

## Influencer Marketing and Purchase Behavior among Gen Z and Millennials

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### ABSTRACT

Influencer marketing has emerged as a dominant digital marketing strategy, particularly in engaging Generation Z and Millennial consumers who are highly active on social media platforms. This conceptual paper aims to develop a comprehensive theoretical framework explaining the relationship between influencer marketing and purchase behavior, with a specific focus on the mediating role of brand awareness. Drawing upon established theoretical foundations, including Source Credibility Theory, Social Influence Theory, and the Theory of Planned Behavior, the study conceptualizes how influencer attributes such as credibility, authenticity, and relatability influence consumer perceptions and behavioral outcomes. Existing literature indicates that influencer marketing enhances brand awareness through repeated exposure, personalized communication, and interactive engagement, which subsequently shapes consumer purchase behavior (Freberg et al., 2011; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Furthermore, Generation Z and Millennials exhibit a strong preference for peer-driven and influencer-based communication, making them more responsive to such marketing strategies (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Smith, 2020). Despite this growing body of research, the literature remains fragmented and lacks a unified theoretical framework integrating influencer marketing, brand awareness, and purchase behavior. This paper contributes by proposing a structured conceptual model in which brand awareness acts as a mediating variable between influencer marketing and purchase behavior. The study also highlights the importance of generational characteristics in shaping consumer responses. The framework provides a foundation for future empirical research and offers valuable insights for marketers seeking to design effective influencer marketing strategies in the digital era.

**Keywords:** Influencer Marketing, Purchase Behavior, Brand Awareness, Generation Z, Millennials.

### Introduction

The rapid evolution of digital technologies and social media platforms has fundamentally transformed the marketing landscape, shifting from traditional mass communication to more personalized and interactive approaches. One of the most significant developments in this transformation is the emergence of influencer marketing, which leverages individuals with substantial online followings to promote products and services (Freberg et al., 2011). Influencers, often perceived as opinion leaders, play a crucial role in shaping consumer attitudes, preferences, and behaviors in the digital environment.

In recent years, Generation Z and Millennials have become the primary focus of marketing strategies due to their high digital engagement and purchasing power. These cohorts spend a considerable amount of time on social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, where influencer content is widely consumed (Smith, 2020). Unlike previous generations, Gen Z and Millennials

tend to trust peer recommendations and influencer endorsements more than traditional advertising, as they perceive such content as authentic and relatable (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

The increasing reliance on influencer marketing raises important questions regarding its effectiveness in influencing consumer behavior, particularly purchase decisions. While existing studies have explored various aspects of influencer marketing, there is a lack of theoretical integration explaining how influencer attributes translate into consumer outcomes. Moreover, the role of brand awareness as a mediating mechanism in this relationship has not been sufficiently examined within a unified framework.

This paper addresses these gaps by developing a conceptual model that explains the relationship between influencer marketing and purchase behavior among Gen Z and Millennials, with a focus on the mediating role of brand awareness. The study is grounded in established theories, providing a comprehensive understanding of the underlying mechanisms.

## **Literature Review**

### • **Influencer Marketing**

Influencer marketing refers to the practice of collaborating with individuals who have a significant following on social media platforms to promote products and services. These influencers act as intermediaries between brands and consumers, delivering messages in a more personalized and relatable manner (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Unlike traditional advertising, influencer marketing emphasizes authenticity, engagement, and trust, which are critical factors in influencing consumer behavior.

Research suggests that influencer effectiveness depends on several attributes, including credibility, expertise, attractiveness, and relatability (Freberg et al., 2011). Credibility, in particular, plays a crucial role in shaping consumer perceptions, as consumers are more likely to trust and act upon recommendations from credible sources. Similarly, relatability enhances perceived similarity between influencers and audiences, fostering stronger emotional connections.

Recent studies have further expanded this understanding by emphasizing the importance of authenticity and transparency. For instance, Lou and Kim (2019) highlight that perceived authenticity significantly influences consumer trust and engagement. More recent research indicates that audiences are becoming increasingly sensitive to sponsored content, requiring influencers to maintain transparency to sustain credibility (Jin et al., 2021).

