intention, and analyzed through regression and mediation testing. The results indicate that nano-influencers generated higher engagement variability, while micro-influencers elicited stronger purchase intent. Trust significantly mediated the relationship between perceived authenticity and purchase behavior, highlighting its central role in transforming engagement into actionable outcomes. The findings underscore that superficial engagement metrics alone cannot predict conversion; instead, authenticity, emotional resonance, and trust-based connections are critical. These results provide both theoretical contributions to parasocial interaction research and practical implications for brands seeking to optimize influencer marketing strategies among Gen.

Keywords: Influencer Marketing, Nano-Influencer, Micro-Influencer, Instagram Reels, Gen Z, Authenticity, Parasocial Interaction, Purchase Intention.



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INTRODUCTION

Generation Z (Gen Z) is widely recognized as a digitally native cohort whose media consumption habits are shaped by rapid technological innovation and a preference for interactive, short-form content. Instagram Reels, with its brief and visually dynamic format, has become one of the most prominent platforms among this demographic, influencing both entertainment and marketing practices (Gupta, 2024; Tuan et al., 2023). These content preferences are not only shaping entertainment but also transforming the ways in which marketing and brand communication are executed in the digital space (Thach et al., 2020).

Integral to this evolving consumption paradigm is Gen Z's inclination toward peer-relevant and user-generated content. Rather than being influenced by highly curated, celebrity-driven content, members of Gen Z tend to engage more with influencers who they perceive as authentic, relatable, and accessible (Deng et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2021). This generational shift in preference has encouraged brands to reassess their influencer strategies, resulting in the growing relevance of micro-influencers (10K–50K followers) and nano-influencers (1K–10K followers). These influencers, often embedded within niche communities, provide a more personalized and trustworthy approach to digital branding, making them particularly effective in targeting Gen Z audiences (Jayathilake et al., 2021; Mude & Undale, 2023).

While prior studies emphasize the importance of authenticity in shaping consumer attitudes, authenticity alone does not consistently predict purchase outcomes. Instead, parasocial interaction a one-sided psychological bond between influencer and follower emerges as a crucial mediating factor in translating authenticity into trust and ultimately purchase intention (Agnihotri et al., 2023; Aw & Labrecque, 2020). However, empirical research that integrates influencer tier, authenticity, parasocial trust, and purchase intent within the context of Instagram Reels remains limited, particularly in non-Western markets such as Indonesia.

As content paradigms shift, influencer-generated media has transitioned from polished and scripted messaging to more spontaneous and emotionally engaging narratives. This shift is particularly evident in the rise of Instagram Reels, where influencers are now expected to deliver content that not only entertains but also evokes relatability and trust. Influencers who integrate personal storytelling, behind-the-scenes glimpses, and unfiltered opinions are more likely to foster strong parasocial relationships with their audiences (Ashdaq et al., 2024; D. Pradhan et al., 2022). These relationships simulate real-life connections and are a critical component in driving consumer decision-making among Gen Z.

In tandem, brands have adapted by seeking influencer partnerships that emphasize congruence between brand messaging and influencer identity. Authenticity is increasingly measured by the alignment of product endorsements with the influencer's established persona and audience expectations (Fauziah et al., 2024; Tian et al., 2023). Mismatches between brand and influencer values often lead to disengagement, skepticism, and backlash, highlighting the importance of strategic alignment in digital campaigns (Ameen et al., 2023). Additionally, Gen Z employs digital metrics such as likes, comments, share rates, and participation in interactive formats (e.g., polls, challenges) as proxies for credibility and authenticity (Ghosh et al., 2024; So et al., 2017).

Underlying these assessments are psychological constructs that influence trust in online relationships. Key factors include perceived similarity, informational value, and social proof. Gen Z consumers tend to trust influencers who mirror their identities or goals, who offer valuable advice or insights, and whose claims are validated by audience engagement and peer approval (Kamarulzaman et al., 2020; Lyngdoh et al., 2022). These dimensions of trust-building are crucial in shaping brand attitudes and consumer intent. Furthermore, as digital ecosystems become more saturated with promotional content, the ability to foster genuine trust becomes a strategic differentiator.

