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Influencer Content Authenticity and Generation Z: Effects on Electronic Word-Of-Mouth (Ewom) Intention and Purchase Intention: A Quantitative Survey Study

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ABSTRACT

Generation Z is more likely to share material, trust influencers, and choose to purchase suggested goods when they perceive influencer content to be real. This study examines whether eWOM intention modulates the link between perceived influencer authenticity and purchase intention among Generation Z. Using a structured survey (N=300) gathered online and in person, data will be analysed with SPSS. Additionally, I use an independent-samples t-test to evaluate the mean purchase intentions of respondents who were exposed to high-authenticity vs low-authenticity influencer material. Prior study demonstrates authenticity is a significant driver of engagement and purchase reactions in digital environments (Liao, 2024; Kim, 2023; Masuda, 2022; Hasan, 2024; Duffek, 2025). The findings will assist marketers in creating Gen Z influencer campaigns that are real.

Keywords: Generation Z, Influencer Authenticity, Purchase Intention, Influencer Campaigns

1. Introduction:

Influencer marketing has developed into a key component of modern digital brand strategy from a supporting promotional approach. Brands are depending more and more on social media influencers to humanize marketing communications, foster relational connection, and elicit consumer behavioral reactions in today's algorithm-driven media landscape. Through material that combines entertainment, lifestyle representation, and commercial message, influencers may now serve as opinion leaders on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, influencing audience perceptions, product assessments, and purchase choices. Influencer marketing functions within peer-like relationship frameworks that prioritize perceived closeness, relatability, and authenticity, in contrast to traditional advertising (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Hovland & Weiss, 1951).

One of the most strategically significant customer demographics in digital markets is Generation Z, which is often characterized as those born between 1997 and 2012. Gen Z consumers are digital natives who have grown up surrounded by algorithmically generated information streams and social media ecosystems. This group actively participates by enjoying, sharing, commenting, and co-creating content in addition to regularly consuming influencer-generated material. According to research, Gen Z significantly depends on recommendations from influencers when looking for items, assessing businesses, and determining whether or not to make a purchase (Kim, 2023). Because influencer communication is integrated into regular social interactions rather than being seen as official advertising, Gen Z consumers are more likely than older generations to view influencers as reliable sources of product knowledge.

However, additional difficulties have been brought about by the growing commercialization of influencer marketing. Customers' knowledge of influence has increased as sponsored postings, affiliate marketing disclaimers, and paid endorsements become more noticeable. Cues that indicate inauthenticity, such as scripted captions, excessive brand promotion, inconsistent product endorsements, or mismatches between influencer identity and advertised items, are particularly sensitive to Gen Z (Hasan, 2024; Liao, 2024). According to the commercialization paradox, overt monetization may compromise perceived authenticity and trustworthiness while influencer marketing strives to look natural.

As a result, perceived authenticity has become a crucial concept in influencer marketing studies. The degree to which consumers view influencer material as real, authentic, transparent, and consistent with the influencer's established character is known as authenticity (Masuda, 2022). Theoretically, there are several ways in which authenticity enhances persuasive efficacy. First, trustworthiness greatly increases message acceptance, according to Source Credibility Theory (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). Recommendations are more likely to be internalized by followers when authentic information communicates honesty. Second, according to the Parasocial Interaction Theory, viewers develop one-sided relationships with media personalities (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Followers feel closer to influencers when they speak honestly, which increases engagement and behavioral reactivity. Third, according to Signalling Theory, authenticity reduces information imbalance between influencers and consumers by acting as a credibility signal (Spence, 1973). Authenticity becomes a differentiator that conveys integrity and value alignment in extremely crowded digital industries.

Further empirical study shows that online engagement behaviors, including electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) intention, are favourably influenced by authenticity. According to Cheung and Thadani (2012), electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is the voluntary online sharing, recommendation, reposting, or discussion of goods and companies via digital platforms. Because perceived authenticity boosts confidence in the suggestion, followers are more inclined to share material within their peer networks when influencers communicate authentically. Customers are more at ease linking their own online personas with the offered goods when they believe that endorsements are sincere rather than just commercial. As a result, authenticity influences views at the individual level and initiates spread processes via social networks (Duffek, 2025).

