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The Role Of Trust In Mediating The Effects Of Micro-Influencer Authenticity And Audience Engagement On Purchase Decisions Among Generation Y And Generation Z In Tiktok Campaigns

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to analyze the role of trust in mediating the effects of micro-influencer authenticity and audience engagement on the purchase decisions of Generation Y and Generation Z in TikTok campaigns, and to examine differences in these effects across generations. The study employed a quantitative approach with a cross-sectional design. Data were collected through questionnaires from 320 TikTok users in Indonesia who had been exposed to micro-influencer campaigns and had made a purchase after being influenced by content or interaction on TikTok, consisting of 160 Generation Y respondents and 160 Generation Z respondents. The sample was selected using purposive sampling and analyzed using Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), mediation analysis, Measurement Invariance of Composite Models (MICOM), and Multi-Group Analysis (MGA). The results show that micro-influencer authenticity does not have a significant direct effect on purchase decisions in either generation, whereas audience engagement and trust have positive and significant effects on purchase decisions. Micro-influencer authenticity and audience engagement also have positive and significant effects on trust. Trust fully mediates the relationship between micro-influencer authenticity and purchase decisions and partially mediates the relationship between audience engagement and purchase

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decisions in both groups. The multi-group analysis indicates differences in the effects of micro-influencer authenticity on trust, audience engagement on trust, and audience engagement on purchase decisions. These findings confirm that the effectiveness of influencer marketing on TikTok depends not only on authenticity and interaction but also on the process of building consumer trust.

Keywords: micro-influencer authenticity; audience engagement; trust; purchase decision; TikTok; Generation Y; Generation Z

INTRODUCTION

The development of the internet and social media has changed how consumers seek information, interact with brands, and make purchase decisions. In the thesis underlying this article, the Digital 2025 report recorded approximately 285 million internet users in Indonesia and approximately 143 million active social media user identities. TikTok ranked second as the most preferred social media platform in Indonesia, with a share of 19.7%, and had the highest average usage time, at 44 hours and 54 minutes per user per month (Kemp, 2025). These conditions demonstrate TikTok's substantial potential as a digital marketing medium.

TikTok's characteristics, which rely on short-form videos, recommendation systems, and active interaction, provide opportunities for influencer marketing. In this study, micro influencers refer to influencers with approximately 10,000 to fewer than 100,000 followers and are considered to have relatively close relationships and high interaction with their audiences. This advantage makes authenticity an important aspect because audiences tend to trust influencers who are perceived as honest, transparent, natural, consistent, and congruent with the identity they present (Audrezet et al., 2020; Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

On the other hand, high engagement with TikTok content does not necessarily result directly in purchase decisions. Likes, comments, shares, attention, and emotional involvement can strengthen the relationship between audiences and influencers, but their conversion into purchases may depend on other psychological factors. Previous studies summarized in the thesis have reported inconsistent findings regarding the effects of micro-influencer authenticity, audience engagement, and trust on purchase decisions. Trust has also been found to have varying mediating effects (Adaba et al., 2025; Fitriasari et al., 2025; Saniah et al., 2025).

Generational differences provide an important context for this study. APJII data used in the thesis indicate that Generation Z accounts for 25.54% and Generation Y for 25.17% of

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Indonesian internet users. The two groups have different digital experiences and patterns of response to marketing content. Therefore, this study not only examines relationships among variables but also compares the model between Generation Y and Generation Z.

This study uses Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) Theory as its main theoretical foundation. Micro-influencer authenticity and audience engagement are positioned as stimuli (S), trust as the consumer's internal state or organism (O), and purchase decisions as the response (R). Within this framework, the study aims to analyze the direct effects of micro-influencer authenticity, audience engagement, and trust on purchase decisions; examine the effects of micro-influencer authenticity and audience engagement on trust; test the mediating role of trust; and identify differences in relationships among variables between Generation Y and Generation Z.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Stimulus Organism Response (Sor) Theory

SOR explains that individual behavior begins with external stimuli that are processed through the organism's internal state before producing a response. In digital marketing, influencer content and interaction can serve as stimuli that affect consumers' cognitive and affective processes. This study uses this framework to explain that micro-influencer authenticity and audience engagement affect trust, which subsequently relates to purchase decisions (Hovland, 1953).