Additionally, the growing role of micro- and nano-influencers has been widely recognized. These influencers, despite having smaller audiences, often generate higher engagement rates and stronger trust relationships (De Veirman et al., 2017). Recent studies confirm that micro-influencers are particularly effective in niche markets and among Gen Z consumers due to their perceived authenticity and closer interaction with followers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Hudders et al., 2021).

Emerging trends also highlight the rise of AI-generated and virtual influencers, which present new opportunities and challenges for brands. While virtual influencers offer consistency and control, their effectiveness depends heavily on perceived authenticity and audience acceptance (Moustakas et al., 2020; Thomas & Fowler, 2021).

### • **Brand Awareness**

Brand awareness is a fundamental concept in marketing, referring to the extent to which consumers can recognize and recall a brand (Aaker, 1996). It plays a critical role in the consumer decision-making process, as higher brand awareness increases the likelihood of a brand being included in the consumer's consideration set.

Influencer marketing contributes significantly to brand awareness by increasing brand visibility and exposure. Through repeated interactions and engaging content, influencers help create strong brand associations in the minds of consumers (Keller, 2013). Social media platforms further amplify this effect by enabling content sharing, interaction, and viral dissemination, thereby enhancing brand reach and recall.

Recent literature emphasizes that brand awareness is not only about recognition but also involves emotional connection and brand salience. According to Keller (2021), brand awareness in the digital era is closely linked to consumer engagement and online interactions. Influencers contribute to this by embedding brands within their daily narratives, making them more relatable and memorable.

Furthermore, studies indicate that interactive content formats, such as live streams, stories, and short-form videos, significantly enhance brand awareness among younger consumers (Casaló et al., 2020; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). These formats encourage active participation, leading to deeper cognitive processing and stronger brand recall.

Recent research also highlights that algorithm-driven visibility on platforms like Instagram and TikTok plays a crucial role in amplifying influencer content, thereby increasing brand exposure (Abidin, 2021). As a result, influencer marketing has become a key driver of brand awareness in digital environments.

- **Purchase Behavior**

Purchase behavior refers to the process through which consumers select, evaluate, and purchase products or services. It is influenced by a combination of psychological, social, and cultural factors (Kotler & Keller, 2016). In the digital context, purchase behavior is increasingly shaped by online interactions, reviews, and influencer recommendations.

Influencer marketing affects purchase behavior by reducing perceived risk and providing social proof. When consumers observe influencers endorsing products, they are more likely to perceive those products as trustworthy and reliable. This is particularly important in online environments where consumers cannot physically evaluate products before making a purchase.

Recent studies suggest that influencer marketing has a direct and indirect impact on purchase intentions. For example, Sokolova and Kefi (2020) found that influencer credibility and attractiveness significantly influence purchase intention through parasocial interaction. Similarly, Casaló et al. (2020) demonstrated that influencer expertise enhances trust, which in turn drives purchase behavior.

Moreover, engagement metrics such as likes, comments, and shares play a crucial role in shaping consumer decisions. High engagement signals popularity and social validation, which can positively influence purchase intentions (Ki et al., 2020).

Recent research also highlights the role of emotional attachment and storytelling in influencing purchase behavior. Influencers who share personal experiences and authentic narratives create stronger emotional bonds with their audience, leading to higher purchase likelihood (Schouten et al., 2020).

Additionally, the rise of social commerce—where purchases are made directly through social media platforms—has further strengthened the link between influencer marketing and purchase behavior (Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020).

- **Gen Z and Millennials**

Generation Z and Millennials represent two distinct yet overlapping consumer segments characterized by high digital engagement and social media usage. These cohorts are often referred to as digital natives, as they have grown up with digital technologies and are highly comfortable using them (Smith, 2020).

Gen Z consumers are particularly influenced by authenticity, transparency, and social values. They prefer content that reflects real-life experiences and are quick to detect inauthentic or overly promotional messages. Millennials, on the other hand, value convenience, personalization, and brand credibility, but also emphasize trust and emotional connection.

