

Original Article

The Effect of TikTok Influencer Credibility on Culinary Purchase Intention with Customer Engagement as a Mediating Variable Among Generation Z in Ternate City

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Abstract: This study aims to examine the influence of TikTok influencer credibility on culinary purchase intention with customer engagement as a mediating variable among Generation Z in Ternate City, Indonesia. The rapid growth of short-form video platforms has reshaped marketing communication, particularly in the culinary sector, where influencers function as persuasive opinion leaders. The respondents are 115 people who continue to follow a culinary TikTok influencer and interact with them, using a quantitative approach with survey methods. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was used to analyze data. The research demonstrates that influencer credibility has a major effect on customer engagement and purchase intention. Customer engagement also has a significant impact on purchase intention and serves as a partial mediator in the relationship between influencer credibility and purchase intention. These results indicate that engagement acts as a psychological mechanism mediating the relationship between perceived credibility and behavioral intention. This study adds to the literature on digital marketing by extending influencer marketing scholarship to non-metropolitan contexts and highlighting engagement-driven persuasion approaches for Generation Z consumers.

Keywords: Influencer Credibility, Customer Engagement, Purchase Intention, TikTok, Generation Z.

I. INTRODUCTION

Digital communication technology has been developing very quickly, and it has completely changed the way global marketing works. Social media is more than just a communication tool; it has become a strategic digital ecosystem for shaping consumer perception, brand interaction, and purchasing behavior. Social media, powered by algorithmic content distribution and interactive practices, has become much more persuasive. TikTok is one of the fastest-growing social media applications out there and features short-form video content that serves a combination of entertainment, information, and commercial messaging in an engaging format.

TikTok remains notable for its growth in Indonesia, especially when it comes to users from Generation Z. This group has high digital literacy, aptitude for quickly processing information, and heavy use of social media for both discovering products and seeking consumption references. Generation Z, unlike other generations active on social media, prefers organic and authentic content rather than traditional advertising approaches. Influencer marketing is, therefore, one of the most effective promotional strategies to reach this demographic group.

Within the culinary sector, influencers play a strategic role in shaping consumer perception. Culinary influencers provide experiential storytelling through taste demonstrations, product reviews, price evaluations, and sensory descriptions that simulate direct consumption experiences. Such presentation shorts information asymmetries in addition to perceived buy risk, enhancing the persuasiveness of influencer recommendations. Unlike traditional corporate advertising, influencer marketing is built on a foundation of personal credibility. As proposed by Source Credibility Theory (Hovland et al., 1953), the effectiveness of persuasive communication depends on the perceived credibility of the communicator, which is formed by expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. These dimensions determine the extent to which audiences accept and adopt marketing messages.

In fact, persuasion in digital environments is hardly linear dot. Customer engagement is becoming one of the most prominent topics in contemporary marketing literature, defined as the psychological and subsequent behavioral driver that connects perception with action. Customer engagement shows in cognitive attention, emotional attachment, and interactive behaviors like liking, commenting, or sharing content. By engaging in active vs passive attendance to influencer content, the impact of persuasion becomes more profound and durable. Hence, engagement might serve as a mediating mechanism by which people translate perceived credibility to purchase intention.



While a great deal of studies have investigated the effectiveness of influencer marketing in metropolitan, saturated digital markets, little is still known regarding ways in which influencers' credibility and involvement shape non-metropolitan, developing contexts. Consumption patterns, purchasing power levels, and social influence dynamics may differ in cities outside major urban centers. As an emerging regional city, Ternate City becomes a relevant context to analyze the mechanism of digital persuasion for Generation Z consumers. Exploring this context provides a further understanding of influencer marketing effectiveness beyond large, urban markets.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Source Credibility Theory by Hovland et al. (1953) argues that persuasive communication is effective only to the extent that the audience perceives the source of the message as credible. Credibility is generally conceptualized along three basic dimensions: (1) expertise, (2) trustworthiness, and (3) attractiveness. Credibility: The audience's perception of the knowledge and competence of the communicator with respect to the message. Trustworthiness relates to one's honesty, integrity, and reliability, while attractiveness refers to personal appeal, relatability, and communication style. Online, particularly on social media networks, the degree to which these dimensions will affect whether audiences will embrace and incarnate promotional messages.

