From Skeptics to Buyers: How Influencer Authenticity and Relatability Drive Purchase Decisions Among Gen-Z

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Abstract

Among Gen Z consumers, influencer marketing quickly became popular, but there is still a considerable disparity between their claimed beliefs about relying on the endorsement of influencers and their actual purchasing intentions. This research paper investigates the trust paradox by comparing the perceived authenticity, relatability and trust of audiences in Gen Z in India and how they affect purchase intentions. The research aims at identifying the psychological stimuli influencing conversion into purchases regardless of the intermediate level of trust.

The cross-sectional research design was quantitative, and data were gathered using a Webbased survey with 154 respondents who were Gen Z (between 18 and 26 years old). The descriptive statistics, Pearson, chi-square and binary logistic regression were used to understand the predictive value of composite measures of trust, authenticity, and relatability in purchase behavior.

Results indicate that all three psychological elements such as trust, authenticity, and relatability have a significant influence on Gen Z consumers following influencer recommendations. Relatability and trust were identified as the greatest contributing factors to purchase decisions and authenticity was a supportive but significant factor. The findings indicate that despite moderate explicit trust, conversion can be brought about by strong emotional and relationship cues.

The paper arrives at a conclusion that influencer effect on Gen Z is not mediated by emotion but rather a mix of cognitive and affective cues. These lessons underscore the need to ensure that the influencers are believable, relatable, and actually in tandem with brand values.

Keywords: Influencer Marketing, Gen Z, trust paradox, authenticity, relatability, purchase behavior

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Influencer marketing has emerged as one of the most impactful digital marketing brands among Gen Z consumers who actively engage with content creators and use Instagram, YouTube, and Tik Tok among others. By becoming part of the regular content, these influences influence perception, lifestyle and preference by making promotional messages natural, relatable and compelling. As Gen Z continues to rely on the information and product discovery The way that they perceive the cues of influencers has been of growing significance to both researchers and marketers due to social media as a source of information discovery.

1.2 Research Problem

Although influencers are a significant presence within the industry, and they shape consumer trends, their influence on their purchase behavior falls evidently short of what they purport to have, meaning the so-called trust paradox. According to many Gen Z users, they are not always convinced to buy products promoted by influencers, but they tend to do so quite often. Such inconsistency is an indication that there are other psychological cues like authenticity and relatability that could be offsetting lower implied levels of trust. Nevertheless, there is very little research on the combination of these cues locally, especially on the Indian Gen Z. Thus, this paradox should be further explored to find out what exactly is behind the influencer-led purchase behavior.

1.3 Research Gaps

Though prior works have studied trust, authenticity, and relatability as a factor in influencer marketing, most have studied these constructions individually and have not understood how they interact to influence Gen Z purchasing behavior. Although there is an increasing interest in the digital choice of Gen Z, there is little empirical research that defines the trust paradox, as low-reported trust is accompanied by great purchase behavior. Previous studies are also highly oriented at the population of the West, and thus, a lack of evidence exists concerning the way Indian Gen Z consumers perceive the qualities of the influencers in their cultural and digital contexts. Moreover, gender and employment status as demographic moderators have not been studied extensively, which restricts the knowledge about possible subgroup differences. Lastly, a good number of studies are based on descriptive or attitudinal analysis and do not have predictive behavioral models that can determine the strongest determining attributes of the influencer among purchase decisions. These lapses underline the necessity of a more holistic, situational analysis of the psychological and demographic dynamics that drive the impact of influences on Gen Z consumers to buy a product or service.

1.4 Research Objectives

The proposed study will examine how influenced attributes influence Gen Z purchase behavior by addressing the following objectives:

- To examine the effect of perceived trust/credibility on purchase behavior.
- To analyze the role of authenticity in influencing purchase decisions.
- To determine the effect of relatability on consumer responsiveness.
- To assess the combination of trust, authenticity, and relatability on purchase.
- To test the existence of these relationships as moderated by gender and employment.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The research is valuable as it informs the aspect of the psychology behind the decision-making of Gen Z during influencer marketing in terms of purchasing decisions. Through examining the synergistic effect of trust, authenticity, and relatability, the study aids in understanding why Gen Z are still able to buy products promoted by influencers even after admitting being skeptical. Such lessons would inform brands to choose the influencers who have a real connection with audiences and create content strategies that can be meaningful engagement. The research has made a new contribution to the academic front trust paradox and broadens our perspective on the psychology of the Gen Z consumers in the virtual world.