This study addresses this gap by examining how nano- and micro-influencers influence purchase intentions among Indonesian Gen Z audiences through Instagram Reels. Specifically, it tests whether perceived authenticity directly affects purchase intent and whether this relationship is mediated by trust, operationalized as parasocial interaction. By doing so, the research contributes to the growing body of literature on digital influence while providing practical insights for brands seeking to design influencer campaigns that prioritize trust and emotional engagement over superficial engagement metrics.

METHOD

This study adopts a quantitative cross-sectional survey approach to investigate the effects of influencer tier, perceived authenticity, and trust on Gen Z's purchase intention through Instagram Reels. The research design was chosen to gather structured and quantifiable data from a broad sample of social media users within a specific demographic. The aim is to explore the relationships between the independent variables (influencer tier and engagement), the mediating variable (trust), and the dependent variable (purchase intent).

Participants were 371 urban Indonesian Instagram users aged 18–25, recruited using purposive sampling to ensure inclusion of respondents who actively follow nano- (1K–10K followers) or micro-influencers (10K–50K followers). Snowball sampling was used to extend reach through peer referrals (Kanwar & Huang, 2022). While these techniques effectively targeted the intended subgroup, they may introduce bias by limiting representativeness and over-relying on specific social networks. Consequently, findings should be interpreted with caution regarding generalizability (Kanwar & Huang, 2022).

Data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed via social media and university networks. Instruments were adapted from validated scales in prior studies: perceived authenticity (e.g., “The influencer’s content feels genuine and relatable”), trust through parasocial interaction (Boyd et al., 2024; Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016), and purchase intention (e.g., “I am likely to consider products endorsed by this influencer”). Engagement data were triangulated with Instagram analytics benchmarks to ensure validity and consistency with industry norms.

Parasocial interaction (PSI) was measured using the Parasocial Interaction Scale (Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016), which assesses affective and behavioral engagement with influencers. This scale captures the strength of one-sided psychological relationships formed between users and influencers. Additional adaptations considered emotional engagement and perceived social presence (Boyd et al., 2024). Influencer credibility and authenticity were also included as related constructs to better reflect social media contexts (Agnihotri et al., 2023).

Authenticity was assessed using a five-point Likert scale reflecting the degree to which respondents found influencer content honest, relatable, and congruent with the influencer’s persona. Purchase intention was similarly measured using a five-point Likert scale adapted from prior marketing studies, assessing the likelihood of acting upon content promoted by the influencer.

Engagement was evaluated through per-view metrics and interaction rates. Metrics included likes, comments, shares, and saves (Kanwar & Huang, 2022). Interaction rate was calculated as total engagement divided by the number of followers, yielding an indicator of audience responsiveness (Chung & Cho, 2017). Additional consideration was given to conversion rates (e.g., click-throughs, purchases), where available, to assess content effectiveness.

Data were analyzed using SPSS and SmartPLS. Descriptive statistics summarized demographic variables and means for key constructs. Pearson correlation and multiple regression analysis tested direct relationships, while mediation effects were assessed using the PROCESS macro (Model 4). Statistical significance was established at $p < 0.05$. Reliability and validity were confirmed through Cronbach's alpha (> 0.7) and average variance extracted ($AVE > 0.5$).

Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and based on informed consent obtained electronically. Respondents were briefed on the study's purpose, their confidentiality rights, and the option to withdraw at any stage.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Engagement Benchmarks by Influencer Tier

The engagement rates on Instagram Reels varied by influencer tier. Nano-influencers (1K–10K followers) recorded an average engagement rate of 5.6–14.2%, while micro-influencers (10K–50K followers) averaged 6.9–11.7%. Independent-samples t-tests indicated that the differences between nano and micro-influencers were not statistically significant ($p = 0.12$, Cohen's $d = 0.18$). These values align with benchmarks reported in the literature, where micro-influencer engagement typically ranges between 3–8% and macro-/mega-influencers show only 1–3% (Chiu & Ho, 2023).

