

## The Power of Parasocial Interaction: Relatability, Trust, and Ethical Engagement in Gen Z Influencer Marketing

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**ABSTRACT:** As short-form video platforms gain prominence, influencer marketing increasingly depends on parasocial interactions (PSI) to engage Generation Z consumers. The aim of this study is to examine the extent to which influencer relatability and trust influence purchase intention, with PSI serving as a mediating mechanism. Using survey data from 400 Indonesian urban Gen Z users active on Instagram Reels, TikTok, and YouTube Shorts, we conducted SEM analyses to validate the mediation effect of PSI. Model fit indices (CFI > 0.90, RMSEA < 0.08, SRMR < 0.08) confirmed acceptable fit, with indirect effects indicating significant emotional mediation pathways ( $\beta = 0.24$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). This study is novel in highlighting the combined role of relatability and trust within the short-form video ecosystem, specifically in a Southeast Asian Gen Z context. Results demonstrate that emotionally resonant storytelling and interactive content (e.g., Q&A sessions, live streams) enhance PSI, which in turn strengthens consumer trust and brand loyalty. In practical terms, the findings suggest that brands should adopt authentic engagement, ethical transparency, and adaptive multi-platform strategies to sustain long-term relevance. However, authenticity and ethical transparency remain critical, as Gen Z is highly sensitive to manipulative content and commercial overreach. This research contributes theoretically by validating PSI as a mediating mechanism in influencer marketing, while providing practical guidance for industry players seeking to design ethical and effective campaigns.

**Keywords:** Influencer Marketing, Parasocial Interaction, Generation Z, Short-Form Video, Trust, Relatability, Consumer Behavior.



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## INTRODUCTION

Digital marketing strategies targeting Generation Z through short-form video platforms have gained significant traction in recent years, adapting to the preferences and behaviors of this demographic. As digital natives, Generation Z actively engages with platforms like TikTok and Instagram Reels, where short-form videos dominate content consumption and social interaction.

These platforms provide rapid, visually driven, and personalized content that aligns with Gen Z's media habits and lifestyle expectations. This demographic places a high premium on authenticity and identity-based content, often favoring realness and connection over overt commercialism. Prior studies indicate that authenticity and relatability enhance Gen Z's engagement more effectively than traditional advertising methods (Esch et al., 2018; Hu et al., 2019). Moreover, the brevity of short-form content aligns with Gen Z's shorter attention spans, requiring marketers to design compelling narratives within limited timeframes (Lăzăroiu, Popescu, et al., 2020).

In evaluating influencer relatability, Generation Z consumers prioritize authenticity and shared values, which shape their purchasing decisions significantly. Relatable influencers not only provide entertainment but also serve as aspirational figures who reflect the audience's own goals, fears, and daily experiences. A study posited that authentic interactions foster trust and enhance consumer engagement levels, as influencers perceived as genuine tend to generate higher levels of relatability (Esch et al., 2018). Additionally, Generation Z is keen on influencers who openly share their experiences and vulnerabilities, as it strengthens their connection and perceived similarity, which is integral in trust formation (Hu et al., 2019). This emphasis on personal authenticity indicates a paradigm shift where traditional marketing strategies emphasizing brand image and promotions must evolve to align with the values cherished by Gen Z, increasingly valuing emotional and social connection over mere transactional relationships (Hu et al., 2019).

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Short-form content plays a pivotal role in shaping consumer attitudes among Generation Z by creating an immediate and engaging user experience. Such content not only captures attention quickly but also delivers potent emotional and informative narratives that resonate deeply with this demographic (Nosi et al., 2021; raj, 2024). Studies have shown that effective use of narrative and visual storytelling in short videos can lead to increased brand recall and positive attitudes toward the brand (Alkhalifah, 2022). This emotional resonance is often more influential than overt messaging, especially when paired with influencer advocacy that feels organic rather than scripted. The rapid trend cycle prevalent in Gen Z's consumption habits means that brands must regularly produce creative and appealing short-form content to stay relevant and visible in the marketplace (Hu et al., 2019). Additionally, short-form video formats facilitate the rapid spread of brand messages, sometimes reaching viral status through trends and challenges. The shift from long-form content to short-form also reflects the need for brands to adapt to evolving consumer behavior driven by instant gratification and rapid content consumption tendencies (Lăzăroiu, Neguriță, et al., 2020).