2. Literature review

2.1 Trust and Purchase Behavior

The feature of trust has always been mentioned as one of the determinants of online purchase intention. In a scenario of influencer marketing, perceived influencer expertise, integrity, and message credibility are powerful predictors of consumers depending on the recommendation (Lou and Yuan, 2019). Trust is a mental

process that decreases perceived risk especially in online shopping platforms where it is hard to evaluate products.

A systematic review study by Zhang, Zhao, and Xu (2022) reveals that the increased trust in online communicators is a major boost in purchase intention in social commerce sites. In line with this, Jin, Muqaddam, and Ryu (2019) discovered that credible influences increase consumer trust and promote the perceived credibility of the products being promoted. Such results prove the trust as a key element of influencer-based buying behavior.

2.2 Authenticity and Relatability

Authenticity has been a constituent of influencer effectiveness. Influencers whose content is transparent, consistent, and real-life create more emotional and cognitive associations with followers. It has been established that real communication is very effective in terms of consumer interaction, perceived credibility, and overall persuasion (De Veirman and Hudders, 2020).

Relatability as a perceived similarity or identification correspondence- is also a determinant of parasocial bonds. The research has shown that relatable influencers build the feeling of social proximity and belonging to the same experience and result in more positive attitudes and purchase intention (Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget, 2020). Authenticity as well as relatability has been identified to strengthen emotional attachment and responsiveness of followers in social commerce environments.

2.3 Gen Z Decision-Making and the "Trust Paradox"

The recent publishing defines Gen Z as very educated, tech-savvy, and not trusting of conventional advertising. Although skeptics, they tend to be very responsive to the suggestions of the influencers. This gives a seeming paradox of trust, with the explicit trust ratings being rated medium, whereas the actual buying behavior is high.

According to Sharma and Sheth (2023), this can be explained by the fact that Gen Z combines cognitive and affective cues (credibility and expert-based versus authenticity and relatability and parasocial closeness) in an additive way. Ghosh and Sarkar (2023) also show that lower baseline trust can be overcome by the signals related to emotions and relation, which is in line with the multi-criteria decision-making dynamics in digital consumer behavior.

2.4 Employment Status and Gender Differences

Influencer responsiveness is also affected by demographic issues. Women tend to be more parasocial and behaviorally affected by digital endorsements, especially with regard to lifestyle and self-expression (Roggeveen & Sinha, 2020). The level of employment is also important: people with greater autonomy or disposable income will demonstrate a better online purchase propensity (Lim and Nguyen, 2021).

Even though, demographic influences are not well examined as opposed to psychological influences, there is an emerging study that, gender and employment status might moderate the impact of trust, authenticity, and relatability on purchase decision. This especially applies to Gen Z whose spending habits are different based on income, employment status, and social identity.

3. Research hypotheses

Hypotheses:

- H1: Purchase behavior has a positive relationship with perceived authenticity.
- H2: Perceived relatability has a positive correlation to purchase behavior.
- H3: There exists a positive relationship between perceived trust/credibility with purchase behavior.
- H4: Trust, authenticity, and relatability have a joint predictive role on purchase behavior (additive effects).

- H5: There is a moderating effect of gender on the effect between influencer attributes and purchase behavior.
- H6: There is a moderating role of employment status on the correlation between influencer attributes and purchase behavior.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The study adopted a quantitative and cross-sectional design to investigate the relationships between attributes of influences and the purchase behavior among the Gen Z. This is an appropriate method, as it allows measuring both the psychological perception and the behavioral outcomes at once, and coincides with the earlier social commerce studies.

