

Impact of Influencer Marketing on Gen Z Consumer Purchasing Patterns in Emerging Economies


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This paper investigates how social media influencer marketing alters the buying behavior of Generation Z (born 1997–2012) within emerging economies. Grounded in Source Credibility Theory and the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework, this study analyzes how influencer traits like perceived authenticity, expertise, and trustworthiness translate into digital peer pressure and conversion. Emerging economies exhibit high mobile internet penetration paired with distinct socioeconomic dynamics, making them unique ecosystems for social commerce. By examining consumer trends across markets like India, Indonesia, and Nigeria, this paper shows that Gen Z rejects traditional top-down corporate advertisements. Instead, they rely on micro- and nano-influencers who operate as proxy peers. The findings reveal that trust acts as the primary link between content exposure and purchase execution, while regional challenges such as digital infrastructure variance and localized platform algorithms heavily shape marketing outcomes.

Keywords: Gen Z, Marketing, Emerging Economics, Digital Growth

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1. Introduction

Digital communication channels have turned contemporary marketing away from broadcast media toward personalized, peer-driven ecosystems. At the center of this structural shift is Generation Z, a demographic cohort characterized by its status as the first true digital natives. Globally, the influencer marketing industry has surged to a critical position within commercial strategies, with its market evaluation swelling past \$20 billion. While developed economies have steady baselines for digital commerce, emerging economies—characterized by rapid smartphone adoption, expanding middle classes, and massive youth populations—present an aggressive and distinct digital growth trajectory.

For Gen Z individuals living in emerging markets like India, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Nigeria, social media is more than an entertainment vehicle; it serves as a primary hub for product discovery, identity construction, and commercial transactions. Traditional marketing structures fail to engage this group due to deep-seated skepticism toward institutional advertising. Instead, Gen Z evaluates brands through the lenses of transparency, real-world utility, and cultural alignment, which are communicated primarily by social media influencers.

Understanding how influencer initiatives drive specific purchasing patterns in these economies is essential for global and local businesses. This paper evaluates the structural mechanics behind this influence, reviewing the underlying psychological triggers, the strategic distinction of influencer tiers, and the specific socioeconomic conditions that define emerging market consumption.

2. Theoretical Framework

To systematically evaluate the impact of digital opinion leaders on younger consumers, this study integrates two core behavioral models: Source Credibility Theory and the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) Model.

2.1 Source Credibility Theory

Originally developed by Hovland et al., Source Credibility Theory states that the persuasive impact of a message depends heavily on the perceived characteristics of the sender. Within digital commerce, this credibility is broken down into three critical sub-dimensions:¹

- **Perceived Expertise:** The extent to which an influencer is perceived to possess the knowledge, experience, or training needed to provide authoritative product evaluations. Long-form content platforms like YouTube allow influencers to display technical knowledge through detailed teardowns or tutorials, directly reinforcing this dimension.
- **Trustworthiness:** The degree of honesty, objectivity, and unscripted sincerity assigned to the influencer. When a creator openly highlights both pros and cons of a sponsored product, Gen Z perceives the communication as a peer review rather than a corporate pitch.
- **Attractiveness and Relatability:** Moving beyond physical aesthetics, modern digital attractiveness centers on lifestyle alignment, shared cultural narratives, and perceived approachability.

2.2 The Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) Model

The S-O-R framework, adapted from environmental psychology, explains how digital marketing inputs translate into physical consumer choices:²

Stimulus(S)---Organism(O)---Response(R)

- 1. Stimulus (S):** Represents the external environmental cues presented on a consumer's screen. This includes visual information quality, caption authenticity, interactive live streams, and community engagement metrics like likes or comments.
- 2. Organism (O):** Represents the internal psychological state of the consumer. Cues from the stimulus alter cognitive and affective states, generating emotional trust, brand familiarity, and parasocial connection with the creator.
- 3. Response (R):** The final behavioral outcome. This manifests as online product search, direct social commerce checkout, long-term brand loyalty, or impulsive purchases driven by the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO).

3. The Gen Z Consumer Profile in Emerging Economies

Generation Z in emerging nations displays a distinct dual identity: they are globally connected via digital algorithms yet bound by local economic realities.

Unlike their peers in developed nations, these consumers frequently navigate transitioning financial environments marked by fluctuating disposable income, localized inflation, and varying access to physical retail. Consequently, digital connectivity offers access to global trends and lifestyle aspirational benchmarks that were previously unavailable.³

Dynamic Feature	Emerging Market Gen Z Reality	Impact on Buying Choices
Media Preference	High reliance on visual platforms (Instagram, TikTok).	Low patience for traditional ads; prefers video-first proof.
Trust Vector	Rejection of celebrity elite endorsements.	Prioritizes micro-influencers acting as digital peers.
Financial Nature	Value-maximizing mixed with trend impulses.	Uses social media links to seek validation and discount codes.
Value Orientation	Demands transparent corporate behavior.	Actively rejects performative sustainability or greenwashing.

This demographic uses mobile commerce as a key tool for social mobility and self-expression. Because physical retail infrastructure can be inconsistent outside tier-1 metropolitan hubs, social media platforms act as decentralized digital malls. In this space, product discovery and peer validation happen at the same time.

