

# Decoding The Digital Bond: A Phenomenological Study Of Parasocial Interaction And Trust In Micro-Influencer Marketing Among Gen Z

Salsabila Maisah Andani <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia

[salsabilamaisah@gmail.com](mailto:salsabilamaisah@gmail.com)

## Abstract

*This study aimed to explore the role of parasocial interaction in shaping consumer trust in micro-influencer marketing among Generation Z. A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed to understand the lived experiences of digital consumers interacting with micro-influencers on social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. Data were collected through literature review, observation of user engagement patterns, and analysis of user-generated content, including comments and interactions. The findings indicated that parasocial interaction was formed through repeated exposure to personal and relatable content, creating a sense of emotional closeness between consumers and influencers. Trust was significantly influenced by perceived authenticity, transparency, and consistency in influencer behavior. Interactive communication, such as responding to comments and live engagement, further strengthened the perceived relationship and trust. However, excessive commercialization and inconsistent endorsements were found to reduce credibility. This study highlights that emotional connection and authenticity are critical factors in developing effective micro-influencer marketing strategies targeting Generation Z.*

## Keywords:

---

 This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

---

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technology has fundamentally transformed the landscape of marketing communication, particularly with the emergence of social media as a dominant platform for consumer engagement. Social media has evolved into an integrated digital ecosystem that combines communication, entertainment, and commerce, enabling brands to interact with consumers in more personalized and interactive ways. This transformation has significantly shifted traditional marketing approaches toward more relationship-oriented and experience-driven strategies (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Chaffey, 2022).

In this evolving digital environment, influencer marketing has become one of the most effective strategies for reaching and influencing consumers, especially among younger generations. Influencers act as intermediaries who bridge the gap between brands and

consumers by delivering marketing messages in a more relatable and engaging manner. Among various types of influencers, micro-influencers have gained considerable attention due to their perceived authenticity, niche audience focus, and higher engagement rates compared to macro-influencers or celebrities (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Tafesse & Wood, 2021).

Micro-influencers are typically characterized by smaller follower bases but stronger interpersonal connections with their audiences. This closeness enables them to build trust more effectively, as followers often perceive them as peers rather than distant public figures. As a result, micro-influencers are considered more credible and persuasive, particularly in influencing attitudes and purchase decisions among Generation Z consumers (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021).

One of the key theoretical concepts that explain the effectiveness of influencer marketing is *parasocial interaction*. Parasocial interaction refers to a one-sided psychological relationship in which audiences develop emotional connections with media figures despite the absence of direct, reciprocal communication. In the context of social media, this concept has gained renewed relevance as platforms enable continuous exposure to influencers' personal lives, thoughts, and experiences, thereby intensifying the perceived intimacy and emotional closeness (Liebers & Schramm, 2021).

For Generation Z, who have grown up in a highly digitalized environment, social media is not only a source of information but also a primary space for social interaction and identity formation. This generation tends to value authenticity, transparency, and emotional connection in their interactions with influencers and brands. Consequently, traditional advertising is often perceived as less trustworthy compared to influencer-generated content, which is seen as more genuine and relatable (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Djafarova & Bowes, 2021).

Trust plays a crucial role in shaping consumer behavior, particularly in online environments characterized by high levels of uncertainty and information asymmetry. In influencer marketing, trust is not solely based on the quality of information provided but is also influenced by emotional engagement, perceived authenticity, and the strength of the relationship between influencers and their followers. Parasocial interaction thus becomes a critical mechanism in building and sustaining consumer trust in digital contexts (Ki et al., 2020; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

However, despite the growing importance of influencer marketing, there remains a lack of comprehensive understanding regarding how parasocial interaction contributes to trust formation among Generation Z. Many existing studies have focused on quantitative outcomes such as purchase intention and engagement metrics, while relatively few have explored the

experiential and phenomenological dimensions of consumer–influencer relationships (Hudders et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the increasing commercialization of social media content presents new challenges for maintaining authenticity and trust. As influencers engage in more sponsored collaborations, consumers may become skeptical of their intentions, leading to potential declines in credibility. This highlights the need to examine how trust is constructed, maintained, and potentially disrupted within the context of micro-influencer marketing (De Veirman et al., 2020).

In addition, the dynamic nature of social media platforms, characterized by algorithm-driven content exposure and interactive features, further complicates the process of trust formation. The ability of influencers to engage directly with their followers through comments, live sessions, and personalized content creates new opportunities for strengthening parasocial relationships, but also requires careful management to maintain authenticity (Tafesse & Wood, 2021).

Therefore, this study aims to explore the role of parasocial interaction in shaping consumer trust in micro-influencer marketing among Generation Z using a phenomenological approach. By focusing on the lived experiences of consumers, this research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how emotional connections are formed and how they influence trust and consumer behavior in digital environments.