Authenticity Micro Influencer

Micro-influencer authenticity refers to audience perceptions of an influencer's honesty, transparency, content genuineness, naturalness, consistency, being real, relatability, and self-congruence. Micro influencers have the advantage of more personal communication and closer relationships with their audiences. When an influencer is perceived as authentic, marketing messages tend to be considered more credible and can therefore build trust (Audrezet et al., 2020; Ki et al., 2020; Lee & Eastin, 2021).

Audience Engagement

Audience engagement describes the psychological state and participation of audiences formed through interaction with content or communication figures. Engagement can be reflected through cognitive, emotional, and behavioral involvement, social interaction, participatory

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engagement, interactive engagement, immersion, and connection (Brodie et al., 2021; Dessart et al., 2022). On TikTok, engagement can occur through likes, comments, shares, attention to content, and active participation in communication.

Trust And Purchase Decision

Trust is the consumer's willingness to rely on a trusted party and is shaped by perceptions of integrity, competence, reliability, and source credibility. In this study, trust is positioned as the organism that bridges marketing stimuli and the response represented by purchase decisions. Purchase decisions reflect confidence in product selection, suitability with needs, actual purchasing action, confidence in the decision, and other purchasing behavior aspects.

Research Hypotheses

H1: Micro-influencer authenticity has a positive and significant effect on purchase decisions.
H2: Audience engagement has a positive and significant effect on purchase decisions.
H3: Trust has a positive and significant effect on purchase decisions.
H4: Micro-influencer authenticity has a positive and significant effect on trust.
H5: Audience engagement has a positive and significant effect on trust.
H6: Trust mediates the effect of micro-influencer authenticity on purchase decisions.
H7: Trust mediates the effect of audience engagement on purchase decisions.
H8: There are differences in the relationships among the variables in the research model between Generation Y and Generation Z.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a quantitative approach with a cross-sectional design. The research subjects were active TikTok users in Indonesia belonging to Generation Y (born 1981–1996) and Generation Z (born 1997–2012), who had active TikTok accounts, had been exposed to micro-influencer campaigns, and had purchased a brand after being influenced by a micro influencer or interaction on TikTok.

The sample consisted of 320 respondents, comprising 160 Generation Y respondents and 160 Generation Z respondents. Purposive sampling was used. The sample size was determined based on 32 indicators multiplied by 10, resulting in 320 respondents. Primary data were collected through a questionnaire using a 1–5 Likert scale.

The independent variables were micro-influencer authenticity (X1) and audience

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engagement (X2), trust (Z) was the mediating variable, and purchase decision (Y) was the dependent variable. The analysis used PLS-SEM through evaluation of the outer model (convergent validity, discriminant validity, composite reliability, and Cronbach's alpha) and inner model (R-square and f-square). Hypotheses were tested using bootstrapping, while mediation effects were tested through specific indirect effects. Group differences were examined using MICOM, PLS-MGA, and parametric tests.

Respondent Characteristics

Characteristic	Category	f	%
Gender	Male	112	35
	Female	208	65
TikTok duration/day	< 1 hour	81	25
	1–2 hours	97	30
	> 2 hours	142	44
Frequency of viewing micro-influencer content	1–2 times/day	85	27
	3–5 times/day	130	41
	> 5 times/day	105	33

Source: Research data (processed).

RESULTS

Measurement MODEL

The outer model evaluation indicates that the research constructs generally demonstrate adequate reliability and convergent validity. Several indicators with loadings below 0.70 were retained based on model evaluation considerations, while indicators AE5 and AE8 for Generation Y and AMI2 for Generation Z were eliminated during instrument evaluation. The AVE values for all constructs were above 0.50, and composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha values were above 0.70.

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Construct	AVE Y	CR Y	α Y	AVE Z	CR Z	α Z
Authenticity micro influencer	0.536	0.901	0.876	0.575	0.904	0.874
Audience engagement	0.693	0.930	0.908	0.512	0.892	0.868
Trust	0.749	0.968	0.962	0.749	0.960	0.952
Purchase decision	0.790	0.960	0.952	0.704	0.950	0.940

Table 1. Measurement model results.