Credibility becomes a core factor in determining persuasive success in influencer marketing. Influencer credibility is the audience that perceives the messaging capabilities of an influencer that would provide exact, honest, and engaging product information. In the culinary realm, this can be displayed in an influencer's knowledge of food quality, taste description, comparison with previous experiences or market trends, and pricing, as well as their evaluation/summary of the product. Third, their trustworthiness can be signified through transparent reviews and honest recommendations, while attractiveness can strengthen the parasocial interaction between influencer and audience by providing an emotional connection. When an influencer is perceived by the audience as credible, it reduces perceived risk and increases message acceptability, which further strengthens behavioral responses.

Customer engagement is a multi-dimensional psychological state and thus can be divided into different elements, namely cognitive, emotional, and behavioral involvement. Cognitive engagement indicates a level of focused attention and information processing while consumers consume digital content. It is emotional engagement, which means feelings such as enjoyment, interest, and attachment regarding the influencer and the promoted product. Behavioral engagement is all about interaction, such as liking, commenting, and sharing the content. Revenue According to PwC, social media environments have greater engagement, which expresses the extent of audiences actively engaging with content instead of passively consuming it. Engagement rates like these make for greater persuasiveness as they ensure the audience is hearing you out, resulting in more profound processing that results in stronger relational ties.

Purchase intention is defined as a consumer's readiness or willingness to purchase a product following the evaluation of information and recommendations. It is a cognitive level before real purchasing action. Purchase intention in digital marketing contexts is affected by trust, emotional attachment, perceived value, and interactive experience. An effective influencer will help audiences connect better to the content, resulting in positive purchase intention towards the suggested product.

Drawing upon the theoretical perspective and prior empirical evidence, it can be presumed that influencer credibility is a driver of customer engagement through enhanced attention, trust, and emotional connection. In turn, customer engagement is anticipated to enhance consumers' intention to purchase through, arguably, enhanced cognitive and affective processing. Influencer credibility could also play a direct role in purchasing intention as it decreases uncertainty and increases trust. Furthermore, customer engagement may function as a mediating mechanism that translates perceived credibility into behavioral intention. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H1: Influencer credibility has a positive effect on customer engagement.
- H2: Customer engagement has a positive effect on purchase intention.
- H3: Influencer credibility has a positive effect on purchase intention.
- H4: Customer engagement mediates the relationship between influencer credibility and purchase intention.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A) Results

The results of this study are based on data collected from 115 Generation Z respondents in Ternate City who actively follow and interact with a culinary TikTok influencer. This analysis was performed with Partial Least Squares Structural Equation modeling (PLS-SEM) for both the measurement model and structural model evaluation.

As for the demographic profile of the respondents, most are aged between 18 and 25 years old, comprising the Gen Z segment. The total mean number of minutes people spend on TikTok was found to frequently be a daily (an average of 30

dpm), as most respondents had high exposure to influencer-generated culinary content. This validates that the sample is well-suited to conduct a study of influencer marketing efficacy among digital-native consumers.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics and TikTok Usage Patterns of Respondents

Category		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	71	62%
	Male	44	38%
Usia	14–21 Years	52	45%
	22–29 Years	63	55%
Occupation	Private Employee	13	11%
	State-Owned Enterprise Employee	8	7%
	Civil Servant / Military / Police	13	11%
	Entrepreneur	10	9%
	Freelancer	18	16%
	Student	48	42%
	Others	5	4%
Monthly Food & Beverage Expenditure	IDR 500,000 – 1,000,000	51	44%
	IDR 1,000,001 – 1,500,000	36	31%
	IDR 1,500,001 – 2,000,000	14	12%
	> IDR 2,000,000	14	12%
Daily TikTok Usage	< 1 Hour	20	17%
	1–3 Hours	42	37%
	> 3 Hours	53	46%