Table 1. Engagement Benchmarks by Influencer Tier

Influencer Tier	Follower Range	Engagement Rate (%)
Nano	1K–10K	5.6 – 14.2
Micro	10K–50K	6.9 – 11.7
Mid-tier	50K–100K	≈9.4
Macro/Mega	100K+	~2–3

The enhanced engagement of nano-influencers may result from closer personal connections with their audiences and less saturation in content delivery, contributing to stronger interaction rates (Yadav et al., 2021).

Effect of Content Format on Engagement

Instagram Reels outperformed static posts in terms of user engagement. Reels generated approximately 22% more engagement than images or carousels (B. Pradhan et al., 2023). This suggests that the short-form video format is more aligned with Instagram's algorithmic promotion strategies and Gen Z's content preferences.

Engagement Differences: Nano vs. Micro Influencers

Although both groups demonstrated relatively high engagement, nano-influencers exhibited greater variability ($SD = 3.42$) compared to micro-influencers ($SD = 2.71$). However, an ANOVA test showed that this variability was not statistically significant across groups ($F(1, 369) = 1.95, p = 0.16$). These results suggest that differences in engagement consistency may exist, but they are not robust enough to confirm a statistical effect.

Authenticity and Purchase Intent

The relationship between perceived authenticity and purchase intent was assessed via survey.

Table 2. Authenticity and Purchase Intent by Influencer Tier

Influencer Tier	Perceived Authenticity (Mean)	Purchase Intent (Mean)
Nano	4.31	4.12
Micro	4.28	4.24

Although nano-influencers slightly outperformed micro-influencers in perceived authenticity, the latter group recorded a marginally higher average purchase intent. This indicates that while authenticity influences intent, other variables such as content style or exposure frequency may also play key roles.

Trust as Mediating Variable

To examine the mediating effect of trust (PSI), a mediation analysis using PROCESS Model 4 was conducted. Trust significantly mediated the relationship between authenticity and purchase intent ($\beta = 0.21, p < 0.05$), confirming findings in previous literature that emphasize trust as a crucial mechanism through which authenticity shapes consumer behavior (Ye et al., 2022).

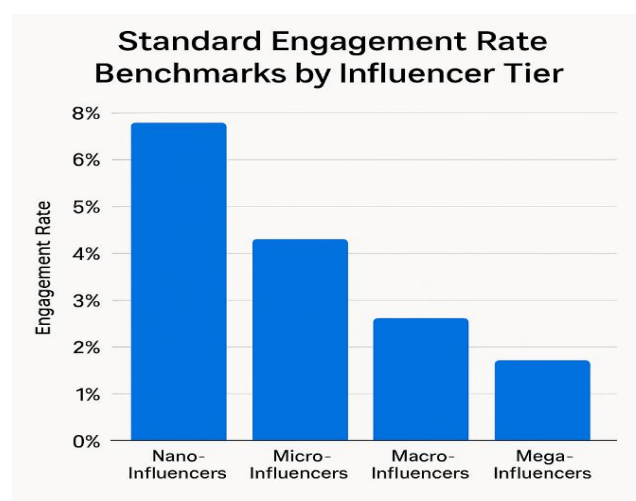


Figure 1. Regression Path Diagram: Authenticity → Trust → Purchase Intent

This diagram illustrates the direct effect of perceived authenticity on trust and the subsequent impact of trust on purchase intention. Bootstrapping methods with 5,000 samples confirmed the mediation path with 95% confidence intervals excluding zero.