The Fornell-Larcker assessment indicates that discriminant validity was not fully established. For Generation Y, several inter-construct correlations were higher than the corresponding construct's √AVE. For Generation Z, the audience engagement–trust correlation (0.847) was higher than the √AVE of audience engagement (0.716). This finding is retained in the reporting of results and constitutes one of the study's limitations.

Structural Model

Endogenous construct	Generation Y R^2	Generation Y Adj. R^2	Generation Z R^2	Generation Z Adj. R^2
Trust	0.864	0.862	0.727	0.724
Purchase decision	0.887	0.885	0.692	0.686

Table 2. R-square results.

The R^2 values indicate strong explanatory power of the model. For Generation Y, micro-influencer authenticity and audience engagement explained 86.4% of the variance in trust, while micro-influencer authenticity, audience engagement, and trust explained 88.7% of the variance in purchase decisions. For Generation Z, the corresponding values were 72.7% for trust and 69.2% for purchase decisions.

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HYPOTHESIS TESTING

Path	β Y	p Y	β Z	p Z	Result
AMI → Purchase decision	-0.093	0.232	-0.027	0.787	Not significant
AE → Purchase decision	0.458	<0.001	0.202	0.009	Positive significant
Trust → Purchase decision	0.595	<0.001	0.714	<0.001	Positive significant
AMI → Trust	0.481	<0.001	0.759	<0.001	Positive significant
AE → Trust	0.509	<0.001	0.136	0.025	Positive significant

Table 3. Direct effects. AMI = Authenticity Micro Influencer; AE = Audience Engagement.

MEDIATION ANALYSIS

Indirect path	**β Y**	**p Y**	**Mediation Y**	**β Z**	**p Z**	**Mediation Z**
AMI → Trust → Purchase decision	0.286	<0.001	Full / indirect-only	0.542	<0.001	Full / indirect-only
AE → Trust → Purchase decision	0.303	<0.001	Partial / complementary	0.097	0.027	Partial / complementary

Table 4. Indirect effects and mediation type.

Trust fully mediates the effect of micro-influencer authenticity on purchase decisions in both generations. In this relationship, the direct effect of micro-influencer authenticity on purchase decisions is not significant, whereas the paths from micro-influencer authenticity to trust and from trust to purchase decisions are significant. Conversely, trust partially mediates the relationship between audience engagement and purchase decisions because the direct effect of audience engagement on purchase decisions remains significant alongside the indirect path through trust.

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MULTI GROUP ANALYSIS

Relationship	Δβ (Y–Z)	p / test	Interpretation
AMI → Trust	-0.278	0.000 (parametric)	Significantly different
AMI → Purchase decision	-0.066	0.683 (parametric)	Not significantly different
AE → Trust	0.373	0.000 (parametric)	Significantly different
AE → Purchase decision	0.256	0.008 (parametric)	Significantly different
Trust → Purchase decision	-0.119	0.191 (parametric)	Not significantly different

Table 5. Multi-Group Analysis and parametric verification.

The MGA and parametric test results indicate differences between groups in the relationships between micro-influencer authenticity and trust, audience engagement and trust, and audience engagement and purchase decisions. Conversely, no significant differences were found for micro-influencer authenticity and purchase decisions or trust and purchase decisions. However, the micro-influencer authenticity construct did not meet compositional invariance in MICOM; therefore, comparisons involving this construct should be interpreted cautiously.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Authenticity Micro Influencer And Trust

Micro-influencer authenticity has a positive and significant effect on trust in both Generation Y and Generation Z. This finding indicates that perceived honesty, transparency, content genuineness, naturalness, consistency, and closeness can build trust in the influencer and the recommendations delivered. The result supports the SOR framework: authenticity functions as a stimulus processed by consumers to form trust as an internal state. This finding is consistent with studies summarized in the thesis, including Mujianto et al. (2025), Denova et al. (2025), and Basyirah et al. (2025).

Audience Engagement And Trust

Audience engagement has a positive and significant effect on trust in both groups. Audience involvement through attention, interaction, participation, and responses to content can

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strengthen psychological closeness with influencers. The effect is stronger for Generation Y (β=0.509) than Generation Z (β=0.136), and this difference is statistically confirmed by the parametric test. This finding shows that engagement is not merely an indicator of content performance but also a mechanism for building trust.