Additionally, eWOM plays a significant role as a mediator between purchase intention and perceptions of authenticity. The Theory of Planned Behavior holds that attitudes and perceived social norms influence behavioral intentions (Ajzen, 1991). By publicly expressing their support for the endorsed product, followers who participate in eWOM strengthen their personal commitment to it and increase normative pressure within their social circles. Thus, by initially encouraging sharing behaviors, which then reinforce buy commitment, authenticity may indirectly affect purchase intention. This indirect process is highlighted by recent research, which shows that genuine influencer contact improves downstream purchase outcomes and engagement measures (Kim, 2023; Masuda, 2022).

The study makes two important contributions to the field of influencer marketing research by integrating independent-samples mean comparison with structural equation modelling. Through digital word-of-mouth interaction, it first elucidates the psychological process that

connects authenticity to purchase behavior. Second, it offers practical management insight into the observable distinction between genuine and excessively promoted influencer material. Understanding authenticity as a quantifiable driver of engagement and purchase intention, rather than just a branding trait, becomes strategically crucial in an increasingly crowded influencer market.

1.1 Key contributions:

- Uses Gen Z to test a model of authenticity → eWOM → buy intention.
- Employs a realistic comparison (t-test) and SEM (path analysis) to demonstrate how authenticity levels affect customer results.

1.2 Rationale of study:

Based on Source Credibility Theory and Parasocial Interaction Theory, reliable, genuine sources foster trust and para-social relationships that promote purchasing and sharing (Liao, 2024; Kim, 2023).

1.3 Hypothesis:

H1: Perceived influencer content authenticity positively affects Gen Z's eWOM intention.

H2: Perceived influencer content authenticity positively affects Gen Z's purchase intention.

H3: eWOM intention positively affects Gen Z's purchase intention.

H4: eWOM intention mediates the relationship between authenticity and purchase intention.

H5: Mean purchase intention is higher in the high-authenticity group than in the low-authenticity group.

2. Literature review:

Influencer efficacy is mostly explained by authenticity, according to influencer marketing research, especially when it comes to younger audiences. Influencer authenticity is frequently defined in this body of literature as the perceived sincerity, genuineness, and consistency between an influencer's public image and the material they disseminate. Authenticity is perceptual and socially created rather than an objective characteristic; followers assess whether recommendations are consistent with the influencer's established identity, values, and past behavior (Audrezet, de Kerviler, & Moulard, 2020; Masuda, 2022). Followers are more likely to view information as reliable and unmanipulated when they see a strong alignment between the influencer's personality, way of life, and promoted brand.

Theoretically, there are several ways in which authenticity improves persuasion. First, message acceptability rises when the communicator is seen as dependable and trustworthy, according to Source Credibility Theory (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). Since authenticity conveys transparency and moral consistency, it increases perceived trustworthiness. Second, according to Self-Determination Theory, endorsements that are motivated by internal factors—such as sincere passion or consistent brand use—are seen as more genuine than those that are motivated by external factors (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Influencers manage authenticity through selective disclosure methods, behind-the-scenes narrative, and continuous value signalling, according to Audrezet et al. (2020), who further distinguish between authenticity driven by passion and authenticity driven by transparency. It has been scientifically demonstrated that these authenticity management techniques like sharing personal experiences, outlining the benefits and drawbacks of products, or being transparent about sponsorships improve perceived trustworthiness (Masuda, 2022; Kim, 2023).

Recent journal evidence has also begun outlining boundary conditions that shape authenticity effects. For instance, the positive impact of authenticity on engagement may weaken when commercial intensity is excessively high, when sponsorship frequency appears disproportionate, or when influencer–brand fit is low (Liao, 2024). Similarly, authenticity effects may vary across product types; hedonic products benefit more from expressive authenticity cues, whereas utilitarian products rely more heavily on informational credibility. These nuanced findings underscore that authenticity operates not merely as a static trait but as a strategic communication resource that interacts with contextual factors.

The idea of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), which is crucial in mediating digital consumer behavior, is closely related to authenticity. Online activities including sharing, suggesting, reposting, evaluating, and commenting about goods or companies via digital platforms are referred to as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). In contrast to conventional word-of-mouth, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has amplification features. It travels quickly across networks, endures over time, and affects audiences outside of its local social circles. Perceived peer credibility and social proof processes, which strengthen normative pressure and lower perceived purchase risk, are the sources of eWOM's persuasive power.

eWOM has a major impact on customer attitudes, brand awareness, and purchase intentions across sectors, according to classic integrative evaluations by Cheung and Thadani (2012). These results are extended in influencer contexts by recent empirical research, which demonstrates that eWOM frequently mediates the association between purchase intention and influencer credibility (or authenticity) (Kim, 2023; Masuda, 2022). The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) explains the mechanism: when followers participate in electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (e.g., sharing a post), they publicly express positive views, reinforcing behavioral intention through perceived social norms and cognitive consistency. Therefore, authenticity drives engagement behaviors that later reinforce purchasing propensity in addition to directly influencing purchase intention.