The correlational framework employed in the study is backed by logistic regression to identify the extent to which trust, authenticity, and relatability are predictors of binary purchase behavior. This combination provides a predictive and relational insight.

4.2 Sampling Strategy

The data regarding Indian Gen Z consumers (approximately 1826 years) were collected through a non-probability convenience sampling method. The participants were also recruited using social media, including Instagram, WhatsApp groups, and university networks. Such a sampling approach is associated with most influenced marketing followers, with Gen Z being very active in those platforms. N = 154 valid replies were obtained. Though the convenience sampling reduces the scope of generalizability, the demographic picture, however, conforms to the trends found in the Indian Gen Z communities.

4.3 Sample Characteristics

The sample was a representative group of Gen Z respondents with different demographic and behavioral characteristics. Gender wise, there were both females and males and a little percentage of the non-disclosed. The breakdown of employment categories were mainly students then secondly self-employed and thirdly full-time jobs. Most respondents are actively involved in the content of influencers on at least one social media platform on a daily basis, which shows that they are highly digitally exposed and familiar with the concept of influence-driven communication.

All in all, the demographic picture indicates a digitally engaged, socially conscious consumer segment, which is why the sample is suitable to research the psychological and behavioral impact of influencer marketing on the users of Indian Gen Z.

4.4 Instrumentation

The questionnaire contains 18 validated questions which were based on the previous literature in influencer marketing. Measures were created to measure trust, authenticity, relatability, and purchase behavior through a 5-point Likert scale. A direct question that determined binary purchase behavior (yes/no) was to ascertain whether a respondent had ever been persuaded to buy something based on the recommendation of an influencer.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

The involvement was anonymous and voluntary. It was explained to the respondents that the data would be used for an academic purpose.

4.6 Data Analysis

The SPSS was used to analyze data with the help of descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analysis, chi-square tests and binary logistic regression to investigate the relationship between the variables and determine predictors of purchase behavior.

5. Results

5.1 Descriptive statistics

Composite Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Authenticity	3.503	1.154	1.0	5.0
Relatability	3.539	0.940	1.0	5.0
Trust/Credibility	3.531	0.972	1.2	5.0

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Purchase and Impulse Buying Behavior

Overall purchase rate: **113/154 = 73.4%**. Impulse purchase agrees/strongly agree: 96/154 = 62.3%. **Composite descriptives.** Authenticity: M = 3.503, SD = 1.154. Relatability: M = 3.539, SD = 0.940. Trust: M = 3.531, SD = 0.972.

Interpretation: The descriptive results show that a majority of Gen Z respondents have purchased products recommended by influencers, indicating strong behavioral responsiveness despite their stated skepticism. The high impulse buying percentage further suggests that influencer content triggers quick, emotionally driven decisions in a substantial portion of the sample. Gen Z reports high purchase and impulse-buying rates from influencer recommendations, showing that they respond strongly to influencer content even when they claim to be skeptical. This confirms the presence of a "trust paradox," where actual behavior is more influenced by familiarity, attraction, and quick emotional triggers than by stated levels of trust.

5.2 Correlations with purchase

Pearson correlations (N = 154) between composite scores and purchase (binary converted for point-biserial interpretation): Trust r = .497, p < .001; Relatability r = .467, p < .001; Authenticity r = .442, p < .001. Individual item-level correlations showed Q8 (credibility influence), Q9 (personal connection), and Q13 (real-life demonstration) as strongest predictors.

Variable	Correlation (r)	p-value	Interpretation
Trust/Credibility	0.497	<0.001	Strongest predictor
Relatability	0.467	<0.001	Strong positive
Authenticity	0.442	<0.001	Moderate positive

Table 2: Pearson Correlations Between Influencer Attributes and Purchase Behavior

Interpretation: The descriptive results show that a majority of Gen Z respondents have purchased products recommended by influencers, indicating strong behavioral responsiveness despite their stated skepticism. The high impulse buying percentage further suggests that influencer content triggers quick, emotionally driven decisions in a substantial portion of the sample. Trust, relatability, and authenticity all show positive associations with purchase behavior, meaning these psychological cues meaningfully shape how Gen Z responds to influencers. Trust reflects credibility, relatability reflects emotional closeness, and authenticity reinforces genuineness. Together, they show that Gen Z evaluates influencers through both cognitive and emotional filters.

