The Influence of Persuasion Knowledge Activation on Gen Z Purchase Decisions: A Comparative Analysis of User-Generated Content and Macro-Influencer Marketing

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the factors influencing purchase intentions among Generation Z, focusing on the comparative impact of User-Generated Content (UGC) and Influencer Marketing, particularly macro-influencers (with 100,000 or more followers). The research is framed within the Persuasion Knowledge Activation (PKA) concept, derived from the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM), which examines how consumers identify and respond to marketing strategies. A survey of 340 participants aged 18 to 30 was conducted to analyze the effects of transparency, trust, and PKA on purchasing behavior. Results reveal that Generation Z perceives UGC as more authentic and relatable due to its lack of overt commercial intent. This perception reduces PKA activation, fostering higher trust and stronger purchase intentions. Conversely, macro-influencer content, perceived as more explicitly commercial, triggers greater PKA activation. As digital natives, Gen Z recognizes the promotional nature of such content, leading to increased skepticism, reduced trust, and diminished purchase intentions. The study highlights that while PKA often heightens skepticism towards content deemed manipulative, transparency in influencer marketing can mitigate its negative effects. Influencers who openly disclose brand partnerships are viewed as more genuine, reducing PKA activation, enhancing trust, and positively influencing purchase decisions. These findings provide insights into effective marketing strategies targeting Generation Z, emphasizing the importance of authenticity and transparency in digital advertising.

Keywords: Gen Z purchase intentions, Influencer marketing **,** Persuasion knowledge Activation, User generated content, Influencer marketing, social media influencers, UGC

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, consumer skepticism toward traditional marketing tactics has made it increasingly challenging for companies to effectively influence their target audience. As consumers become more discerning about overt advertising, many brands have turned to influencer marketing as an alternative. Influencer marketing leverages the credibility and reach of social media personalities to engage audiences and drive brand awareness, often integrating promotional content seamlessly into organic posts (Leung, Gu, & Palmatier, 2022). This strategy has gained significant traction, particularly among Generation Z (Gen Z) — individuals born between 1995 and 2010 — who are digital natives uniquely shaped by constant connectivity to the internet and social media platforms (Francis & Hoefel, 2018).

Gen Z, by 2025, will range in age from 15 to 30 years old and is emerging as a critical consumer group due to its increasing purchasing power. Their exposure to technology has not only shaped their preferences and behaviors but has also made them more sophisticated and skeptical consumers than previous generations (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Gen Z values authenticity, transparency, and individual expression, traits that influence their responses to advertising and their ability to recognize commercial intent (Martínez-López et al., 2020). This heightened awareness of persuasive intent activates their Persuasion Knowledge (PK)—a cognitive mechanism through which they identify marketing efforts and evaluate their authenticity and intent. Friestad and Wright (1994)

This activation of PK is particularly relevant in influencer marketing, where promotional content is often blended with personal narratives. The subtle nature of influencer marketing raises concerns about perceived authenticity, especially in the case of macro-influencers who, with their broad reach and brand affiliations, may trigger greater skepticism (Myers et al., 2022 ; Pan et al., 2024). By contrast, User-Generated Content (UGC) creators are often seen as more relatable and authentic, potentially resulting in lower PK activation (Kaplan & Haenlein., 2010 ; Müller & Christandl, 2019). However, research comparing the relative activation of PK in UGC and macro-influencer marketing, and how this impacts trust and purchase intentions, remains scarce.

Additionally, platforms like TikTok and Instagram dominate Gen Z's media consumption (Smith, 2022), yet much of the existing research on influencer marketing has focused on older platforms like YouTube and Facebook. TikTok, with its short-form video format and algorithmic delivery, and Instagram, with its visually-driven and highly interactive ecosystem, have become preferred spaces for Gen Z to engage with both UGC creators and macro-influencers (Ducman, 2024). Despite their popularity, there is limited understanding of how these platforms amplify or mitigate PK activation, particularly when comparing the influence of UGC versus macro-influencers.