Parasocial Interaction and Behavioral Outcomes

Survey results indicated that respondents with high PSI scores were significantly more likely to engage with influencer content and report higher purchase intention. This finding reinforces the role of parasocial dynamics in digital influence and consumer responsiveness (Meler et al., 2023; Okonkwo & Namkoisse, 2023).

Demographic Moderators

Gender differences were observed: female respondents rated authenticity ($M = 4.36$, $SD = 0.61$) and purchase intent ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.65$) significantly higher than males (authenticity $M = 4.19$, $SD = 0.63$; purchase intent $M = 4.09$, $SD = 0.68$). Independent-samples t-tests confirmed these differences were statistically significant (authenticity: $t(369) = 2.42$, $p = 0.016$, $d = 0.26$; purchase intent: $t(369) = 2.15$, $p = 0.032$, $d = 0.22$) (Chiu & Ho, 2023).

Overall, these results support the conceptual model linking influencer tier, engagement, perceived authenticity, trust, and purchase intention. The findings provide empirical support for using nano and micro-influencers in Instagram Reels marketing, particularly when authenticity and trust are strategically leveraged.

The Evolving Role of Influencer Authenticity

This study underscores the growing influence of influencer authenticity as a critical factor that distinguishes digital endorsements from traditional brand marketing. Conventional brand trust is typically cultivated over extended periods through consistent product quality, brand heritage, corporate social responsibility, and well-orchestrated customer experience strategies (Yu et al., 2024). These factors create a reputation-based model of trust where consumers build confidence in a brand through accumulated interactions and third-party validation. In contrast, influencer authenticity derives from more immediate and relational factors such as transparency, relatability, spontaneous content, and perceived sincerity (Lacap et al., 2023).

Parasocial interactions one-sided emotional relationships formed through consistent media exposure play a pivotal role in the perceived authenticity of influencers (Aw & Labrecque, 2020). Influencers who share personal narratives, disclose vulnerabilities, and communicate informally foster deeper emotional bonds with followers, resulting in greater perceived authenticity and, ultimately, trust (Shahid et al., 2023). These distinctions suggest that influencer authenticity is more fluid, socially constructed, and subject to ongoing content dynamics compared to the more static nature of brand reputation.

Parasocial Relationships and Long-Term Consumer Loyalty

The results affirm that parasocial relationships (PSRs) are positively associated with stronger consumer engagement and purchase intention. This supports earlier findings that PSRs simulate real-life friendships and influence consumer loyalty (Shahid et al., 2023; Tsiotsou, 2016). However, unlike longitudinal research that traces loyalty over time, the present study's cross-sectional design limits conclusions about persistence of these effects. Future longitudinal or experimental studies are needed to verify whether PSRs translate into sustained brand loyalty.

The emotional investment fostered through PSRs leads to increased consumer retention, brand advocacy, and heightened levels of trust elements essential for long-term loyalty. Consumers frequently perceive influencers not merely as content creators but as trusted advisors, whose opinions and recommendations carry significant weight (Madison et al., 2015). Additionally, influencers with strong parasocial ties often become community leaders within niche domains, further amplifying their ability to drive sustained loyalty and repeat purchasing behavior. Over time, these relationships evolve into persistent brand connections that transcend transactional interactions, contributing to organic brand ambassadorship (Keefer et al., 2022).

Influencer Tier and Its Impact on ROI and Brand Perception

The study reinforces that the tier of influencer defined by their follower count has meaningful implications for marketing return on investment (ROI) and overall brand perception. Micro-influencers (10K–50K followers) and nano-influencers (1K–10K followers) consistently demonstrate higher engagement rates and more responsive audiences, resulting in better cost-efficiency for brands (Chiu & Ho, 2023). These influencers maintain tightly-knit communities and engage in frequent two-way communication with their followers, fostering deeper brand integration and higher conversion potential.