5.3 Group comparisons

Gender	Purchased (n)	Not Purchased (n)	Total	Purchase Rate (%)
Female	57	13	70	81.4%
Male	54	27	81	66.7%
Prefer not to say	2	1	3	66.7%
Total	**113**	**41**	**154**	**73.4%**

Table 4: Gender-wise Comparison of Purchase Rates Among Gen Z Respondents

Purchase rate by gender: Female 81.4% (57/70) vs Male 66.7% (54/81). Chi-square test for gender × purchase: $\chi^2(1) = 4.259$, $p = .119$ (not significant at $\alpha = .05$), suggesting the observed difference is practically meaningful but not statistically robust in this sample.
Purchase rate by employment: Self-employed 80.0% (40/50) vs Students 67.7% (42/62). $\chi^2(4) = 3.353$, $p = .501$ (not significant), likely due to subgroup sizes.

Although females showed a higher purchase rate than males, the difference was not statistically significant, indicating that gender does not reliably predict whether Gen Z consumers act on influencer recommendations. Similarly, while self-employed respondents appeared more likely to purchase compared to students, this difference was also not statistically meaningful. These patterns suggest that the variations observed across gender and employment groups are more reflective of sample composition rather than true behavioral differences. Overall, demographic factors do not play a major role in shaping influence-driven purchase behavior, reinforcing that psychological cues such as trust, authenticity, and relatability are far more influential.

5.4 Logistic regression

A binary logistic regression model predicting purchase status included Authenticity, Relatability, Trust, Gender (female = 1), and Employment dummy variables (self-employed, student, employed FT; baseline = other). The model was statistically significant overall (model χ^2 and df to be reported from statistical output) and correctly classified **80.5%** of cases (classification table).

Variable	B	SE	Odds Ratio (OR)	95% CI	Interpretation
Relatability	0.719	0.210	2.05	[1.36, 3.09]	Strongest predictor
Trust	0.713	0.212	2.04	[1.35, 3.09]	Equally strong
Authenticity	0.296	0.132	1.34	[1.04, 1.74]	Significant but weaker
Gender (Female=1)	-0.702	0.405	0.50	[0.22, 1.13]	Not significant
Employment (Self-employed)	0.160	0.477	1.17	[0.46, 2.99]	Not significant
Employment (Student)	-0.076	—	0.93	—	Not significant
Intercept	-1.082	0.783	—	—	—

Table 3: Logistic Regression Model Predicting Purchase Behavior

Key coefficients:

- **Relatability:** B = .719, SE = .210, OR = 2.05, 95% CI [1.36, 3.09], p = .001.
- **Trust:** B = .713, SE = .212, OR = 2.04, 95% CI [1.35, 3.09], p = .001.
- **Authenticity:** B = .296, SE = .132, OR = 1.34, 95% CI [1.04, 1.74], p = .02.
- Gender and employment variables were not significant predictors after controlling for the psychological composites.

Interpretation: The regression model confirms that trust, relatability, and authenticity *jointly* predict influencer-driven purchasing. Relatability and trust are the strongest predictors, while authenticity plays a smaller but meaningful role. Demographic variables contribute to descriptive patterns but do not statistically change the model. Relatability and trust are the strongest predictors of whether Gen Z purchases influencer-promoted products, while authenticity plays a supportive but still meaningful role. Demographic factors do not significantly change the outcome, confirming that psychological cues—not gender or employment—are the primary drivers of influencer-led purchase decisions.

5.5 Extended Interpretation of Statistical Findings

In addition to the importance of key predictors, there are several patterns in the data that should be examined deeper. To begin with, Relatability and Trust have relative strength implying that Gen Z consumers combine both a cognitive and social cue in their decision process. The odds ratios of these variables are almost equal and point to the fact that relational closeness and perceived credibility are parallel processes that have a significant positive effect on the likelihood of purchase.