Transparency, a critical factor in influencer marketing, may also play a role in moderating the effects of PK activation. Gen Z's demand for clear disclosures and authenticity has pushed brands and influencers to adopt more transparent practices. This study addresses these gaps by comparing the effects of UGC creators and macro-influencers on Gen Z's purchasing decisions. It focuses on PK activation as a primary factor, analyzing its influence on trust and purchase intent. Transparency is examined as a potential moderating variable, particularly in the context of macro-influencer marketing. By leveraging the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM), this research aims to provide insights into how UGC and macro-influencers differ in their effectiveness, offering practical implications for brands seeking to engage Gen Z in the evolving digital landscape.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Persuasion Knowledge model

The Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM), introduced by Friestad and Wright (1994), explains how consumers develop the ability to recognize and respond to persuasive marketing tactics. As individuals gain experience with advertisements and promotional content, they build persuasion knowledge (PK)—a cognitive framework that enables them to identify marketing strategies and assess the marketer's intent. This knowledge influences their emotional and cognitive reactions, such as skepticism, trust, or avoidance (Friestad & Wright, 1994). In digital marketing, PK is activated by various factors, including transparency and the presentation format of advertisements. These elements affect how consumers engage with content, shaping their trust and purchase intentions (Eisend & Tarrahi, 2021).

In influencer marketing, the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) posits that when consumers identify content as sponsored, they may perceive it as manipulative, leading them to question both the influencer's authenticity and the brand's credibility (Boerman et al., 2017). However, sponsorship disclosures, such as "Sponsored" labels, can activate persuasion knowledge and, in some cases, enhance trust in the influencer by signaling transparency and honesty (Cao & Belo, 2023). The type of influencer also plays a crucial role in how PK is activated. Macro-influencers, who often have large followings and professional contracts with brands, are more likely to be perceived as "marketers," which may heighten skepticism and perceptions of manipulation (Sweeney et al., 2022).

Regarding User-Generated Content (UGC), PKM presents a different dynamic. UGC, typically created by everyday consumers, may not immediately activate the same level of persuasion knowledge as influencer marketing, especially when the content is perceived as genuine and not explicitly commercial. Research suggests that UGC is often viewed as more authentic and less intrusive than traditional advertising, including influencer content, because it lacks overt sponsorship markers (Martínez-López et al., 2020). However, UGC can still activate PK depending on the level of transparency. If consumers perceive UGC as part of a brand-

driven campaign or influenced by commercial interests (e.g., through hashtags, product placements, or partnerships with brands), their persuasion knowledge is likely to increase, leading to greater skepticism (Van Reijmersdal et al., 2016).

The hypothesis are proposed here:

H1: PKA is higher for macro-influencer marketing compared to UGC.

User generated content

User-Generated Content (UGC) refers to media created by individuals and shared on social media platforms. This content—ranging from product reviews to personal experiences—is increasingly valued for its authenticity and relatability, distinguishing it from traditional branded advertisements (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Müller & Christandl, 2019). UGC creators offer a compelling alternative to traditional influencers. These creators, with smaller followings (below 10K), produce content perceived as less commercially driven, maintaining a higher degree of authenticity (Wibawa et al., 2021).

The rise of platforms like TikTok and Instagram has amplified the role of UGC in shaping consumer behavior, as Gen Z seeks peer-driven, unfiltered content they perceive as genuine (O'Connor, 2008). Gen Z places significant trust in UGC, as they prioritize authenticity and relatability over overtly commercial content (De Veirman et al., 2017). Unlike traditional advertisements, UGC often bypasses Persuasion Knowledge Activation (PKA) because it lacks clear persuasive cues. This perceived genuineness enhances trust, fosters credibility, and reduces skepticism (Mayrhofer et al., 2020 ; Kim & Song, 2017). Smaller creators and everyday users, often associated with UGC, are particularly effective in engaging Gen Z, as they are seen as peers rather than marketers.

The Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) explains how content types influence PKA differently. UGC typically triggers lower PKA than influencer marketing, especially when it is perceived as organic and non-commercial (Mayrhofer et al., 2020). Macro-influencers, with their larger followings and explicit brand partnerships, often activate higher levels of PKA due to the clear promotional nature of their content. This contrast positions UGC as a uniquely powerful tool for influencing Gen Z's purchase decisions, as it facilitates seamless engagement without triggering skepticism (Boerman et al., 2017). Gen Z's active participation in creating, sharing, and commenting on UGC further enhances its credibility and social proof. This interactivity increases its influence on purchase decisions while underscoring the importance of authenticity. When Gen Z perceives UGC as genuinely created by users rather than orchestrated by brands, trust and purchase intentions are positively affected (Graham & Wilder, 2020).

The hypothesis are proposed here:

H2: Higher PKA negatively impacts Trust in UGC.

H3: Trust in UGC positively influences Purchase Intentions.

Macro- Influencer marketing

Influencer marketing leverages the relatability and perceived authenticity of social media figures to promote brands. Influencers, unlike traditional celebrities, gain popularity through digital platforms, often beginning as User-Generated Content (UGC) creators. Over time, many evolve into more prominent roles, developing skills to produce engaging multimedia content (Freberg et al., 2011 ; Khamis et al., 2017). Influencers are categorized into UGC creators, micro-, macro-, and mega-influencers, each with unique characteristics. UGC creators maintain smaller, niche audiences and are perceived as highly authentic, while macro-influencers (100K–1M followers) balance broader reach with relatability, though they may struggle to maintain the same level of authenticity (Campbell & Farrell, 2018 ; Hawley & Ismail, 2024).

Macro-influencers play a pivotal role in engaging Gen Z, with approximately 44% of Gen Z consumers reporting that influencer recommendations directly impact their purchase decisions (Pradhan et al., 2023). However, Gen Z's engagement with macro-influencers is complex. This generation is highly skeptical of influencer marketing, particularly when content is perceived as overly commercial or lacking authenticity

(Leung et al., 2022 ; Venn, 2021). Transparency and authenticity are crucial factors in maintaining Gen Z's trust, as they value influencers who promote products responsibly and align with their personal values (Childers & Boatwright, 2021 ; Francis & Hoefel, 2018).

The Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) provides a framework for understanding how consumers react to influencer marketing. Macro-influencers, due to the overtly commercial nature of their content, often activate higher levels of Persuasion Knowledge Activation (PKA) (Boerman et al., 2017). This activation makes Gen Z more critical of the promotional intent behind the content, leading to increased skepticism and reduced trust in both the influencer and the brand. (Francis & Hoefel, 2018).

Transparency is a critical factor in influencer marketing, particularly in the context of macro-influencers. Sponsorship disclosures, such as "Sponsored" or "Paid Partnership" labels, signal the promotional nature of the content, directly activating persuasion knowledge (PK) (Balaban et al., 2022). This recognition allows consumers to critically evaluate the content but can also lead to skepticism if the promotional intent is perceived as disingenuous (Boerman et al., 2014 ; Van Reijmersdal et al., 2016). However, when handled effectively, transparency can enhance trust, signaling that the influencer is honest and ethical in their practices (Krouwer et al., 2019). Transparency's impact is nuanced. While it increases ad recognition and can trigger PKA, it also fosters trust if the influencer maintains credibility (Kim & Kim, 2021 ; De Cicco et al., 2020). Studies show that influencers who integrate disclosures seamlessly into their content, while maintaining relatability, are more likely to retain trust and positively influence purchase decisions (Evans et al., 2019 ; Woodroof et al., 2020).

Gen Z places significant importance on transparency, with studies showing they are more likely to purchase products when they trust the influencer and perceive the content as genuine (Gonçalves et al., 2024). Overly commercial content, even when transparently disclosed, may still activate skepticism if it does not align with the influencer's personal brand. Conversely, well-executed transparency can enhance perceptions of both the influencer and the promoted brand, leading to stronger purchase intentions (Van der Bend et al., 2023). Macro-influencers, due to their larger audiences, often adopt more explicit transparency practices to maintain credibility, making transparency management a key determinant of their effectiveness (Lee et al., 2022).

The hypothesis are proposed here :

H4: Higher PKA negatively impacts Trust in Influencers.

H5: Trust in Influencers positively influences Purchase Intentions.

H6: Transparency positively influences Trust in Influencers.