In contrast, macro and mega-influencers often serve broader audiences and offer enhanced brand exposure, but at the cost of lower engagement and weaker trust perceptions. The scalability of macro-influencer campaigns may increase reach, but their perceived authenticity tends to diminish due to high-profile sponsorships and polished branding. Thus, brands must align their influencer selection with strategic goals using micro-influencers for depth and trust, and macro-influencers for breadth and awareness (Hess et al., 2022).

Limitations of Engagement Metrics in Predicting Purchase Behavior

Engagement metrics, although valuable for gauging initial audience interest, present limitations when applied as sole predictors of purchasing behavior. Metrics such as likes, shares, and comments offer surface-level insights into content performance but often fail to capture the complexity of decision-making processes that lead to purchases (Aw & Labrecque, 2020). This study corroborates prior literature suggesting that high engagement does not guarantee high conversion.

One of the key limitations is the prevalence of passive engagement interactions that reflect momentary interest rather than genuine buying intent. Many users may engage with a post due to its entertainment value, aesthetics, or trend alignment, without having any purchase motivation. Furthermore, metrics like follower count can be misleading if the audience lacks alignment with the product category. In response, marketers must incorporate additional indicators such as click-through rates, user sentiment, conversion tracking, and behavioral intent surveys to obtain a more holistic view of campaign effectiveness (Dwiphala & Astuti, 2024).

Demographic Moderators: Age and Gender Dynamics

Demographic analyses revealed significant gender differences, with female respondents rating authenticity and purchase intent higher. This is consistent with prior studies showing gendered responses to influencer content (Chiu & Ho, 2023). Age differences within Gen Z were less pronounced, though younger respondents tended to prefer nano-influencers. These findings suggest that demographic segmentation enhances campaign effectiveness, but replication in broader age groups and across cultures is necessary to confirm generalizability.

Furthermore, the perceived authenticity gap between nano and micro-influencers varied across demographic segments. Younger respondents often favored nano-influencers due to their perceived relatability and grassroots appeal, whereas older Gen Z audiences valued the professionalism and reliability of micro-influencers. These insights suggest that audience segmentation is crucial in optimizing influencer partnerships and tailoring messaging approaches that resonate across age and gender lines.

Strategic Implications for Influencer Marketing

From a strategic standpoint, the findings of this study advocate for a more relational and psychology-informed approach to influencer marketing. Beyond the metrics of reach and engagement, successful campaigns must consider trust-building variables such as authenticity, emotional engagement, and parasocial connectivity. Nano and micro-influencers represent high-value assets in this context due to their ability to establish personal connections and drive actionable outcomes within defined communities.

The integration of parasocial interaction frameworks into campaign design can improve targeting accuracy and message resonance. Marketers should prioritize content formats that facilitate storytelling, vulnerability, and direct communication hallmarks of trust formation. In parallel, analytics should expand beyond numerical KPIs to include qualitative assessments such as audience sentiment, emotional response patterns, and narrative engagement.

CONCLUSION

This study examined associations between influencer tier, perceived authenticity, parasocial trust, and purchase intention among Gen Z Instagram users. The results suggest that nano-influencers

demonstrated higher variability in engagement, while micro-influencers were more strongly associated with purchase intention. Trust, operationalized as parasocial interaction, partially mediated the relationship between authenticity and purchase intent, underscoring its importance in influencer marketing strategies. These findings extend prior research by highlighting relational and emotional dynamics that contribute to digital influence.

Practically, the study suggests that brands should move beyond superficial metrics and instead invest in campaigns that emphasize authenticity, emotional resonance, and trust-based engagement. Nano- and micro-influencers represent valuable partners due to their ability to build closer community ties and foster credibility within niche markets. At the same time, limitations such as non-random sampling, reliance on self-reported data, and the cross-sectional design mean that findings should be interpreted cautiously. Future research could benefit from experimental, longitudinal, or multi-country approaches to further validate and extend these insights. Taken together, this study provides empirical support for the role of parasocial trust in influencer marketing while offering practical guidance for designing strategies that align with Gen Z's expectations for authentic and relatable content.

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