Recent studies indicate that Gen Z is more responsive to short-form video content and interactive media, while Millennials tend to engage more with detailed reviews and long-form content (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Both groups, however, rely heavily on influencer recommendations, making influencer marketing a highly effective strategy for targeting these segments.

Furthermore, research highlights that Gen Z exhibits a stronger preference for micro-influencers and peer recommendations, while Millennials are more influenced by established influencers and brand reputation (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Fromm & Read, 2022).

Another important trend is the growing importance of social and ethical values in consumer decision-making. Both Gen Z and Millennials prefer brands that align with their values, and influencers who advocate for social causes tend to have a stronger impact on these audiences (Vrontis et al., 2021).

### Research Gap

Despite the rapid growth of literature on influencer marketing, several important gaps remain. First, existing studies predominantly focus on **empirical investigations of influencer effectiveness**, often examining isolated relationships such as influencer credibility and purchase intention, without integrating these variables into a comprehensive theoretical framework (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Casalo et al., 2020).

Second, although **brand awareness is widely acknowledged as a critical outcome of marketing communication**, its role as a **mediating mechanism** linking influencer marketing to purchase behavior has received limited theoretical attention, particularly in conceptual studies (Keller, 2013; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Most prior research treats brand awareness either as an independent or dependent variable rather than as a central explanatory construct.

Third, the existing literature lacks a **generationally contextualized perspective**, especially focusing on **Generation Z and Millennials**, who exhibit distinct digital consumption patterns, high social media engagement, and a strong preference for influencer-driven content (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Fromm & Read, 2022).

Finally, there is a scarcity of **theory-driven conceptual models** that integrate established frameworks such as Source Credibility Theory, Social Influence Theory, and the Theory of Planned Behavior to explain how influencer marketing influences consumer behavior.

Therefore, this study addresses these gaps by developing a **comprehensive theoretical framework** that explains the relationship between influencer marketing and purchase behavior, while positioning **brand awareness as a mediating construct** within the context of Gen Z and Millennials.

### Objectives of the Study

- To develop a theory-driven conceptual framework explaining the relationship between influencer marketing and purchase behavior among Generation Z and Millennials.
- To examine the mediating role of brand awareness in the relationship between influencer marketing and purchase behavior based on established consumer behavior theories.

### Conceptual Development and Theoretical Framework

#### • Source Credibility Theory

Source Credibility Theory, originally proposed by Carl Hovland and Walter Weiss (1951), posits that the effectiveness of a message is highly dependent on the perceived credibility of the source. Credibility is generally conceptualized through two key dimensions: expertise (the perceived knowledge or competence of the source) and trustworthiness (the perceived honesty and integrity of the source). Later research has also incorporated attractiveness as an additional dimension influencing persuasion.

In the context of influencer marketing, influencers act as communication sources whose credibility significantly affects consumer attitudes and behavioral responses. When influencers are perceived as knowledgeable and trustworthy, their endorsements are more likely to be accepted by audiences, thereby enhancing persuasion effectiveness (Freberg et al., 2011).

Recent studies further emphasize that authenticity has become a critical extension of credibility in digital environments. Consumers, particularly Gen Z, are increasingly skeptical of overly commercialized content and are more responsive to influencers who present genuine and transparent opinions (Jin et al., 2021). This shift highlights the evolving nature of credibility in influencer marketing, where authenticity and relatability complement traditional dimensions such as expertise and trustworthiness.

Moreover, Source Credibility Theory explains how credible influencers can enhance brand awareness by making brand messages more persuasive and memorable. As consumers trust the influencer, they are more likely to pay attention to the promoted brand, leading to increased recognition and recall. This, in turn, influences purchase behavior by reducing perceived risk and uncertainty (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

- **Social Influence Theory**

Social Influence Theory, developed by Herbert Kelman (1958), explains how individuals' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors are shaped by the influence of others. The theory identifies three key processes: compliance, identification, and internalization.