Parasocial interactions, where users develop apparent personal relationships with influencers, are highly prevalent among Generation Z within social media usage. These interactions simulate face-to-face social bonds and are enhanced by frequent, personal-feeling content. This phenomenon allows users to feel a sense of intimacy and connection, which is typically reserved for real-life relationships (Filieri et al., 2015). Studies have indicated that smaller, micro-influencers generate greater parasocial interactions as their audiences perceive them as more relatable and engaged compared to mega-influencers (Punyatoya, 2019). Such relationships are significant as they can foster loyalty and trust, making users more likely to act upon influencer recommendations, demonstrating the increased impact of parasocial interactions on marketing effectiveness (Alkhalifah, 2022). Furthermore, parasocial interactions can serve as an emotional anchor, reinforcing brand loyalty through sustained exposure to the influencer's lifestyle and values. The blend of consistent online engagement and relatable content fuels this dynamic, further emphasizing the importance of strategic influencer collaborations to leverage these interactions effectively (Filieri et al., 2015).

Influencer effectiveness varies across social media formats, with certain influencers performing better on specific platforms due to the unique characteristics and user engagement patterns of each format. For instance, platforms like Instagram are highly visual and favor influencers who can curate aesthetic and lifestyle-oriented content, while TikTok thrives on creativity and originality, often rewarding authenticity over aesthetic perfection (Ye et al., 2020). Research suggests that video content on TikTok can lead to higher engagement rates compared to image-based platforms, as users respond more positively to video narratives that elicit emotions or provide educational content (Darke et al., 2016). YouTube, on the other hand, supports long-form storytelling that enables deeper exploration of topics and longer viewer retention. Additionally, the context in which influencers present their messages influences their effectiveness, with relatable humor and personal storytelling being particularly effective mechanisms on platforms that allow for greater narrative depth like YouTube, as compared to more surface-level engagement typical on platforms such as Twitter (Esch et al., 2018). Research also suggests that the demographic profiles of influencers must align with those of their target audience to maximize engagement and effectiveness, indicating that brands need to strategize thoughtfully when selecting influencers for specific platforms (Geetha et al., 2021).

In conclusion, there is an intricate relationship between influencer relatability, trust, parasocial interaction, and purchase intention in the context of short-form video platforms. Unlike previous studies that examined these variables separately, this study specifically highlights the integrated mediating role of PSI in the Gen Z short-form ecosystem. By aligning platform, message, and messenger, marketers can more effectively engage with Gen Z audiences through strategies that combine authenticity, trust, and emotional resonance.

## METHOD

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to investigate the influence of influencer relatability and trust signals on Generation Z's purchase intentions, with Parasocial Interaction (PSI) as a mediating variable. The approach is rooted in well-established digital

marketing and communication frameworks that recognize the psychological dimensions of influencer-audience relationships.

A structured online questionnaire was designed to capture self-reported perceptions from Gen Z users across three major platforms: TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts. The survey format was selected for its efficiency in collecting data from a large, geographically diverse population. Questions were adapted from validated scales in the influencer marketing literature (Agnihotri et al., 2023; Lou & Kim, 2019), ensuring conceptual robustness.

Participants (N = 400) were Indonesian Gen Z users aged 18–27 who actively engage with short-form video content on social media. Respondents were recruited via social media and digital community forums to ensure demographic alignment with the study's focus. The screening process involved three stages: (1) initial self-declaration of platform use, (2) verification of at least three influencer followings, and (3) submission of recent screenshots of interactions (likes, comments, or shares). Cases with incomplete or inconsistent data were removed prior to analysis (n = 18).