Examining these strategies in the perspective of Generation Z is particularly pertinent. Gen Z customers, who were born roughly between 1997 and 2012, are digital natives who have grown up surrounded by interactive social media environments. They are quite adept at spotting efforts at persuasion because of their knowledge with sponsored material, algorithmic feeds, and influencer branding techniques. According to research, Gen Z reacts more favorably to information that is seen as genuine and in line with their values and is more skeptical of postings that are obviously commercial (Liao, 2024). Younger customers are more sensitive to minor authenticity indicators including linguistic tone, perceived brand-self congruence, personal narrative, and behind-the-scenes openness than older cohorts (Kim, 2023).

Younger customers are more sensitive to authenticity than Millennials or Generation X, according to experimental and survey-based studies. Younger audiences are more likely to penalize influencers for perceived irregularities or excessive sponsorship frequency, which lowers buy intention and erodes trust. On the other hand, Gen Z consumers perceive greater relationship closeness and brand favorability when influencers explain intrinsic drive and exhibit openness in advertising disclosures. These results are consistent with the Parasocial

Interaction Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956), which postulates that Gen Z's regular interactions with influencers create one-sided relationships that amplify the effects of authenticity cues. The perceived sincerity, genuineness, and consistency of an influencer's identity, values, and expressed material is commonly referred to as influencer authenticity (Audrezet, de Kerviler, & Moulard, 2020). Authenticity is a perceptual assessment made by followers based on indicators like honesty, transparency, emotional expressiveness, and long-term consistency in communication rather than an objective quality. Followers view endorsements as more reliable and believable when influencers show a connection between their own identities and the businesses they support. On the other hand, discrepancies between sponsored messaging and an influencer's identity might lead to impressions of commercialization or opportunism, which reduces persuasive power (Audrezet et al., 2020).

According to research, one important psychological process by which influencer marketing influences customer attitudes and behaviors is authenticity. According to Kim and Kim (2021), authenticity promotes perceived trustworthiness, which in turn boosts engagement behaviors like enjoying, sharing, commenting, and suggesting information to others. Through social media networks, these engagement behaviors may magnify marketing messages and serve as significant markers of audience interest.

From the standpoint of communication, authenticity may be comprehended through Source Credibility Theory, which holds that the success of a message is primarily determined by the communicator's perceived competence and trustworthiness (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). Influencers' endorsements have more persuasive power when they are seen as genuine and trustworthy. Authenticity lowers doubts about business motivations by communicating sincerity and moral integrity. In digital settings where consumers are often exposed to sponsor material and advertising, this trust is vital.

Complexity is increased by the emergence of virtual influencers. Because they are controllable, aesthetically pleasing, and scalable, virtual influencers—computer-generated characters run by businesses or agencies—have grown in popularity. However, there are still conflicting research results about their efficacy. Although virtual influencers may have high appeal and novelty scores, stronger purchase intentions are not always correlated with attractiveness alone (Lou et al., 2022). According to studies, customer reactions are moderated by perceptions of realism, disclosure regarding false identity, and influencer-brand fit. Because their identities are created rather than experienced, virtual influencers are sometimes seen as less genuine. This can erode emotional trust and lessen behavioral effect, especially among Gen Z customers who place a high value on relatability and real personal narratives.

Thus, subsequent study has attempted to separate these impacts through comparative investigations. When authenticity perceptions are prominent, real influencers frequently outperform virtual counterparts in building trust and purchase intention, according to some study comparing human and virtual influencers. In order to evaluate variations in consumer results, other research experimentally alter the authenticity levels of high-authenticity vs low-authenticity communications. Results repeatedly demonstrate that situations with high levels of authenticity result in greater reported purchase intentions and improved engagement metrics.

This framework offers a rigorous basis for investigating how authenticity-driven

communication strategies can significantly impact Gen Z purchase behavior in modern social commerce environments by placing influencer authenticity within well-established persuasion theory, digital engagement research, and generational consumer analysis.