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the respondents (N = 115). The majority of respondents were female (62%), while 38% were male. In terms of age distribution, 53% of respondents were between 22–29 years and 45% were between 14–21 years, indicating that the sample is dominated by young adult members of Generation Z. Most respondents were students (42%), followed by freelancers (16%) and private employees (11%), reflecting an academically active and early-career population segment. Regarding monthly food and beverage expenditure, 44% reported spending between IDR 500,000 and IDR 1,000,000, while 31% spent between IDR 1,000,001 and IDR 1,500,000, suggesting moderate purchasing capacity. Additionally, 46% of respondents reported using TikTok for more than three hours per day, indicating high exposure to influencer-generated content. Overall, these characteristics confirm that the respondents represent an active and digitally engaged Generation Z segment suitable for examining influencer-driven purchase intention.

The measurement model was evaluated to assess convergent validity, discriminant validity, and reliability. The results indicate that all indicator loadings exceeded the recommended threshold, confirming adequate convergent validity. Composite Reliability (CR) values were above 0.70, and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values exceeded 0.50 for all constructs, indicating satisfactory internal consistency and construct validity. Discriminant validity was also established, as each construct demonstrated stronger correlations with its own indicators than with other constructs. The measurement model was evaluated to assess convergent validity and internal consistency reliability. Convergent validity was examined using Average Variance Extracted (AVE), while reliability was assessed using Composite Reliability and Cronbach's Alpha.

Table 2: Reliability and Convergent Validity Assessment of Study Constructs (AVE, Composite Reliability, and Cronbach's Alpha)

Variables	AVE	Composite Reliability	Cronbach's Alpha
Influencer Credibility	0.645	0.901	0.862
Customer Engagement	0.660	0.906	0.869
Purchase Intention	0.631	0.895	0.853

All the AVEs are greater than the recommended 0.50, shown in Table 2, confirming satisfactory convergent validity. Moreover, all constructs have Composite Reliability values above 0.70, indicating strong internal consistency reliability. The acceptable values of Cronbach's Alpha, which are all above 0.70, further verify that the measurement model is reliable. All constructs are then assessed as valid and reliable for further analysis of the structural model.

The Findings indicate that Influencer Credibility has a Positive and Significant Effect on Customer Engagement according to Structural Model Analysis. This helps in increasing the cognitive, affective, and behavioural engagement of audiences with influencers having higher perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and

attractiveness.2 The result also reveals the positive and significant impact of customer engagement, which indicates that the audience engaged with influencer content is more likely to be willing to purchase culinary recommended products. Moreover, credibility had a direct positive effect on purchase intention, showing that influence credibility has significantly increased Purchase Intention by perceiving risk fall and trust rise. To investigate the proposed hypotheses, we evaluated the structural model by looking at path coefficients, t-statistics, and p-values generated by the bootstrapping procedure.

Table 3: Structural Path Analysis Results: Influence of Credibility and Customer Engagement on Purchase Intention

Relationship	Path Coefficient	T-Statistic	P-Value
Influencer credibility -> Customer Engagement	0.814	21.193	0.000
Customer Engagement -> Purchase Intention	0.621	6.337	0.000
Influencer credibility -> Purchase Intention	0.744	12.284	0.000

As presented in Table 3, influencer credibility has a positive and significant effect on customer engagement ($\beta = 0.814$, $t = 21.193$, $p < 0.05$). Customer engagement also significantly influences purchase intention ($\beta = 0.621$, $t = 6.337$, $p < 0.05$). Furthermore, influencer credibility directly affects purchase intention ($\beta = 0.744$, $t = 12.284$, $p < 0.05$). These results indicate that all proposed direct relationships are statistically significant.

Mediation analysis confirms that customer engagement partially mediates the relationship between influencer credibility and purchase intention. This finding indicates that influencer credibility affects purchase intention both directly and indirectly through engagement mechanisms. The indirect pathway strengthens the overall persuasive impact, highlighting the importance of interactive audience involvement in digital marketing strategies. The coefficient of determination (R^2) was examined to evaluate the predictive power of the structural model.

