THE IMPACT OF TIKTOK CONTENT AND INFLUENCER MARKETING ON GENERATION Z BRAND TRUST AND CUSTOMER LOYALTY IN THE E-COMMERCE (CASE STUDY: TIKTOK SHOP)

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Abstract

This study This study examines the impact of TikTok content and influencer marketing on brand trust and customer loyalty among Generation Z in the context of e-commerce via TikTok Shop. Using a qualitative survey method, the research investigates how content characteristics (creativity, engagement) and influencer attributes (credibility, expertise) influence brand trust, which subsequently affects customer loyalty.The initial results indicate that influencer credibility and content creativity have a positive and significant effect on building brand trust. Furthermore, brand trust serves as a key mediator that strengthens customer loyalty toward brands promoted on TikTok Shop. These findings highlight the need for a shift in digital marketing strategies: brands should focus not only on product presentation but also on emotional engagement and authentic visual storytelling facilitated by TikTok and its influencers.

Keywords:
Influencer Marketing, Brand Trust, Customer Loyalty, Generation Z, TikTok Shop, Content Creativity, Credibility, Digital Marketing.

Introduction

Digital technology has fundamentally transformed consumer behavior, particularly among Generation Z born between 1997 and 2012, with TikTok emerging as the fastest-growing platform and its TikTok Shop creating "social commerce" that integrates social media engagement with seamless in-app shopping experiences. Gen Z exhibits distinct shopping behaviors characterized by preference for creative content, authentic messaging, and heavy reliance on digital influencer recommendations (Cladio & Wardani, 2024) while the platform's algorithm curates personalized content that influences purchase intentions (Putri & Nurhayati, 2024). Influencers have become crucial intermediaries, using authentic storytelling and creative demonstrations to build trust that transfers to promoted brands (Mustikasari et al., 2023) research shows that influencer credibility, expertise, and content creativity significantly enhance brand trust, which is essential for customer loyalty in competitive e-commerce markets (Hossain, 2024) While customer loyalty is vital for firms' profitability and competitive excellence (Hidayat, 2021), and trust is recognized as crucial for fostering loyalty due to transaction uncertainty in e-commerce ((Ribbink

et al., 2004)empirical research—especially qualitative studies—examining how influencer marketing and content characteristics shape brand trust and consumer loyalty among Generation Z remains limited. Previous studies primarily used quantitative methods (Syafriani & Hidayah, 2025) but lack contextual understanding of underlying psychological mechanisms explaining why and how these effects occur. This study addresses this gap by qualitatively investigating how influencer marketing and TikTok content influence brand trust and consumer loyalty among Generation Z TikTok Shop users in Jabodetabek through in-depth interviews with 15 informants, exploring perceptions, experiences, and decisionmaking processes linking influencer endorsements and content quality to trust formation and loyalty development.

Theoretical Framework

Consumer behavior refers to how individuals, groups, and organizations select, purchase, use, and dispose of products to satisfy needs and wants (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Factors shaping purchase decisions include product choice, brand preference, purchase timing, and payment methods. Generation Z exhibits distinctive patterns: digital fluency, preference for visual content, reliance on peer recommendations through social media, expectations for authentic brand communications, and emphasis on values alignment including social responsibility. Social media influencers are third-party advocates who significantly shape audience attitudes and behaviors toward promoted brands (Sudha & Sheena, 2017) Digital marketing through social media allows businesses to achieve marketing goals at lower costs compared to traditional media. Influencer effectiveness depends on key attributes: credibility (trustworthiness and expertise), attractiveness (physical appeal and likability), popularity (follower count and reach), and authenticity (genuine product use and honest opinions). When perceived as credible and authentic, influencers effectively build brand awareness, shape positive perceptions, and drive purchasing intentions (Devi et al., 2024) Content marketing on TikTok involves creating creative, engaging, and valuable short-form videos (15-60 seconds) that quickly capture attention (Pratama et al., 2024). Content characteristics influencing consumer responses include creativity (originality and entertainment value), informativeness (useful demonstrations and education), engagement potential (interactivity and shareability), and authenticity (genuine and relatable presentations). TikTok's recommendation algorithm analyzes user interactions to personalize content feeds, increasing relevance and visibility for engaging content (Putri & Nurhayati, 2024) Brand trust represents consumers' confidence in a brand's reliability and integrity to deliver on promises (Ribbink et al., 2004)In e-commerce where physical inspection is impossible, trust becomes critical as it reduces perceived risk. Trust is built through consistent positive experiences, transparent communication, perceived competence, and positive word-of-mouth from credible sources like influencers. Research shows trust significantly influences customer satisfaction, repeat purchase intentions, and loyalty (Hossain, 2024) In TikTok Shop, trust operates at multiple levels: platform-level trust in systems and policies, brand-level trust in specific sellers, and influencer-level trust that transfers to brands through