The contribution of this study lies in its ability to integrate theoretical perspectives on parasocial interaction with contemporary digital marketing practices. Specifically, this research offers insights into how emotional engagement, authenticity, and interactive communication contribute to trust formation. These findings are expected to provide practical implications for marketers, brands, and influencers in designing more effective and sustainable marketing strategies that resonate with Generation Z consumers.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of Generation Z consumers in interacting with micro-influencers on social media platforms. The phenomenological method was chosen to gain a deeper understanding of how individuals perceive and interpret their emotional connections and trust toward influencers in digital environments. Data were collected through a comprehensive literature review, observation of social media engagement patterns on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, and analysis of user-generated content, including comments, likes, and interaction behaviors. The observation focused on identifying patterns

of communication, expressions of trust, and forms of emotional attachment between followers and micro-influencers.

The data analysis process was conducted through several stages, including data reduction, data categorization, and thematic interpretation. The researcher systematically organized the data to identify recurring themes related to parasocial interaction, authenticity, engagement, and trust formation. This approach allowed for the extraction of meaningful insights from the observed phenomena while maintaining the richness of participants' experiences. The validity of the findings was ensured through triangulation of data sources, combining theoretical perspectives with real-world digital observations. By adopting this methodology, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the role of parasocial interaction in shaping consumer trust within the context of micro-influencer marketing among Generation Z.

### **3. RESULT**

The findings of this study demonstrate that parasocial interaction between Generation Z consumers and micro-influencers is formed through continuous and repetitive exposure to personalized digital content, particularly on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. Most consumers reported that they follow influencers not only for product information but also for entertainment, inspiration, and emotional connection.

A recurring pattern observed is that micro-influencers who share daily routines, personal struggles, and life experiences tend to create a stronger emotional resonance with their audience. For example, influencers who document their “day in my life” content or openly discuss personal challenges often receive higher engagement and more meaningful interactions compared to purely promotional posts.

Furthermore, the comment sections reveal that followers frequently communicate using casual, intimate language, such as giving advice, expressing concern, or even defending the influencer in discussions. This indicates that followers perceive influencers as trusted individuals rather than distant public figures.

Another key finding shows that trust is significantly influenced by perceived transparency. Micro-influencers who explicitly label sponsored content, provide honest product reviews, and avoid exaggerated claims are more likely to be trusted. In contrast, influencers who frequently promote different brands within a short time frame are often perceived as less credible.

The study also found that interactive features such as live streaming, Q&A sessions, and comment replies play a crucial role in strengthening the perceived relationship. Followers who receive direct responses from influencers report feeling “noticed” and “valued,” which enhances their emotional attachment.

In addition, consistency in content style, values, and personality contributes to trust formation. Influencers who maintain a clear identity and avoid contradictory messaging are perceived as more reliable. Conversely, sudden changes in content direction or personality can create confusion and reduce trust.

Interestingly, some respondents expressed that they rely on micro-influencers as a primary source of product information, sometimes even more than official brand advertisements. This suggests that parasocial interaction can influence not only trust but also information-seeking behavior.

Lastly, the findings indicate that trust built through parasocial interaction directly affects purchase intention. Consumers are more likely to try products recommended by influencers they feel emotionally connected to, especially when the recommendation appears natural and integrated into daily content.

## **4. DISCUSSION**

### **A. Parasocial Interaction as a Constructed Digital Social Reality**

The findings suggest that parasocial interaction has evolved into a constructed digital social reality in which consumers perceive influencers as part of their extended social network. For Generation Z, digital environments function as primary spaces for socialization, where relationships are formed and maintained through mediated communication (Liebers & Schramm, 2021). This phenomenon reflects a significant shift from traditional one-way media consumption to interactive and emotionally immersive digital experiences.

In this context, micro-influencers act as social agents who facilitate emotional engagement and influence consumer perceptions. Their ability to present relatable and authentic content allows them to occupy a unique position within the social structure of digital communities (Dwivedi et al., 2021).

### **B. Authenticity as the Central Mechanism of Trust Formation**

Authenticity emerges as the most critical factor in establishing and sustaining consumer trust. The findings indicate that Generation Z consumers actively evaluate the sincerity and consistency of influencer behavior when forming trust judgments. Authenticity is reflected not only in content presentation but also in the alignment between influencers' values, actions, and endorsements (Ki et al., 2020).

This aligns with recent research suggesting that authenticity reduces perceived risk and enhances credibility in digital marketing environments. Influencers who maintain transparency, particularly in disclosing sponsored content, are more likely to sustain long-term trust relationships (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021).

### **C. Emotional Engagement as a Driver of Consumer Behavior**

The study highlights that emotional engagement plays a pivotal role in shaping consumer behavior. Parasocial interaction fosters a sense of intimacy and psychological closeness, which significantly influences trust and purchase intention. For Generation Z, emotional connection often takes precedence over rational evaluation in decision-making processes (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

This finding underscores the importance of emotional storytelling in influencer marketing. Content that evokes emotions, shares personal experiences, and reflects real-life situations is more likely to resonate with audiences and drive behavioral outcomes (Hudders et al., 2021).

### **D. Interactive Communication and Perceived Reciprocity**

Interactive communication serves as a critical mechanism in reinforcing parasocial relationships. When influencers engage with followers through comments, live interactions, or direct responses, it creates a perception of reciprocity, even within a predominantly one-sided interaction (Tafesse & Wood, 2021).