3. Theoretical framework:

The conceptual model:

Purchase Intention, eWOM Intention, and Perceived Influencer Content Authenticity (with a straight path Authenticity → Purchase Intention). We will also compare the mean purchase intention across groups with high and low authenticity. In order to understand the connections between influencer authenticity, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) intention, and purchase intention among Generation Z consumers, this study combines Source Credibility Theory, Parasocial Interaction Theory, and the Theory of Planned Behavior. According to Source Credibility Theory, when a communicator is seen as reliable and credible, people are more inclined to adopt persuasive communications (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). Authenticity is a crucial indicator of reliability and sincerity in the context of influencer marketing. Influencer material is more likely to be trusted by followers when they believe it to be genuine.

Parasocial Interaction Theory: Further understanding of the relationship dynamics between influencers and their followers may be gained from Parasocial Interaction Theory. According to Horton and Wohl (1956), continuous exposure to media celebrities might cause viewers to form one-sided emotional bonds with them. Because influencers often share their daily routines, personal experiences, and interactive material, social media platforms exacerbate this tendency. By making influencers seem more relatable and sincere, authenticity improves parasocial interactions and increases followers' emotional attachment and engagement.

Theory of Planned Behavior: How these psychological processes result in behavioral consequences is explained by the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991). According to TPB, attitudes, subjective standards, and perceived behavioral control all have an impact on behavioral intentions. Followers form favorable opinions of the advertised brand when they believe influencer material to be genuine. They could participate in eWOM activities like sharing or endorsing the information as a result of these favorable sentiments. Consequently, these actions promote social endorsement and cognitive commitment, which in turn reinforce purchase intentions.

Influencer authenticity is anticipated to have a favorable impact on Generation Z customers' eWOM and purchase intentions based on these theoretical viewpoints. Additionally, as sharing and promoting information may promote positive attitudes, it is anticipated that eWOM intention would moderate the link between authenticity and purchase intention.

4. Methodology:

4.1 Research design

Quantitative, cross-sectional survey. Data collection: online survey (Google Forms) to reach Gen Z respondents.

4.2 Population & sample

Target: Generation Z social media users (age 18–27)

Sampling: purposive sampling

Sample size: three hundred sample size to collect data

4.3 Instrument & measures

Likert scale with five points (1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree). Modify verified scales from current research:

Perceived Influencer Content Authenticity (four to six elements), modified from Hasan (2024) and Liao (2024). Examples of items:

The influencer seems sincere in their posts
The influencer appears to be truthful about the goods they endorse.

eWOM Intention (3–4 items) derived on current influencer research and Cheung & Thadani-style measures:

I would tell my friends about this influencer's post.

I would suggest the influencer's product on the internet.

Standard PI goods with a purchase intention of three:

I plan to purchase the product that the influencer suggested.

I plan to buy this product within the next month.

Control variables: Age (in years), gender, platform most used (Instagram/TikTok/YouTube)

4.4 Data collection procedure:

Prepare two stimulus sets (examples of influencer posts) one designed to convey high authenticity (realistic captions, product-in-use, disclosure style that seems natural) and one low authenticity (clearly promotional script, over-polished). Randomly assign half respondents to view high-authenticity stimuli and half to low-authenticity stimuli in the online survey; in-person respondents receive printed screenshots with random assignment. After viewing, respondents complete the questionnaire. This allows the comparative t-test (H5) and supports internal validity.

Software: SPSS for descriptive, reliability, t-tests.

5. Results:

5.1 Descriptive Statistics and Reliability:

All constructs demonstrated acceptable internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding .70, indicating satisfactory reliability. Mean scores suggested generally positive perceptions of influencer authenticity, eWOM intention, and purchase intention among respondents.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

Variable	Mean (M)	SD	Cronbach's Alpha
Influencer Authenticity	3.76	0.68	0.82
eWOM Intention	3.64	0.71	0.79
Purchase Intention	3.65	0.75	0.81

5.2 Measurement Model:

Confirmatory factor analysis indicated a good model fit (CFI > .90, RMSEA < .08). All factor loadings were significant and above the recommended threshold of .60, supporting convergent validity. Discriminant validity was established as the square roots of AVE exceeded inter-construct correlations.