endorsements. Consumer loyalty refers to customers' deep commitment to consistently repurchase preferred products despite situational influences and competitive efforts (Novitasari, 2024) Loyalty encompasses attitudinal dimensions (preference and emotional attachment) and behavioral dimensions (repeat purchases and advocacy). E-loyalty specifically addresses loyalty toward online platforms, characterized by intention to return and repurchase. Loyalty provides competitive advantages including reduced marketing costs, positive word-of-mouth, price premium acceptance, and resilience against competition. Research demonstrates that loyalty is built on foundations of trust, satisfaction, perceived value, and emotional connection rather than mere repeated transactions (Hidayat, 2021)

Method

This qualitative study employed an exploratory-descriptive design to gain a deep understanding of how influencer marketing and TikTok content shape brand trust and consumer loyalty among Generation Z TikTok Shop users. The research utilized a purposive sample of 15 Generation Z individuals (aged 18-27) residing in Jabodetabek who had actively purchased on TikTok Shop and followed relevant influencers, ensuring data collection reached saturation. Data was gathered through three main techniques: in-depth semi-structured interviews (45-60 minutes), nonparticipant observation of their browsing behavior, and documentation (screenshots, purchase history). Data analysis followed the Miles and Huberman (1994) interactive model (data reduction, display, and conclusion drawing/verification), incorporating multi-step thematic analysis including open, axial, and selective coding. The study ensured data validity using Lincoln and Guba's four criteria: Credibility (via triangulation and member checking), Transferability (via thick description), Dependability (via an audit trail), and Confirmability (via reflexivity), ensuring the findings are robust and grounded in the collected evidence.

Results

Thematic Analysis Results

The sample consisted of 15 Generation Z TikTok Shop users from the Jabodetabek area, providing a profile typical of social commerce consumers: they were predominantly female (66.7%), primarily young adults in their early twenties (73.3% aged 18-24), and largely identified as students (53.3%) or employees (40%). Geographically, the informants were distributed across major urban areas (Jakarta being the largest at 33.3%). Crucially, these users were frequent online shoppers, with purchase frequencies the ranging from 3 to 7 times per month, and majority (60%) making 4-5 purchases monthly, confirming their active engagement with the TikTok Shop platform.

Theme 1: Influencer Credibility as Foundation of Brand Trust.

The results of the analysis revealed that influencer credibility is the primary factor influencing brand trust among Generation Z TikTok Shop users, who act as sophisticated content evaluators. This credibility is built upon three consistent

dimensions: First, authenticity and honesty are highly valued, with informants trusting those who provide balanced reviews (including product disadvantages) over purely promotional content. Second, expertise and knowledge significantly enhance credibility, especially when influencers demonstrate a deep understanding of their product category (e.g., skincare ingredients). Third, consistency and long-term engagement build cumulative trust over time, leading consumers to view the recommendations of long-followed influencers as genuine and reliable.

Theme 2: Content Creativity and Engagement Drive Initial Interest.

The results of the analysis established that TikTok content quality significantly influences purchase intentions by acting as an initial engagement mechanism. This influence operates through several dimensions: Creative visual storytelling, such as funny skits, is crucial for capturing attention and enhancing brand recall; informative demonstrations and step-by-step showcases reduce product uncertainty; and relatable content reflecting the Gen Z lifestyle fosters emotional connection. Furthermore, interactive elements like Q&A and responsive comment engagement build a sense of community and value. Importantly, informants stressed that while creative content successfully generates awareness and interest, it does not automatically lead to purchase or loyalty; instead, trust remains the essential foundation that determines whether this initial interest converts into actual consumer action.