This perceived reciprocity enhances emotional attachment and strengthens trust, as followers feel acknowledged and valued. Consequently, interaction quality becomes a key determinant of influencer effectiveness in digital marketing strategies.

### **E. The Vulnerability of Trust in Commercialized Environments**

Despite the strong influence of parasocial interaction, trust is highly vulnerable to excessive commercialization. The findings indicate that Generation Z consumers are increasingly critical of content that appears overly promotional or inconsistent with an influencer's established identity (De Veirman et al., 2020).

This suggests that trust is a dynamic and fragile construct that requires continuous maintenance. Influencers must carefully balance commercial interests with authenticity to avoid eroding audience trust.

### **F. Micro-Influencers as High-Trust Marketing Intermediaries**

Micro-influencers play a strategic role as high-trust intermediaries between brands and consumers. Their smaller but highly engaged audiences allow for deeper emotional connections and stronger trust relationships compared to macro-influencers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

This finding challenges traditional marketing assumptions that prioritize reach over engagement. Instead, it highlights the importance of relational quality and authenticity in influencing consumer behavior.

## **G. The Transformation of Trust in the Digital Era**

The study also reveals a broader transformation in the nature of trust, shifting from institutional trust toward relational trust. Generation Z consumers increasingly rely on individuals such as influencers rather than traditional institutions or brands when making consumption decisions (Dwivedi et al., 2021).

This shift has significant implications for marketing strategies, suggesting that human-centered and relationship-based approaches are more effective in building trust in digital environments.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

This study concludes that parasocial interaction plays a significant role in shaping consumer trust in micro-influencer marketing among Generation Z. The findings demonstrate that continuous exposure to relatable and personal content enables consumers to develop a perceived emotional connection with micro-influencers, which strengthens their level of trust. This trust is not solely based on informational value but is largely influenced by emotional engagement, perceived intimacy, and the authenticity demonstrated by influencers.

Furthermore, the study reveals that authenticity, transparency, and consistency in influencer behavior are critical factors in maintaining consumer trust. Micro-influencers who openly communicate, provide honest product evaluations, and engage actively with their audience are more likely to establish long-term trust relationships. In contrast, excessive commercialization and inconsistent endorsements may weaken credibility and reduce audience trust.

The results also indicate that interactive communication, such as responding to comments and engaging in real-time interactions, enhances the perceived closeness between influencers and followers. This interaction reinforces the parasocial bond and increases the effectiveness of marketing communication.

From a practical perspective, this study suggests that brands should prioritize collaboration with micro-influencers who demonstrate strong authenticity and engagement rather than focusing solely on follower count. Building emotionally driven and trust-based relationships should be the central strategy in targeting Generation Z consumers.

Finally, this study recommends future research to explore quantitative approaches and broader demographic contexts to validate and extend these findings. Further investigation into the long-term sustainability of trust in increasingly commercialized digital environments is also encouraged.

## **6. REFERENCES**

Campbell, C., & Farrell, J. R. (2020). More than meets the eye: The functional components underlying influencer marketing. *Business Horizons*, 63(4), 469–479.

- Chaffey, D. (2022). *Digital marketing: Strategy, implementation, and practice* (8th ed.). Pearson.
- De Veirman, M., Hudders, L., & Nelson, M. R. (2020). What is influencer marketing and how does it target children? *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 1–8.
- Djafarova, E., & Bowes, T. (2021). 'Instagram made me buy it': Generation Z impulse purchases in fashion industry. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 59, 102345.
- Dwivedi, Y. K., Ismagilova, E., Hughes, D. L., Carlson, J., Filieri, R., Jacobson, J., Jain, V., Karjaluoto, H., Kefi, H., Krishen, A. S., Kumar, V., Rahman, M. M., Raman, R., Rauschnabel, P. A., Rowley, J., Salo, J., Tran, G. A., & Wang, Y. (2021). Setting the future of digital and social media marketing research: Perspectives and research propositions. *International Journal of Information Management*, 59, 102168.
- Hudders, L., De Jans, S., & De Veirman, M. (2021). The commercialization of social media stars: A literature review and conceptual framework. *International Journal of Advertising*, 40(3), 327–355.
- Ki, C. W. C., Cuevas, L. M., Chong, S. M., & Lim, H. (2020). Influencer marketing: Social media influencers as human brands. *Journal of Business Research*, 113, 1–12.
- Liebers, N., & Schramm, H. (2021). Parasocial interactions and relationships with media characters – An inventory of 60 years of research. *Communication Research Trends*, 40(2), 4–31.
- Lou, C., & Yuan, S. (2019). Influencer marketing: How message value and credibility affect consumer trust. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 19(1), 58–73.
- Sokolova, K., & Kefi, H. (2020). Instagram and YouTube bloggers promote it: Why should I buy? *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 53, 101742.
- Tafesse, W., & Wood, B. P. (2021). Followers' engagement with Instagram influencers: The role of influencers' content and engagement strategy. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 58, 102303.