Second, the smaller but significant influence of Authenticity shows that not only does authenticity serve as a foundational signal but cannot be a driving force on conversion unless it is supported by either trust or relatability. Authenticity thus seems to work as a hygiene factor, which is significant, albeit not enough by itself.

Third, that gender and employment status were not statistically significant including the multivariate model means that demographic segmentation may not predict as well as many people expect in influencer marketing. A more potent targeting framework can be psychological (e.g., trust-prone vs. trust-skeptical consumers).

Lastly, the model accuracy (80.5) is rather high, which suggests that the set of psychological variables selected captures a significant percentage of purchase behavior variance and, therefore, serves as a theoretical argument in favor of influencer marketing being discussed as a multi-criteria domain of decision making, as opposed to the unidimensional emotional influence.

6. Additional Analyses

6.1 Trust Paradox Subgroup Patterns

Additional cross-tabulations indicated that there were significant differences in the low trust and high purchase group. The neutral trust levels (score = 3), with a high authenticity/relatability score, gave a purchase rate of 73.3 which is significantly high compared to the low-trust group (47.6%). This proves the theory that the concepts of authenticity and relatability can be used as compensatory factors during the decision process.

6.2 Interaction Trends (Exploratory)

Although sample size limited statistical testing, exploratory moderation plots suggested that:

- females showed a steeper slope between relatability and purchase probability than males,
- self-employed respondents showed stronger responsiveness to trust signals,

- students showed greater susceptibility to impulse cues.

These trends merit formal examination in larger samples.

6. Discussion

The outcomes explain the seemingly existent trust paradox: purchase behavior in Gen-Z seems to be a sum of trust (cognitive cue) and affective/social cues (relatability and perceived authenticity). Even with the mid-range (54.5% agreed/strongly agreed they trust influencer recommendations) baseline trust, most of the respondents still did buy when authenticity and relatability were high. This implies that the lack of explicit trust can be offset by authenticity and relatability in accordance with a multi-criteria decision-making process as opposed to an emotion-based model.

The strongest predictors in the regression model (both about doubling odds of purchase as units increase) were relatability and trust, and authenticity had a smaller but significant effect. It means that authenticity, relatability, and trust can be regarded as the complementary levers that brands and researchers need to use.

Gender and employment differences (greater purchase and impulse rates among females and self-employed respondents) were found to be descriptively different, but these subgroups differences did not obtain statistical significance in the multivariate equation presumably because of small sample sizes of described subgroups. Formal testing of moderation in future studies should be done through the use of larger samples.

The discovery that repeated exposure (frequency) was less associated with purchase (r ≈) was made. 262) helps to argue that the quality of content and perceived authenticity are of more importance than the sheer volume of exposure.

6.1 Theoretical Implications

The findings contribute to three streams of literature: (1) **Trust and social commerce**: Results challenge the assumption that explicit trust must precede purchase behavior. Instead, trust appears to work jointly with affective cues.
(2) **Authenticity research**: Authenticity functions as a contextual amplifier—strengthening the impact of trust and relatability—but is not the dominant driver on its own.
(3) **Gen Z decision-making**: The stereotype of Gen Z as emotionally impulsive is oversimplified. Cognitive inputs (credibility, trustworthiness) remain central, suggesting dual- processing rather than emotional primacy.

6.2 Practical Segmentation Implications

Though the demographic variables did not have a significant effect in regression, the descriptive patterns indicate the potential of using a hybrid segmentation of psychological and demographic cues. For example:

- Females with high relatability sensitivity may respond best to narrative-driven campaigns.
- Self-employed individuals may prefer expertise-focused or credibility-focused messaging.

This is motivating the brands to shift to psychographic segmentation as opposed to using age/gender.