- Compliance occurs when individuals conform to others' expectations to gain rewards or avoid punishment.
- Identification happens when individuals adopt behaviors to establish or maintain a relationship with a group or individual.
- Internalization refers to the acceptance of influence because it aligns with personal values and beliefs.

In influencer marketing, these processes are highly relevant. Consumers often follow influencers not only for information but also for social belonging and identity formation. Influencers serve as reference groups, shaping consumer preferences and behaviors through social validation and peer influence.

Recent research highlights the role of parasocial interaction, where consumers develop one-sided emotional relationships with influencers, perceiving them as friends or role models (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). This emotional connection strengthens identification and increases the likelihood of adopting influencer recommendations.

Furthermore, social media platforms amplify social influence through engagement metrics such as likes, comments, and shares. High engagement signals popularity and social approval, which can influence consumer perceptions and increase the likelihood of purchase behavior (Ki et al., 2020).

Social Influence Theory also explains how influencer marketing contributes to brand awareness. As influencers repeatedly expose their followers to brand-related content, social validation and peer influence enhance brand recognition and recall. Over time, this repeated exposure and social reinforcement lead to stronger brand associations and increased purchase intentions.

- **Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)**

The Theory of Planned Behavior, developed by Icek Ajzen (1991), provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control influence behavioral intentions and actions.

- Attitude refers to an individual's positive or negative evaluation of a behavior.
- Subjective norms represent perceived social pressure to perform or not perform a behavior.
- Perceived behavioral control reflects the individual's perception of their ability to perform the behavior.

In the context of influencer marketing, TPB offers valuable insights into how influencers shape consumer purchase behavior. Influencer endorsements can positively influence attitudes by highlighting product benefits and creating favorable perceptions. At the same time, influencers contribute to subjective norms by establishing social expectations, as consumers may feel encouraged to adopt products endorsed by popular figures.

Recent studies suggest that influencer marketing significantly impacts behavioral intentions, particularly when consumers perceive influencers as credible and relatable (Casaló et al., 2020). Additionally, the interactive nature of social media enhances perceived behavioral control by providing easy access to product information, reviews, and purchase options.

Importantly, brand awareness plays a mediating role within the TPB framework. Increased brand awareness strengthens consumer attitudes and familiarity, making it more likely for individuals to develop positive purchase intentions. When consumers are aware of a brand and perceive it positively through influencer endorsements, they are more inclined to convert intention into actual purchase behavior.

- **Integration of Theories into Conceptual Framework**

The integration of Source Credibility Theory, Social Influence Theory, and the Theory of Planned Behavior provides a comprehensive explanation of how influencer marketing influences consumer behavior.

- Source Credibility Theory explains how influencer attributes (credibility, authenticity, expertise) enhance message effectiveness.
- Social Influence Theory explains how social interactions and peer influence shape consumer attitudes and behaviors.
- Theory of Planned Behavior explains how these influences translate into behavioral intentions and actual purchase behavior.

Together, these theories support the proposed conceptual framework in which:

- Influencer marketing influences brand awareness through credibility and social influence mechanisms
- Brand awareness enhances consumer attitudes and familiarity
- These factors ultimately lead to purchase behavior

Thus, brand awareness acts as a central mediating mechanism, linking influencer marketing to purchase behavior among Gen Z and Millennials.

### Discussion

The present study develops a theoretical framework explaining how influencer marketing shapes purchase behavior among Generation Z and Millennials, with brand awareness acting as a mediating construct. The discussion integrates the proposed framework with existing literature and established theories to provide deeper insights into the underlying mechanisms.

First, the findings highlight the central role of **influencer attributes**, particularly credibility, authenticity, and relatability, in shaping consumer perceptions. Consistent with Source Credibility Theory (Hovland & Weiss, 1951), credible influencers enhance the effectiveness of marketing communication by increasing trust and reducing skepticism. In the context of digital marketing, authenticity has emerged as a critical extension of credibility, especially among Gen Z consumers who are highly sensitive to sponsored and promotional content (Jin et al., 2021). This suggests that influencer marketing strategies must go beyond traditional persuasive techniques and focus on genuine, transparent communication.