Theme 3: Brand Trust as Critical Purchase Decision Mediator.

The results of the analysis established that Brand Trust serves as the essential bridge (or mediator) between marketing exposure (influencer endorsements and creative content) and actual purchase decisions. Informants identified three primary mechanisms through which trust operates: First, it acts as a risk reduction mechanism, significantly easing consumer anxiety about receiving fake or poorquality products in the non-verifiable online shopping environment. Second, trust signals quality assurance and consistency, derived from a brand's reputation and influencer partnerships. Third, institutional trust is enhanced by platform reliability features, such as TikTok Shop's buyer protection policies and verified seller badges. Critically, the process is sequential: influencer credibility and content quality must first establish trust, and only then does that trust enable a purchase decision, emphasizing that effective marketing must prioritize trustbuilding over merely generating exposure.

Theme 4: Brand Trust Drives Consumer Loyalty Through Multiple Pathways.

The results of the analysis strongly established that brand trust profoundly influences consumer loyalty through four interconnected mechanisms, demonstrating that loyalty is more than just repeated transactions. First, trust drives repeat purchase intention by significantly reducing decision-making effort and perceived risk for subsequent purchases. Second, trusted brands benefit from active word-of-mouth recommendations as informants willingly become brand advocates, sharing videos and endorsing products to their social circles. Third, trust creates brand preference, leading consumers to choose a trusted brand as their first option on TikTok Shop, even when competitors offer lower prices. Finally, deep trust fosters an emotional attachment that elevates the relationship beyond mere transactional exchanges. These

mechanisms confirm that loyalty encompasses critical attitudinal dimensions— preference, advocacy, and emotional connection— all firmly rooted in trust.

Theme 5: The Two-Step Mediation Process.

The results of the analysis revealed a critical Two-Step Mediation Process where trust is the mandatory link between marketing efforts and consumer loyalty. Informants consistently clarified that influencer endorsements and creative content do not directly create loyalty; instead, these factors must first build trust through repeated exposure, credible information, and perceived authenticity. Trust then subsequently drives loyalty through positive purchase experiences and relationship development. Essentially, trust functions as a crucial filtering mechanism: consumers only proceed to purchase and potentially become loyal when both the influencer is trustworthy AND the brand is reliable. This finding underscores the complexity of the Gen Z decision-making process, confirming that loyalty is not automatic but requires consistent reinforcement across multiple aligning factors before it develops.

Discussion

The findings of this qualitative study provide rich insights into how influencer marketing and TikTok content shape brand trust and consumer loyalty among Generation Z. The study reveals that influencer authenticity is the cornerstone of brand trust among Generation Z TikTok Shop users. Unlike traditional celebrity endorsements where fame and reach were primary considerations, Generation Z values genuine, transparent communication that includes both positive and negative product aspects. This finding aligns with (Devi et al., 2024)who found that influencer credibility significantly affects purchase decisions, and extends (Syafriani & Hidayah, 2025) by revealing that authenticity manifests through honesty about product limitations, consistent long-term engagement, and demonstrated personal product use rather than purely promotional messaging. Generation Z's preference for authentic influencers reflects their sophisticated media literacy and skepticism toward traditional advertising developed through lifelong exposure to digital marketing (Claodio & Wardani, 2024). While creative, entertaining TikTok content effectively captures attention and generates initial interest, the study reveals a nuanced distinction between attention-grabbing and action-driving factors. Content creativity serves primarily as an engagement mechanism that makes consumers aware of brands and interested in products, but brand trust determines whether that interest converts to actual purchase and sustained loyalty. This finding extends (Pratama et al., 2024) by clarifying the distinct roles of content and trust in the consumer journey. The most effective content combines entertainment value with informative demonstrations, showing products in relatable Generation Z contexts such as student life, social situations, and everyday challenges. Interactive elements like Q&A sessions strengthen community feelings and facilitate two-way communication that builds trust over time. The study confirms brand trust as the critical mediating mechanism between marketing stimuli (influencer endorsements and content quality) and behavioral outcomes (loyalty).