4. Key Drivers of Influencer Marketing Effectiveness

The mechanics linking an influencer’s social media post to a consumer’s purchase involve several interconnected factors.

4.1 The Primacy of Authenticity and Trust

Authenticity is the primary variable affecting Gen Z purchase intent. Quantitative models show a strong correlation ($r = 0.60$) between an audience’s trust in an influencer and their subsequent purchase frequency. Gen Z consumers can easily distinguish between an unscripted, organic recommendation and a corporate endorsement that feels forced. The moment an influencer’s content appears overly corporate, their persuasive power declines sharply.⁴

4.2 The Strategic Power of Micro- and Nano-Influencers

While macro-influencers and celebrities offer wide reach, micro-influencers (10,000 to 100,000 followers) and nano-influencers (under 10,000 followers) yield higher conversion rates.

Celebrity Influencers--High Reach-- Low Perceived Relatability

Micro/Nano Influencers-- Moderate Reach-- High Engagement & Trust

This dynamic occurs because smaller creators can maintain active, two-way communication within their comment sections. This close interaction fosters a parasocial environment where followers view the creator as an extended friend or peer rather than a distant commercial entity.⁵

4.3 Social Proof, FOMO, and the Bandwagon Effect

The algorithmic structure of modern social media networks reinforces social proof. High visible engagement rates—such as rapid comment growth, shares, and stitches—create a sense of trend validation. For a youth demographic focused on collective identity, these metrics trigger the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO). When localized peer circles and relevant online creators back a specific product, it creates an immediate sense of urgency, driving rapid, impulse buying decisions.⁶

5. Regional Insights from Key Emerging Markets

The operational impact of influencer marketing varies based on the regional digital regulations, economic traits, and platform ecosystems of individual countries.

5.1 India

According to data from the India Brand Equity Foundation (IBEF), India’s influencer marketing sector is on track to hit \$404 million, sustained by an 18% compound annual growth rate.⁷

This expansion is driven by affordable mobile data plans, which have unlocked consumer markets in Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities. Indian Gen Z consumers show strong interest in visual storytelling and hyper-localized, regional-language content. Influencers play a key role in making complex product categories—such as specialized skincare routines and personal fintech apps—accessible and understandable to younger audiences.

5.2 Southeast Asia (Indonesia and Malaysia)

In countries like Indonesia and Malaysia, social-

commerce platforms have integrated shopping directly into interactive media formats. Multi-country structural equation modeling shows that product-influencer fit is a major determinant of consumer action in this region. Live-stream shopping features on platforms like TikTok have transformed local buying habits. In these live broadcasts, influencers display products, answer viewer questions in real time, and offer time-sensitive discount codes, combining entertainment with instant checkout.

5.3 Africa (Nigeria)

In Nigeria, influencer marketing is closely tied to lifestyle aspiration and community validation. Because institutional consumer protections can be weak, Nigerian Gen Z consumers face an increased risk of encountering counterfeit goods in the open market. Consequently, they treat trusted influencers as safety verification checkpoints. A creator's public testing and endorsement of a product serve as a mark of quality and authenticity, reducing perceived purchase risk for the consumer.⁸

6. Challenges and Strategic Implications for Marketers

6.1 The Threat of Saturation and Ad Fatigue

As more brands shift their budgets toward digital creators, social feeds risk becoming oversaturated with sponsored material. Gen Z developed clear coping mechanisms for this, including banner blindness and skipping repetitive, sponsored videos. Marketers must move away from rigid, transactional sponsorships and prioritize multi-month ambassadorships where the product integrates naturally into the creator's ongoing content narrative.

6.2 Managing Creator Autonomy and Brand Safety

A common mistake for brands is enforcing overly restrictive corporate scripts on independent creators. When an influencer reads a rigid, corporate brief verbatim, the content loses its natural tone and fails to engage Gen Z audiences. Brands must learn to give up creative control, allowing influencers to present products in their unique voice to maintain audience trust while ensuring basic compliance with core brand values.

6.3 Metric Shifts: Moving Beyond Vanity Results

Relying strictly on basic metrics like follower counts or raw view numbers can lead to poor campaign performance. Modern digital spaces require analyzing deep engagement metrics, such as comment sentiment, share-to-view ratios, and direct link click-through conversions. This is especially true given the rise of automated engagement bots and fake follower networks in developing digital markets.⁹

7. Conclusion

Influencer marketing has evolved beyond basic celebrity endorsements to become a core architecture guiding Generation Z's consumption habits within emerging economies. This demographic actively avoids traditional corporate advertisements, turning instead to micro- and nano-influencers who provide relatable, peer-level validation. Grounded in Source Credibility Theory and the S-O-R framework, the success of these marketing campaigns relies on the creator's authenticity and perceived expertise. These elements transform standard content into a form of social proof that encourages immediate purchase action.

For brands looking to operate effectively in emerging markets like India, Indonesia, and Nigeria, generic, global campaigns are no longer sufficient. Long-term commercial success requires collaborating with localized creators, granting them the freedom to make unscripted content, and building strategies around deep, genuine community engagement.

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