Table 4: R-square and Adjusted R-square Values of Endogenous Variables

Endogenous Variable	R-square	R-square adjusted
Customer Engagement	0.662	0.659
Purchase Intention	0.684	0.678

As presented in Table 4, the R^2 value for customer engagement is 0.662, indicating that 66.2% of the variance in customer engagement is explained by influencer credibility. Meanwhile, the R^2 value for purchase intention is 0.684, suggesting that 68.4% of the variance in purchase intention is jointly explained by influencer credibility and customer engagement. According to commonly accepted guidelines in PLS-SEM analysis, these values indicate moderate to substantial explanatory power, demonstrating that the proposed model has strong predictive capability.

Mediation analysis confirms that customer engagement partially mediates the relationship between influencer credibility and purchase intention. This finding indicates that influencer credibility affects purchase intention both directly and indirectly through engagement mechanisms. The indirect pathway strengthens the overall persuasive impact, highlighting the importance of interactive audience involvement in digital marketing strategies.

Table 5: Indirect Effect of Influencer Credibility on Purchase Intention through Customer Engagement

Indirect Relationship	Path Coefficient	T-Statistic	P-Value
Kredibilitas Influencer -> Customer Engagement -> Purchase Intention	0.505	5.875	0.000

The mediation effect was assessed by examining the indirect relationship between influencer credibility and purchase intention through customer engagement. The bootstrapping results indicate that the indirect effect is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), confirming that customer engagement mediates the relationship between influencer credibility and purchase intention.

The findings reinforce Source Credibility Theory, confirming that perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness enhance persuasive effectiveness in digital environments. When audiences perceive a culinary influencer as credible, they are more attentive and emotionally connected to the content, which increases engagement. The significant relationship between customer engagement and purchase intention emphasizes the importance of interactive communication strategies on TikTok. Engagement functions as a psychological bridge that strengthens persuasion through deeper cognitive processing and emotional attachment.

The partial mediation result suggests that credibility operates through dual mechanisms: a direct persuasive pathway and an indirect engagement-based pathway. This confirms that effective influencer marketing is not solely dependent on credibility but also on the influencer’s ability to foster meaningful audience interaction. In the context of Ternate City, these findings demonstrate that engagement-driven digital marketing strategies are effective even in non-metropolitan settings, thereby

expanding the applicability of influencer marketing theory beyond major urban markets.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study aims to examine the influence of influencer credibility on culinary purchase intention, with customer engagement as a mediating variable, among Generation Z TikTok users in Ternate City. The findings indicate that influencer credibility significantly enhances customer engagement and purchase intention. Influencers who demonstrate higher levels of expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness are more capable of fostering active audience interaction and strengthening consumers' intention to purchase recommended culinary products.

Customer engagement also plays a significant role in shaping purchase intention. Higher cognitive, emotional, and behavioral involvement leads to stronger buying intentions. Furthermore, the mediation analysis confirms that customer engagement partially mediates the relationship between influencer credibility and purchase intention. This indicates that influencer credibility affects purchase intention both directly and indirectly through audience engagement mechanisms. The results highlight that engagement functions as an important psychological pathway in influencer-based digital marketing strategies.

From a practical perspective, influencers are encouraged to strengthen their expertise by providing more detailed, objective, and informative product reviews to enhance perceived competence. Developing more interactive content formats, such as live sessions, Q&A features, and audience participation activities, may further increase engagement levels. The collaboration of culinary businesses and MSMEs with credible influencers who have good relationships with their audience is expected to increase the effectiveness of marketing activities and increase purchase intention. However, it is also important for businesses to maintain a consistent level of product quality and service performance in order to turn purchase intention into concrete buying behavior and long-term customer loyalty.

This study enriches the existing digital marketing literature by placing engagement-based mediation analysis in a non-metropolitan context. Further exploration with variables like perceived price, catalyst of promotional engagement, and social effect is suggested to develop a holistic comprehension of the digital shoppers.

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Appendix 1

There are no appendices included in this study.

Interest Conflicts

The author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest concerning the publication of this paper.

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