H7: Higher transparency positively impact purchase intentions

Based on the previously formulated hypotheses, this paper develops a research model to explore the relationships between persuasion knowledge activation, trust, transparency, and purchase intentions within the context of Generation Z's social media behavior, as shown in the following figure.

Figure 1: Research model
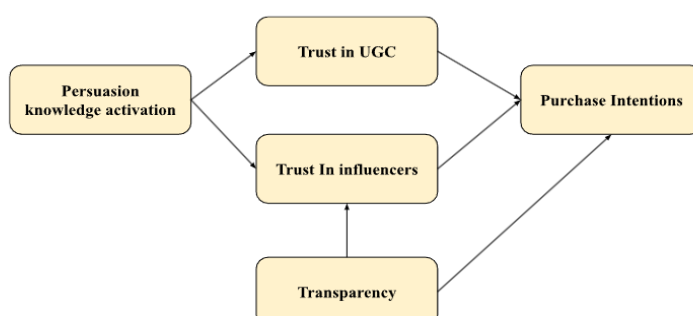
Data and Sample Description

The sample for this study consists of 340 respondents from Generation Z, aged between 18 and 30 years old by 2025, after screening out individuals above 30. The gender distribution includes 61.5% females and 38.5% males. Regarding social media usage, 80.65% of respondents reported spending more than 3 hours per day on social media, while 19.35% spend less than 3 hours daily. In terms of platform preferences, 80.7% of respondents identified TikTok and Instagram as their most commonly used apps, followed by 9.3% who primarily use Facebook, 6% who favor YouTube, and 4% who use other platforms. Data was collected through an online survey shared on platforms where Generation Z is most active, ensuring a targeted and relevant sample reflective of this generation's social media behaviors and preferences.

This study adopts a quantitative research approach utilizing a causal research design to explore the relationships between key variables influencing Gen Z's purchase decisions. Additionally, the research involves a comparative analysis between UGC creators and Macro Influencers, aiming to assess the differences in their effects on persuasion knowledge, consumer trust, skepticism, and purchase intentions. A quantitative approach is particularly suitable for establishing measurable relationships between variables and testing hypotheses about the effects of narrative content and content creators on consumer behavior (Creswell, 2014 ; Field, 2013).

Data Analysis

In this section, the data analysis process is outlined, which involves several statistical techniques to explore and test the relationships between key variables. The analysis begins with descriptive statistics to summarize the sample data, followed by correlation analysis to examine the relationships between variables. Additionally, t-tests and regression analysis will be performed to test the hypotheses and provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing Generation Z's purchase decisions. All analyses were conducted using SPSS software, a statistical software that facilitates the implementation of these techniques and ensures accurate and reliable results.

Variables explanation

This section provides an overview of the key variables used in the study. The table below details each variable's name, abbreviation, meaning, the question used to measure it, and its variable type. This provides a clear understanding of how each variable is operationalized and contributes to the overall research model.

Table 1: Variable measurement and explanation

Variable Name	Abbreviation	Meaning	Question	Variable Type
Purchase Intentions	PIU	Measures the likelihood that the respondent will purchase a product or service based on UGC	I am more likely to make a purchase decision if the product has been recommended by other users.	Dependent
	PII	Measures the likelihood that the respondent will purchase a product or service-based Influencer	I would consider purchasing a product if it was recommended by an influencer I follow.	
Persuasion knowledge activation	PKU	Measures the extent to which the respondent perceives content as manipulative or persuasive when recommendation coming from User	I can identify if the recommendations from other users in some reels are intended to persuade me to buy a product or influence my purchase decision.	Independent

		generated content		
	PKI	Measures the extent to which the respondent perceives content as manipulative or persuasive when products are recommended by influencer	When I see a product mentioned by an influencer, I can recognize it as a marketing strategy.	
Trust	TU	Evaluates the respondent's trust in user-generated content (UGC), perceived as more authentic.	I am more likely to trust recommendations shared by users with a small number of followers rather than by influencers.	Independent
	TI	Assesses the respondent's level of trust in influencers, particularly those with a large following.	I trust recommendations made by influencers on social media when their number of followers exceeds 100k.	
Transparency	Trans	Assesses how transparent the influencer's content is regarding sponsorship and promotional intent.	I am more likely to trust influencers who disclose their sponsorships compared to those who do not.	Independent
Engagement	Eng	measures how the number of likes and comments under social media posts influences Generation Z's purchase decisions.	When I see a post with high engagement (e.g., likes, comments), it feels more credible.	Control variable
Brand familiarity	BF	Assesses whether familiarity with a brand influences respondents' decision.	I am more likely to purchase something recommended if I am already familiar with the brand.	Control variable