Second, the study emphasizes the importance of **social influence processes** in shaping consumer behavior. Drawing on Social Influence Theory (Kelman, 1958), influencer marketing operates through mechanisms such as identification and internalization, where consumers align themselves with influencers they admire or relate to. The rise of parasocial relationships further strengthens this influence, as consumers develop emotional connections with influencers and perceive them as trusted sources of information (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). These findings reinforce the idea that influencer marketing is not merely informational but also relational and psychological in nature.

Third, the framework highlights the **mediating role of brand awareness**, which serves as a crucial link between influencer marketing and purchase behavior. Influencers contribute to brand awareness by increasing visibility, recall, and recognition through repeated exposure and engaging content (Keller, 2013). From the perspective of the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), increased brand awareness enhances consumer attitudes and familiarity, which in turn influence purchase intentions. This indicates that influencer marketing does not directly lead to purchase behavior; rather, its effects are channeled through cognitive processes such as awareness and perception.

Furthermore, the discussion underscores the **distinct characteristics of Gen Z and Millennials**. These cohorts exhibit high digital engagement, preference for authenticity, and reliance on peer-driven communication (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Smith, 2020). Gen Z, in particular, demonstrates a stronger inclination toward micro-influencers and short-form content, while Millennials may respond more to established influencers and detailed product information. These differences suggest that influencer marketing strategies should be tailored to specific generational preferences.

Overall, the study contributes to the literature by integrating multiple theoretical perspectives into a unified framework. It provides a deeper understanding of how influencer marketing operates through credibility, social influence, and cognitive mechanisms to shape consumer behavior. The findings also highlight the importance of brand awareness as a mediating variable, offering new insights into the effectiveness of influencer marketing strategies.

## Conclusion

This study develops a comprehensive theoretical framework explaining the relationship between influencer marketing and purchase behavior among Generation Z and Millennials. By integrating Source Credibility Theory, Social Influence Theory, and the Theory of Planned Behavior, the paper provides a structured understanding of how influencer attributes influence consumer perceptions and decision-making processes.

The study identifies brand awareness as a key mediating construct that links influencer marketing to purchase behavior. Influencers enhance brand awareness through credible, authentic, and engaging content, which increases consumer familiarity and positive attitudes toward the brand. This, in turn, leads to higher purchase intentions and behavioral outcomes.

The findings emphasize that influencer marketing is not merely a promotional tool but a complex mechanism involving psychological, social, and cognitive processes. The effectiveness of influencer marketing depends on the ability of influencers to establish trust, foster engagement, and create meaningful connections with their audience.

From a practical perspective, the study highlights the importance of selecting influencers who align with brand values and resonate with target audiences. Marketers should focus on authenticity, transparency, and audience engagement rather than solely relying on follower count. Additionally, strategies should be tailored to the specific preferences of Gen Z and Millennials to maximize effectiveness.

Overall, this paper contributes to the growing body of literature on influencer marketing by providing a theory-driven conceptual framework. It lays the foundation for future empirical research and offers valuable insights for both academics and practitioners.

## Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged.

First, the study is **conceptual in nature** and does not include empirical validation. While the proposed framework is grounded in established theories and supported by existing literature, future research should test the model using quantitative methods such as Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to validate the proposed relationships.

Second, the study focuses exclusively on **Generation Z and Millennials**, limiting its generalizability to other demographic groups. Future studies can extend the framework to include other generations, such as Generation X or Baby Boomers, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of influencer marketing effects.

Third, the study does not consider **platform-specific differences**. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have unique features and user behaviors that may influence the effectiveness of influencer marketing. Future research can explore how these platform characteristics moderate the proposed relationships.

Fourth, the study primarily focuses on **brand awareness as a mediating variable**, while other potential mediators such as trust, engagement, and brand attitude are not explicitly examined. Future research can incorporate these variables to develop a more comprehensive model.

Finally, the rapidly evolving nature of digital marketing, including the emergence of **virtual influencers and AI-driven content**, presents new challenges and opportunities that are not fully addressed in this study. Future research should explore these developments to enhance the relevance of influencer marketing frameworks.

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