7. Implications of the Study

The report notes that Gen Z is the most receptive to the authentic and transparent communicating influences. This means that the brands need to focus on the actual product demonstrations, personal stories, and sincere reviews. Also, even though the demographic trends were not significant, there was a descriptive indication of potential future segmentation opportunities, particularly in the female and self-employed consumer group.

Trust can be enhanced by maintaining consistent and value-based communication across social media platforms that will enhance long-term engagement.

7.1 Managerial Implications

Marketing managers need to transform influenced partnerships in the form of transactional and promotion intensive relationships to long-term partnerships that are based on credibility and value alignment. When choosing influencers, the brands need to focus on their authenticity, relatability, and trustworthiness and not on the number of followers or the frequency of posts. Managers must make sure there is proper and responsive contact with the audiences to build trust and respond to consumer issues in time, which can drive purchase intention and loyalty among Gen Z.

7.2 Strategic Implications

Companies must also ensure that they establish cross-platform policies that do not change messaging, tone, and authenticity. By combining the profiles of the influencers with consumer psychographics (such as trust orientation, relatability signals, content preferences) one can assist in creating highly personalized and also effective campaigns. Resonance and brand equity can be achievable through strategic use of influencers who are similar to the core audience of the brand in terms of lifestyle and values.

7.3 Measurement & Evaluation Implications

The old-fashioned measuring tools of reach, impressions, or counts of followers cannot be used to determine the performance of influencers. The brands are advised to implement an assessment model that is multidimensional and consists of authenticity ratings, perceived trust ratings, relatability ratings, and qualitative engagement ratings. These more profound measures give a better picture of the campaign effectiveness and allow marketers to maximize ROI by locating influencers that can be used to elicit significant behavioral changes and not superficial ones.

8. Limitations and Future Research

8.1 Limitations

The research employed convenience sampling and self-reported data, which as well could cause biases in responses and reduce generalizability. The number of subgroups (e.g., retired or other types of employment) was rather small, which decreased the statistical power of the moderation tests. The cross-sectional design does not allow the interpretation of causality, and there was no study of platform-specific effects.

8.2 Future research direction

Future research can use both longitudinal or experimental designs to confirm causal mechanisms that steer the trust paradox. It may be possible to extend the sample to Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities to reveal the regional variations. Future research needs to examine platform variations (e.g., TikTok vs Instagram), effect of product category and other psychological attributes (e.g., perceived value, social comparison and environmental concern).

8.3 Implications for Influencer Evaluation Frameworks

The results offer empirical information on how to design influencer evaluation models. The conventional measures of followers and impressions volume does not predict the real purchase conversion. Rather, the brands are supposed to implement multi-dimensional assessment systems such as:

- Authenticity Indicators (consistency of messaging, transparency, real usage)
- Relatability Measures (audience similarity, personal storytelling)
- Credibility Assessments (domain knowledge, reliability, history of accurate recommendations)

- Engagement Quality Metrics (meaningful comments vs likes)
- Psychological Resonance Scores (perceived trust and connection)

9. Conclusion

This paper reinforces the message about the combination of authenticity, relatability, and trust to influence the personality of influencer-me, purchase behavior of Gen Z consumers. The findings reveal that the so-called trust paradox can be considered not merely emotional impulsiveness, but a set of cognitive and affective indicators that inter-depend in making choices. High authenticity and high levels of relatability may lead to conversions even with moderate levels of explicit trust, meaning that Gen Z considers influencers using more than one psychological filter and not just one.

These observations underscore the need to select the influencers who talk regularly, depict authentic lifestyles, and sustain credibility in the long run. Simultaneously, these qualities will become a priority of brands as the field of influencer marketing is growing, and brands will be unable to maintain the attention unless they show the least promotional side of the product. The results also highlight the necessity of better evidence-based digital strategies that would meet the expectations of transparency and reality of Gen Z.

With the developments in digital channels and the shift and change in consumer demands, more studies will be needed to optimize existing models, as well as understand the impacts of newer types of content, new platforms, and the alteration of influencer practices on purchase behavior. The research is a solid basis of such future work and practical advice to the brands looking to develop meaningful and trustworthy influence relationships.

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