Informants consistently described a two-step sequential process: influencers and content first establish trust through credibility signals, authentic communication, and valuable information; then trust enables purchase decisions by reducing perceived risk and increasing confidence; finally, positive purchase experiences reinforce trust and develop into loyalty. This finding supports (Hossain, 2024) while providing richer understanding of the psychological processes and temporal sequences involved. Trust reduces the inherent risks in online shopping—concerns about product authenticity, quality consistency, seller reliability, and transaction security. When credible influencers consistently promote brands that deliver positive experiences, trust accumulates over time creating competitive advantages that are difficult for new brands to overcome quickly. This study reveals Generation Z-specific trust and loyalty dynamics distinct from older generations documented in marketing literature. First, Generation Z exhibits strong social proof primacy, heavily weighting peer experiences, influencer testimonials, and user-generated content over brand claims and traditional advertising. Second, they have high transparency expectations, expecting complete honesty including product limitations, ingredient lists, sourcing information, and potential issues rather than polished marketing messages. Third, Generation Z demonstrates community orientation, valuing brands that foster community through interactive content, responsive communication, and shared values rather than one-way promotional messaging. Fourth, they evaluate brands through values alignment lenses including social responsibility, ethical practices, environmental sustainability, and inclusivity—not just product quality and price. These characteristics require fundamentally different marketing approaches compared to strategies effective with older generations.

Conclusion

This research indicates that for Generation Z TikTok Shop users, consumer loyalty is driven by a two-step mediated process where brand trust is the critical mechanism linking marketing stimuli to behavioral outcomes. The study revealed that influencer authenticity and content creativity are essential for capturing attention and establishing initial trust, but sustainable loyalty demands systematic trust development built on consistent quality delivery, transparent communication, and genuine relationship building. Specifically, credible influencers and quality content first establish trust, which then enables purchase decisions and positive experiences that cultivate loyalty. Furthermore, Generation Z consumers exhibit sophisticated media literacy, valuing authenticity over popularity, transparency over polish, and community engagement over mere transactions. Consequently, the findings underscore the necessity for businesses to prioritize strategic influencer partnerships based on credibility over reach, invest in creative and informative content, and ensure systematic trust-building that aligns with Gen Z values, thereby providing rich, contextual insights that complement existing quantitative social commerce literature.

Research Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting and applying the findings. First, the sample of 15 informants from Jabodetabek may not represent Generation Z consumers in other Indonesian regions with different socioeconomic characteristics, cultural values, and technology adoption patterns. Second, findings may vary across product categories, as trust and loyalty dynamics for high-involvement products like electronics may differ from low-involvement products like fashion accessories. Third, the study captures a snapshot of the rapidly evolving social commerce ecosystem, and dynamics may change as TikTok Shop develops new features and competitive platforms emerge. Fourth, the research relies on self-reported perceptions and recollections rather than real-time behavioral observation, which may be subject to recall bias and social desirability effects. Fifth, the study focuses specifically on TikTok Shop and findings may not generalize to other social commerce platforms with different features, user demographics, and influencer ecosystems.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should extend this study through several directions. First, conduct comparative qualitative studies across different social commerce platforms (Instagram Shopping, Shopee Live, Facebook Marketplace) to identify platformspecific versus general trust and loyalty dynamics. Second, employ longitudinal qualitative designs tracking the same informants over 6-12 months through repeated interviews to understand how trust and loyalty evolve over time and through different purchase experiences. Third, examine product category variations by conducting separate qualitative studies for high-involvement products (electronics, furniture) versus low-involvement products (fashion, beauty) to understand category-specific trust requirements. Fourth, use mixed methods approaches combining qualitative insights with quantitative measurement to triangulate findings, test emergent theories with larger samples, and provide both depth and breadth of understanding. Fifth, conduct cross-cultural qualitative research comparing Generation Z consumers in Indonesia with those in other Southeast Asian countries, Western countries, and other cultural contexts to identify culturally-specific versus universal patterns. Sixth, explore negative cases by interviewing consumers who distrust influencers, are skeptical of TikTok Shop, or have had negative experiences to understand barriers to trust and loyalty formation. These research directions would provide more comprehensive understanding of social commerce dynamics and Generation Z consumer behavior.

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