Descriptive statistics

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the key variables included in the study. The table displays the number of observations (N = 340), along with the mean, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum values for each variable. The mean values range from 2.529 (Trust in Influencers, TI) to 3.518 (Trust in UGC, TU), indicating that respondents generally report moderate to high levels of trust in both influencers and UGC. The standard deviations reveal some variability in the responses, with PKI (Persuasion Knowledge Activation for Influencers) showing the highest standard deviation of 1.353, suggesting that responses to influencer content may differ more widely compared to other variables. The minimum values for most variables are 1, and the maximum values are 5, as per the 1-5 scale used for measurement. For instance, the Prior Purchase variable (PP) has a mean of 0.741 and a maximum of 1, reflecting limited prior purchase experiences among the respondents. These descriptive statistics provide an understanding of the central tendencies and variability in the data.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
PIU	340	3.371	1.252	1	5

PII	340	2.738	1.147	1	5
PKU	340	3.3	1.211	1	5
PKI	340	3.5	1.353	1	5
TU	340	3.518	1.327	1	5
TI	340	2.529	1.143	1	5
Trans	340	3.115	1.155	1	5
Eng	340	2.959	1.164	1	5
BF	340	3.365	1.145	1	5
PP	340	.741	.439	0	1

Correlation matrix of key variables

Table 3 presents the correlation matrix of key variables, revealing several statistically significant relationships. Trust in UGC (TU) is positively correlated with Persuasion Knowledge Understanding for UGC (PKU) (0.523, $p < 0.01$), indicating that individuals who are more aware of persuasive tactics in UGC content are more likely to trust it. Additionally, Engagement (Eng) shows significant positive correlations with Trust in UGC (TU) (0.288, $p < 0.01$) and Prior Purchase (PP) (0.188, $p < 0.01$**), suggesting that higher engagement with content is associated with greater trust in UGC and prior purchase experience. Engagement is also positively correlated with Transparency (Trans) (0.346, $p < 0.01$), highlighting that more engaged consumers tend to perceive higher transparency in influencer marketing. Persuasion Knowledge Intent for Influencers (PKI) is positively correlated with Trust in Influencers (TI) (0.431, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that greater awareness of persuasive tactics in influencer marketing increases trust in influencers. Furthermore, Brand Familiarity (BF) is strongly positively correlated with Trust in UGC (TU) (0.477, $p < 0.01$), indicating that familiarity with a brand enhances trust in the associated UGC. Lastly, Prior Purchase (PP) is positively correlated with Trust in UGC (TU) (0.164, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that previous purchase experience influences trust in UGC, which may, in turn, affect future purchase decisions. These significant correlations highlight the important role of engagement, transparency, brand familiarity, and prior purchase behavior in shaping trust and purchase intentions among Generation Z consumers, providing a foundation for further regression analysis to assess the influence of these variables on consumer behavior.

Table 3: Correlation matrix of key variables

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
(1) PIU	1.000									
(2) PII	0.090	1.000								
	(0.096)									
(3) PKU	0.354	0.116	1.000							
	(0.000)	(0.032)								
(4) PKI	0.362	-0.528	0.509	1.000						