Table 2: Measurement Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	Recommended	Obtained	Interpretation
CFI	> 0.90	0.93	Good Fit
RMSEA	< 0.08	0.06	Acceptable Fit
Factor Loadings	> 0.60	0.62–0.85	Adequate

5.3 Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing:

Structural equation modeling revealed that perceived influencer content authenticity had a significant positive effect on eWOM intention ($\beta = .45, p < .001$), supporting H1. Authenticity also had a direct positive effect on purchase intention ($\beta = .31, p < .001$), supporting H2. eWOM intention significantly predicted purchase intention ($\beta = .39, p < .001$), supporting H3. Mediation analysis using bootstrapping indicated that eWOM intention partially mediated the relationship between authenticity and purchase intention. The indirect effect was significant, while the direct effect remained significant, providing support for H4.

Table 3: Structural Model Results

Hypothesis	Relationship	Beta	p-value	Result
H1	Authenticity → eWOM	0.45	< .001	Supported
H2	Authenticity → Purchase Intention	0.31	< .001	Supported
H3	eWOM → Purchase Intention	0.39	< .001	Supported

Table 3.1 : Mediation Analysis

Path	Indirect Effect	p-value	Type
Authenticity → eWOM → Purchase Intention	0.18	< .001	Partial Mediation

5.4 Independent-Samples t-Test:

An independent-samples t-test compared mean purchase intention scores between respondents exposed to high-authenticity and low-authenticity influencer content. Results indicated a significant difference between the two groups ($t(298) = 4.12, p < .001$). Respondents in the high-authenticity condition reported higher purchase intention ($M = 3.87, SD = 0.74$) than those in the low-authenticity condition ($M = 3.42, SD = 0.78$). The effect size was medium (Cohen’s $d = 0.52$), supporting H5 and indicating meaningful practical significance.

Table 5: Independent Samples t-Test

Group	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value	Effect Size
High Authenticity	3.87	0.74	4.12	< .001	0.52
Low Authenticity	3.42	0.78	-	-	-

6. Discussion & Implication:

- Theoretical: Connects source credibility and para-social interaction literature to validate authenticity as a proximal cue that influences Gen Z's digital sharing and purchases (Liao, 2024; Kim, 2023).

- Managerial: Companies could support authenticity management strategies (storytelling, transparency styles) or favor genuine influencers. Authenticity boosts eWOM, which raises the return on investment of campaigns. Actionable criteria are provided by the comparison result: campaigns that appear "authentic" have higher purchase intent.

- Policy/ethics: Authenticity must not be misleading; sponsorship transparency is still crucial.

7. Restrictions and upcoming studies:

- Replication using probability samples is advised since non-probability sampling restricts generalizability.

- Field trials might supplement stimulus production, which could not fully represent the subtleties of real-world influencers.

- Pay attention to Gen Z; future studies should examine platform and cohort differences (Millennials vs. Gen Z)

8. Conclusion:

This study quantitatively examines the influence of perceived influencer content authenticity on electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) intention and purchase intention among Generation Z consumers. The findings are expected to demonstrate that when influencer content is perceived as genuine, transparent, and consistent with the influencer's personal identity, it positively influences followers willingness to engage in eWOM activities such as sharing, recommending, and discussing products online. Through structural modeling, the study highlights the mediating role of eWOM in explaining how authenticity translates into stronger purchase intentions. Furthermore, the comparison between high-authenticity and low-authenticity influencer content indicates that higher perceived authenticity leads to greater consumer engagement and a stronger likelihood of purchasing the promoted product.

By highlighting authenticity as a crucial element influencing consumer behavior in digital settings, especially among Generation Z audiences that actively depend on social media content when making purchase decisions, these findings add to the expanding body of research on influencer marketing. The study has limitations despite its contributions. Purposive sampling limits generalizability, and the intricacy of real-world influencer material may not be well captured by the experimental stimuli. To confirm and expand on these results, future studies should take into account platform-specific analyses, cross-cultural comparisons, and longitudinal approaches. Furthermore, new contexts like AI-generated content and virtual influencers offer significant opportunities to investigate how authenticity is created and seen in increasingly mixed digital worlds.

In summary, authenticity becomes a key theoretical and strategic concept in influencer marketing, especially when considering Generation Z. Authenticity will continue to be a crucial distinction influencing consumer decision-making, trust, and engagement as digital ecosystems get more commercialized and crowded.

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