- *Influencer Relatability*: Measured using a 5-point Likert scale derived from Lou & Kim (2019) model assessing dimensions such as sincerity and shared values.
- *Trust Signals*: Assessed with modified items from Agnihotri et al. (2023), focusing on perceived integrity, dependability, and alignment of brand values.
- *Parasocial Interaction (PSI)*: Evaluated using the Dibble et al. (2015) and Yousaf (2022) PSI scales, which capture emotional closeness and symbolic interaction.
- *Purchase Intention*: Measured by self-reported likelihood of product purchase following influencer exposure.

Data were collected via a secure online platform using a structured survey format. To ensure reliability, participants were asked to submit screenshots of recent interactions (e.g., likes, comments, shares) as part of the engagement validation process.

Statistical analysis included descriptive statistics, multiple regression, and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to assess the mediating role of PSI. SEM was chosen due to its capacity to test complex relational hypotheses and path models involving latent variables (Kumar et al., 2024; Shahid et al., 2023). IBM SPSS and AMOS software were used for data processing.

To address concerns about self-reported engagement accuracy, cross-validation with behavioral analytics (when available) and consistency checks were implemented (Aw et al., 2022). Items prone to social desirability bias were reverse-coded. Engagement was defined in both active (e.g., likes/comments) and passive (e.g., viewing duration) dimensions to ensure consistency. Additionally, responses were compared across platforms (Instagram, TikTok, YouTube) to identify anomalies in self-reported versus validated engagement.

The study also examined platform-specific variations in engagement and PSI, comparing responses across Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. This approach reflects Ghosh & Islam (2023) emphasis

on multi-platform marketing dynamics, providing a richer perspective on influencer effectiveness in varied media ecosystems.

This study relies on self-reported data, which may be subject to recall bias and social desirability bias. Although validation steps were implemented, complete elimination of these risks was not possible. Moreover, the cross-sectional design restricts causal inference, and the predominantly urban sample may not represent rural Gen Z users. Future research should apply longitudinal or experimental designs to strengthen causal claims and broaden generalizability.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Descriptive Statistics

The demographic profile of respondents aligns with previous findings on Southeast Asian Gen Z users, who are typically digital natives proficient in mobile-based social media use (Tjandrawibawa, 2020). Among the 400 respondents, 52.5% were female and 47.5% male. A large majority reported daily interactions with short-form video platforms, averaging 3–5 sessions per day. Respondents were predominantly urban, a factor shown to correlate with higher social media engagement rates (Blegur & Cokki, 2023).

**Table 1.** Respondent Demographics & Engagement Metrics

| Variable               | Frequency | Percentage |
|------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Male                   | 190       | 47.5%      |
| Female                 | 210       | 52.5%      |
| Avg. Reels Use/Day     | 3–5 times | -          |
| Engagement Rate (Self) | 1.5–3.0%  | -          |

Users indicated high daily consumption of short-form video content, confirming Jalil et al. (2021) findings that over 70% of Gen Z users engage with such platforms for at least one hour per day. Notably, engagement was reported to spike on weekends (Dewi & Hidayat, 2024).

### Regression Analysis

Multiple regression results revealed significant predictive relationships between both influencer relatability ( $\beta = 0.421$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and trust signals ( $\beta = 0.295$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) with purchase intention. The adjusted  $R^2$  value of 0.39 indicates that these variables collectively explain 39% of the variance in purchase intention, a moderate-to-strong effect size. This suggests that higher relatability and trust are positively associated with stronger consumer purchase intention among Gen Z.

**Table 2.** Regression Coefficients

| Predictor | $\beta$ | p-value |
|-----------|---------|---------|
|-----------|---------|---------|

|                |       |        |
|----------------|-------|--------|
| Relatability   | 0.421 | <0.001 |
| Trust Signals  | 0.295 | <0.01  |
| R <sup>2</sup> | 0.39  | -      |

These effect sizes fall within the moderate-to-large range reported in prior studies (Ardiansyah & Sarwoko, 2020), reaffirming the strength and consistency of these predictors across contexts.