(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)							
(5) TU 0.523	0.068	0.498	0.424	1.000					
(0.000)	(0.211)	(0.000)	(0.000)						
(6) TI 0.032	0.365	0.032	-0.272	-0.041	1.000				
(0.562)	(0.000)	(0.557)	(0.000)	(0.449)					
(7) Trans 0.297	0.328	0.310	0.186	0.288	0.211	1.000			
(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.001)	(0.000)	(0.000)				
(8) Eng 0.223	0.410	0.170	0.058	0.127	0.431	0.346	1.000		
(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.002)	(0.286)	(0.020)	(0.000)	(0.000)			
(9) BF 0.477	0.185	0.365	0.365	0.392	0.080	0.341	0.301	1.000	
(0.000)	(0.001)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.143)	(0.000)	(0.000)		
(10) PP 0.164	0.205	0.008	0.025	0.099	0.239	0.047	0.112	0.188	1.000
(0.002)	(0.000)	(0.886)	(0.648)	(0.068)	(0.000)	(0.386)	(0.039)	(0.000)	

T-test results between key variables

Table 4 presents the results of the paired t-tests comparing three pairs of variables. The results show several significant findings that support the study's hypotheses. The comparison between Persuasion Knowledge Understanding for UGC (PKU) and Persuasion Knowledge Intent for Influencers (PKI) reveals a significant difference, with PKI having a higher mean (3.5) compared to PKU (3.3) and a p-value of 0.004, indicating that influencer content activates higher levels of persuasion knowledge compared to UGC, supporting Hypothesis 1. The Trust in UGC (TU) and Trust in Influencers (TI) comparison shows that TU is significantly higher than TI with a difference of 0.988 and a p-value of 0, reinforcing the hypothesis that UGC is perceived as more authentic and trustworthy than influencer content. Additionally, the paired t-test for Persuasion Knowledge Understanding (PIU) and Purchase Intentions Influence (PII) indicates that PIU has a higher mean (3.371) compared to PII (2.738) with a p-value of 0, suggesting that understanding persuasive tactics significantly influences purchase intentions, aligning with the hypothesis that persuasion knowledge plays a key role in shaping consumer behavior. Overall, these findings underscore the importance of persuasion knowledge activation in influencer and UGC content, highlighting how these elements influence trust and purchase intentions, which is central to the research's investigation of Generation Z's purchasing decisions.

Table 4: Paired t test between key variables

Variables	obs	Mean1	Mean2	dif	St Err	t value	p value	Result
H1: PKU – PKI	340	3.3	3.500	-0.2	0.069	-2.9	0.004***	Supported
TU - TI	340	3.513	2.530	0.988	0.097	10.2	0.000***	Supported
PIU - PII	340	3.371	2.738	0.632	0.088	7.2	0.000***	Supported

Model Regression coefficient

The results shown in table 5 from the regression analysis provide strong support for all seven hypotheses tested.

H2 demonstrates that higher PKA (UGC) negatively impacts Trust in UGC with a statistically significant coefficient, indicating a negative relationship. H3 shows that Trust in UGC positively influences Purchase Intentions, supporting the idea that trust in user-generated content increases purchase likelihood. H4 reveals that higher PKA also negatively affects Trust in Influencers, suggesting that increased PKA reduces trust in influencers. H5 confirms that Trust in Influencers has a positive impact on Purchase Intentions, reinforcing the role of trust in influencer marketing in driving consumer behavior. H6 shows that Transparency positively influences Trust in Influencers, suggesting that greater transparency increases trust in influencers, while H7 supports that higher Transparency positively impacts Purchase Intentions, indicating transparency's direct role in boosting purchase intent. All hypotheses have statistically significant results, with p-values well below 0.05, affirming that transparency, trust in influencers, and user-generated content all play vital roles in influencing consumer intentions and behavior. The analysis also highlights that PKA (UGC) generally has a negative effect on trust, whether in UGC or influencers, while transparency serves as a key positive driver of trust and purchase intentions.

Table 5: Model regression coefficient

Hypothesis	Path	Standard path coefficient	C.R.	p	Tested-Results
H2	Higher PKA (UGC) → Trust in UGC	-0.5452	-10.55	0.000***	Support
H3	Trust in UGC → Purchase Intentions	0.493805	11.29	0.000***	Support
H4	Higher PKA → Trust in Influencers	-0.3914882	-7.14	0.000***	Support
H5	Trust in Influencers → Purchase Intentions	0.3661972	7.21	0.000***	Support
H6	Transparency → Trust in Influencers	0.2085026	3.96	0.000***	Support
H7	Higher transparency → Purchase intentions	0.3253043	6.38	0.000***	Support