Authenticity Micro Influencer And Purchase Decision

Micro-influencer authenticity does not have a significant direct effect on purchase decisions among either Generation Y or Generation Z. This finding is important because it shows that perceived authenticity does not automatically translate into purchasing action. Consumers may perceive an influencer as authentic, but purchase decisions may still require a psychological process involving the formation of trust. This also explains why the direct relationship between authenticity and purchase decisions is not significant in both groups.

Audience Engagement And Purchase Decision

Audience engagement has a positive and significant effect on purchase decisions in both generations. However, the coefficient differs, at 0.458 for Generation Y and 0.202 for Generation Z. This difference is significant in the multi-group test. The finding indicates that audience interaction with micro-influencer content can encourage purchase responses, but its strength is not the same across generations.

Trust And Purchase Decision

Trust has a positive and significant effect on purchase decisions among Generation Y and Generation Z. The coefficients are 0.595 for Generation Y and 0.714 for Generation Z. Thus, trust represents an important psychological mechanism for converting exposure to content and digital interaction into purchase decisions. Although the coefficients differ descriptively, the difference between groups is not significant.

Mediating Role Of Trust

Trust is a key finding of the study. In the relationship between micro-influencer authenticity and purchase decisions, trust functions as a full mediator in both generations. This means that authenticity alone is insufficient to directly drive purchase decisions; its effect operates through trust formation. Meanwhile, in the relationship between audience engagement and purchase decisions, trust functions as a partial mediator. Audience engagement can affect

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purchase decisions directly and simultaneously through trust. This finding strengthens the SOR explanation that marketing stimuli do not always produce responses directly but may operate through an internal psychological state.

Generational Differences

Between-group differences are particularly evident in relationships involving audience engagement and in the relationship between micro-influencer authenticity and trust. Generation Y shows higher coefficients for audience engagement → trust and audience engagement → purchase decisions, whereas Generation Z shows higher coefficients for micro-influencer authenticity → trust and trust → purchase decisions. These differences should not be interpreted as definitive evidence that all behavioral characteristics of the two generations differ, because the study only demonstrates differences in relationship strength within the sample data, and the authenticity construct did not meet compositional invariance in MICOM.

Theoretical And Practical Implications

Theoretically, this study strengthens the use of SOR to explain consumer behavioral mechanisms in TikTok influencer marketing. Micro-influencer authenticity and audience engagement function as stimuli, trust as the organism, and purchase decisions as the response. An important contribution of the study is the examination of trust as a mediating mechanism while comparing relationships across generations.

Practically, companies are advised to select micro influencers who are authentic, honest, consistent, relevant, and capable of building personal interaction. Because trust is an important mechanism, campaigns should not focus solely on engagement but should also ensure accurate product information, present genuine experiences or reviews, and select credible influencers. Communication strategies can also be adapted: Generation Z may be approached with more interactive, creative, and participatory content, whereas Generation Y may benefit more from clear, credible, and trust-building information.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that micro-influencer authenticity does not have a significant direct effect on purchase decisions among Generation Y or Generation Z, whereas audience engagement and trust have positive and significant effects on purchase decisions. Micro-influencer authenticity and audience engagement also have positive and significant effects on trust. Trust is proven to be a

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full mediator in the relationship between micro-influencer authenticity and purchase decisions and a partial mediator in the relationship between audience engagement and purchase decisions.

The group comparison indicates significant differences in the relationships between micro-influencer authenticity and trust, audience engagement and trust, and audience engagement and purchase decisions. No significant differences were found in the relationships between micro-influencer authenticity and purchase decisions or trust and purchase decisions. These results confirm that the effectiveness of TikTok influencer marketing is influenced by a combination of marketing stimuli, audience involvement, and trust formation before consumers make purchase decisions.

Limitations And Future Research

The study is limited to the TikTok platform and Generation Y and Generation Z respondents in Indonesia who had made purchases after being exposed to micro-influencer content. The model includes only micro-influencer authenticity, audience engagement, trust, and purchase decisions. In addition, discriminant validity based on the Fornell-Larcker criterion was not fully established in both groups, and micro-influencer authenticity did not meet compositional invariance in MICOM. Future research may expand the platforms, generational groups, geographic coverage, and variables such as e-WOM, brand image, brand awareness, perceived value, or price perception, and may employ mixed methods or qualitative approaches to explore trust formation more deeply.

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