## SEM and Mediation Analysis

SEM analysis confirmed Parasocial Interaction (PSI) as a statistically significant mediator between influencer traits and consumer purchase intention. The model demonstrated robust fit statistics (CFI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.06, SRMR = 0.05), indicating a well-fitting model (Sáng, 2024). Path coefficients showed that relatability → PSI ( $\beta = 0.37$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and trust → PSI ( $\beta = 0.33$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) were significant. Moreover, PSI → purchase intention ( $\beta = 0.65$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) suggests that when PSI increases by one unit, purchase intention also increases substantially. The indirect effect of relatability on purchase intention through PSI was 0.24 ( $p < 0.01$ ), confirming the mediating role of emotional engagement (Erwin et al., 2023).

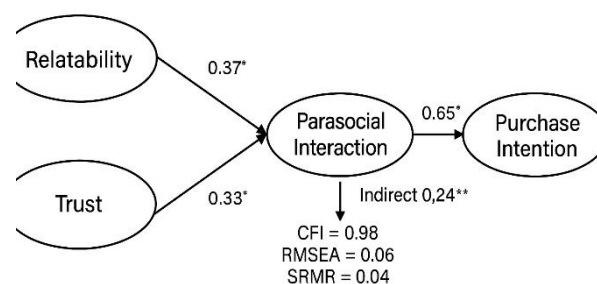


Figure 1. SEM Model: Relatability and Trust → PSI → Purchase Intention

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## Comparative Literature Insight

The strength of PSI's mediation aligns with Indonesian Gen Z's collectivist orientation, which favors emotional storytelling and relatability (Sutton et al., 2018). Compared to Western audiences, who may prioritize expertise, Indonesian users place higher trust in influencers with local relevance and perceived authenticity (Safeer et al., 2021; Genoveva & Samukti, 2020).

These findings validate the multidimensional influence of relatability and trust in digital marketing and reinforce the significance of culturally contextualized influencer strategies.

## Storytelling and Emotional Resonance

One of the most effective frameworks for integrating parasocial interaction (PSI) into digital marketing involves narrative-based strategies. Storytelling allows influencers to share personal experiences and relatable anecdotes, which deepen emotional engagement and create perceived intimacy between the influencer and their audience (Weismueller et al., 2020). This emotional resonance has been shown to increase trust and brand affinity, strengthening the consumer-

influencer relationship. Furthermore, emotionally charged stories make content more memorable and persuasive. By weaving brand messages into authentic life narratives, influencers can subtly embed product endorsements without disrupting the user experience. This technique aligns with Gen Z's desire for meaning and realism in the content they consume, increasing receptiveness to brand messaging over time.

### **Interactive Content and Community Engagement**

Interactive tools such as Q&A sessions, live streams, and polls enable bidirectional communication and foster real-time emotional involvement (Daimi & Tolunay, 2021). These formats enhance the illusion of reciprocity central to PSI and allow consumers to feel like active participants in a shared digital community. Such engagements not only humanize influencers but also deepen brand loyalty through communal validation. Moreover, as interactions accumulate, they simulate long-term relational cues, similar to friendships, reinforcing the PSI bond. Incorporating gamified features such as challenges, giveaways, and collaborative campaigns also empowers audiences to engage more deeply. When followers feel their input is valued, it increases their emotional investment and the perceived authenticity of influencer-brand affiliations.

### **Measurement and Longitudinal Tracking**

To assess PSI-driven effectiveness, brands must implement tools like sentiment analysis and engagement analytics (Asyraff et al., 2022). Combining quantitative metrics (likes, shares, comments) with qualitative methods (interviews, surveys) over time enables marketers to monitor changes in consumer perceptions and adjust campaign strategies accordingly (Tran et al., 2024). Longitudinal research provides insights into how influencer-consumer relationships evolve and whether these shifts correlate with purchasing patterns. Monitoring fluctuations in PSI intensity can reveal early signs of influencer fatigue or oversaturation, giving marketers a proactive advantage. Additionally, comparative cross-platform studies offer benchmarks for evaluating which social media environments best support sustained parasocial bonds.