DISCUSSION

Gen Z, born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, is a highly tech-savvy cohort that has grown up with social media and digital platforms at the forefront of their lives. This generation is uniquely positioned to influence trends and consumer behaviors, particularly in digital marketing. Gen Z is characterized by their strong preference for authenticity, relatability, and transparency in content. They tend to be highly skeptical of traditional marketing tactics and are more likely to engage with content that feels genuine, rather than overtly commercial. As De Veirman et al. (2017) highlight, Generation Z places significant value on authenticity over conventional advertising, which has contributed to their shift toward content that appears natural and peer-driven, rather than brand-driven. This skepticism is particularly notable in their interaction with influencer marketing, as Leung et al. (2022) suggest that the more overtly commercial influencer content becomes, the more PKA (Persuasion Knowledge Activation) is triggered, which reduces the perceived authenticity and trustworthiness of that content.

In line with this, User-Generated Content (UGC) resonates more with Gen Z than traditional influencer content. UGC, typically created by everyday consumers and shared on social media platforms, is perceived as more authentic and relatable, aligning with Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) and Müller & Christandl (2019), who emphasize that UGC is valued for its lack of commercial intent. As Mayrhofer et al. (2020) and Kim & Song (2017) further note, UGC activates lower levels of PKA, meaning Gen Z is less likely to perceive it as a marketing strategy, but rather as content that resonates with their lived experiences. UGC is not perceived as explicitly persuasive, which makes it more engaging and trustworthy compared to the commercialized nature

of influencer content. However, influencer marketing continues to play a significant role, though Boerman et al. (2017) argue that it is often viewed skeptically by Gen Z when the content is too overtly promotional, triggering higher PKA and thereby diminishing trust in both the influencer and the brand they promote.

The importance of transparency in influencer marketing is crucial to mitigating this skepticism. Transparency helps influencers build trust by signaling honesty and authenticity in their content. Studies such as Evans et al. (2019) and Woodroof et al. (2020) suggest that influencers who disclose brand partnerships clearly and transparently are more likely to maintain credibility and trust with their followers. The findings of this study support this, showing that transparency positively influences Trust in Influencers, which in turn boosts purchase intentions. In line with Gonçalves et al. (2024), transparency in influencer marketing allows Gen Z to feel that content is genuine, thereby increasing their likelihood to engage and purchase.

The results from the paired t-tests also align with these findings. H1 tested whether PKA is higher for macro-influencer content compared to UGC, and the results show a significant difference, with PKA being higher for macro-influencers, supporting the idea that higher PKA negatively impacts Trust in UGC (H2). This confirms that as PKA increases, consumers are more likely to question the authenticity of the content, reinforcing the need for transparency. H3, which tested whether Trust in UGC positively influences Purchase Intentions, shows a significant positive relationship, further supporting the notion that authenticity in UGC leads to greater trust and higher purchase intentions. H5, which looked at the relationship between Trust in Influencers and Purchase Intentions, also demonstrates a strong, positive relationship, confirming that Trust in Influencers is a critical factor in driving purchase behavior.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has provided valuable insights into the factors that drive purchase intentions among Generation Z, particularly in relation to User-Generated Content (UGC) and Influencer Marketing. The analysis demonstrates that UGC is perceived as more authentic and relatable by Gen Z, triggering lower levels of Persuasion Knowledge Activation (PKA) and resulting in higher trust and purchase intentions. On the other hand, macro-influencer content tends to activate higher PKA, which generates skepticism and diminishes trust, ultimately reducing purchase intentions. However, transparency was identified as a key factor in mitigating the negative effects of PKA in influencer marketing. Influencers who clearly disclose their brand partnerships are perceived as more authentic, which helps reduce skepticism, increase trust, and enhance purchase intentions. These findings highlight the critical role that authenticity and transparency play in shaping consumer trust and driving purchasing decisions among Gen Z. Marketers targeting this generation should prioritize content that feels genuine and transparent to effectively engage them and boost their purchase behavior. Future research, however, should explore the additional factors of engagement and brand familiarity, which may provide further depth to understanding how Gen Z interacts with marketing content and influences their purchasing decisions.

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