### **Authenticity and Trust Concerns**

Despite the effectiveness of influencer strategies, Gen Z audiences increasingly question authenticity. Concerns about over-commercialization, deceptive content, and influencer fatigue challenge the sustainability of PSI as a marketing level (Florenthal, 2019). When influencers appear insincere or prioritize sponsorships over community values, trust erodes, leading to disengagement (Dewanthi, 2024). Transparent disclosure of partnerships, unfiltered content, and consistency in personal values are crucial for maintaining credibility. For instance, controversies involving influencers who failed to disclose paid endorsements in Indonesia highlight the risks of perceived dishonesty. As social media audiences become more media literate, the threshold for perceived authenticity rises, making nuanced, contextually aware content creation vital.

## Research Limitations

This study's respondents were predominantly urban users, which limits generalizability to rural Gen Z audiences. In addition, the cross-sectional design restricts causal inference, and the reliance on self-reported data carries potential biases despite validation measures.

## Ethical Considerations in Emotional Marketing

Marketers must tread carefully to avoid exploiting emotional bonds established via PSI. Transparency in sponsored content, genuine brand alignment, and ethical conduct are essential to maintaining credibility (Song et al., 2023). Gen Z's strong ethical consciousness demands that brands balance persuasion with authenticity and fairness (Florenthal, 2019; Weismueller et al., 2020). Ethical missteps can damage brand equity and undermine long-term engagement. It is crucial that brands avoid tactics that manipulate consumer emotions without delivering actual value. Campaigns should prioritize informed consumer choice and maintain openness about marketing objectives. Companies may consider establishing ethical guidelines for influencer collaborations that include vetting for value alignment, long-term partnership potential, and mutual benefit agreements.

## Strategic Integration and Adaptive Engagement

To sustainably benefit from PSI, brands should tailor influencer collaborations to reflect evolving Gen Z expectations. Authentic engagement, ethical transparency, and real-time interaction must converge to build long-term consumer trust. As digital environments change, so too must the strategies that seek to meaningfully connect with audiences on an emotional level. Adaptive marketing strategies that integrate AI-based sentiment monitoring and social listening can help brands respond in real-time to audience shifts. Furthermore, a multi-platform approach that considers how PSI differs across TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube can provide a more complete and effective influencer engagement model. By embracing cultural nuances, localization, and micro-influencer ecosystems, marketers can maintain relevance in an increasingly fragmented and value-driven media landscape.

## CONCLUSION

This study underscores the central role of parasocial interaction (PSI) in enhancing the effectiveness of influencer marketing strategies targeting Generation Z, particularly within short-form video platforms. By integrating emotionally resonant storytelling and interactive content, influencers can cultivate trust and relatability, fostering stronger connections with their audiences. When managed ethically, these relationships translate into increased purchase intention and long-term brand loyalty.

The findings emphasize the importance of authenticity in influencer collaborations. As Generation Z becomes increasingly skeptical of over-commercialized or insincere content, brands must

prioritize transparency, value alignment, and meaningful engagement over purely promotional messaging. The risk of influencer fatigue and declining trust further underscores the importance of longitudinal tracking, adaptive content strategies, and ethical practices in influencer marketing.

Moreover, the study highlights the need for diverse evaluation tools, including sentiment analysis and longitudinal tracking, to capture the dynamic nature of PSI over time. Brands that remain agile in their strategies are more likely to foster enduring consumer relationships in the evolving digital landscape. Future research may extend this work by comparing PSI effects across rural and urban populations, testing longitudinal designs, or examining how emerging technologies such as AI-driven influencers reshape consumer trust and engagement.

Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of PSI as both a psychological mechanism and a strategic tool. Its implications extend to influencer selection, content design, and campaign execution, offering valuable guidance for marketers aiming to engage ethically and effectively with Gen Z audiences.

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