

PERCEPTIONS OF CONSUMER AUTHENTICITY IN INFLUENCER MARKETING: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON GENERATION Z IN THE ONLINE FASHION INDUSTRY

Nurhilalia Nurhilalia^{1*}, Muhammad Yusuf², Firman Menne³, Yulia Yunita Yusuf⁴

¹ Politeknik Negeri Ujung Pandang, Indonesia

^{2,3} Universitas Bosowa, Indonesia

⁴ Universitas Negeri Makassar, Indonesia

*Corresponding author: nurhilalia07@poliupg.ac.id

Abstract: This study explores how Generation Z consumers in Indonesia perceive authenticity in influencer marketing within the online fashion industry. Employing a qualitative case study design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 active social media users aged 18–25. Data were analyzed thematically using NVivo, guided by Braun and Clarke’s (2006) framework. The findings reveal five central themes: (1) authenticity as consistency and transparency, (2) trust as the foundation of influence, (3) homophily and relatability, (4) parasocial relationships as emotional engagement, and (5) value alignment and cultural resonance. Authenticity emerged as the pivotal construct mediating the relationship between influencer attributes and consumer responses. Participants emphasized that transparency in sponsorship disclosure and alignment with sustainability and cultural values are critical for fostering trust and loyalty. Parasocial bonds further enhanced receptivity to brand endorsements, while micro-influencers were consistently perceived as more authentic and relatable than celebrity endorsers. This study contributes to the literature by integrating authenticity, trust, homophily, parasocial interaction, and value alignment into a unified conceptual framework. Theoretically, it extends influencer marketing research by situating authenticity within generational and cultural contexts. Practically, the results suggest that brands should prioritize influencers who embody transparency, relatability, and value congruence, while encouraging content strategies that balance aspirational aesthetics with candid, humanizing elements. These insights offer actionable implications for marketers seeking to engage Generation Z consumers in emerging markets.

Keywords: Influencer marketing, authenticity, Generation Z, fashion industry, parasocial relationships, trust, homophily

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid transformation of communication technologies has revolutionized the way companies interact with their consumers. Social media, as the dominant channel in digital marketing, not only provides a platform for promotion but also creates an ecosystem where personal and emotional relationships between brands, influencers, and consumers are formed in a highly interactive manner. Influencer marketing has emerged as a key strategy in this era, leveraging social media figures with a large follower base to deliver brand messages. Handranata and Kalila (2025) emphasize that influencer marketing proves to be more effective than traditional advertising in generating brand engagement, as it offers a more personal connection with the audience.

One of the most critical elements determining the effectiveness of influencer marketing is the perception of authenticity. Ünalmiş (2024) argues that the perceived authenticity of influencers becomes a central determinant of trust, as audiences tend to be skeptical toward content that appears overly commercialized. Obreja (2023) further notes



that Generation Z, as digital natives, evaluate authenticity based on behavioral consistency, alignment of communication style, and transparency in sharing personal experiences. Authenticity, therefore, is not merely an attribute but also a relational construct, shaped through the ongoing interaction between influencers and their audiences.

Generation Z holds a strategic position in digital marketing research. They represent a consumer group with increasing purchasing power, spending a significant portion of their time on social media platforms. Singh (2024) demonstrates that trust in influencers has a significant impact on purchase intentions among Generation Z, and authenticity serves as a reinforcing factor in this relationship. Similarly, Wang (2025) highlights the importance of relatability—the influencer’s ability to appear close and genuine in everyday life—as a major driver of consumer engagement in the fashion sector.

The online fashion industry has become one of the most intensive domains for the application of influencer marketing strategies. As fashion represents a form of self-expression strongly tied to social image, lifestyle, and personal identity, product promotion through influencers holds a particular appeal. Ünalımsı (2024) finds that fashion influencers perceived as authentic strengthen consumer attachment to brands, while those who overly emphasize commercial aspects tend to undermine trust. Obreja (2023) similarly reveals that Generation Z values openness, spontaneity, and consistency in fashion influencers as essential for creating emotional connection.

However, online fashion content is often highly curated to project aspirational lifestyles. This creates ambivalence among Generation Z: while they may be inspired by the styles presented, they simultaneously question the authenticity of content that appears overly polished or artificial (Singh, 2024). The misalignment between consumer expectations for influencer transparency and the reality of heavily commercialized content erodes trust. According to Wang (2025), this tension represents a central challenge for brands in the online fashion industry, as consumer loyalty within Generation Z is highly dependent on perceptions of authenticity.

In addition, statistical evidence demonstrates the economic relevance of fashion e-commerce in Indonesia. According to ECDB (2024) and Mordor Intelligence (2025), Indonesia’s fashion e-commerce revenue reached approximately USD 14.98 billion in 2024 and is projected to grow steadily to over USD 35 billion by 2030. This robust growth indicates the increasing reliance of the fashion industry on digital platforms and highlights the importance of influencer marketing in shaping consumer purchasing behavior.



Figure 1. Fashion eCommerce Market in Indonesia (2024–2030) *Source: ECDB (2024); Mordor Intelligence (2025).*

The academic literature on influencer marketing has grown substantially, yet much of it remains dominated by quantitative approaches that measure the relationships among variables such as credibility, trust, authenticity, and purchase intention (Singh, 2024; Handranata & Kalila, 2025). While these studies provide statistical evidence of causal relationships, they fall short in capturing the deeper meanings and subjective interpretations consumers assign to authenticity in their interactions with influencers. Authenticity is inherently subjective, shaped by social and cultural contexts as well as individual experiences, and therefore requires methodologies that allow for richer exploration.

Qualitative inquiry is particularly valuable in this regard, as it enables the exploration of personal narratives and lived experiences of Generation Z concerning what they perceive as authentic in online fashion influencers. Ünalımsı (2024) asserts that perceptions of authenticity vary widely among individuals, depending on their values and expectations of digital social relationships. Likewise, Obreja (2023) underscores the importance of exploring

consumer stories directly to understand the indicators of authenticity—such as spontaneity, lifestyle congruence, and the willingness to reveal imperfections behind the public image.

Furthermore, most existing research has focused on contexts in developed countries, particularly in Europe and North America, while studies in emerging economies such as Indonesia remain limited. This gap is significant, as Indonesia is one of the largest social media markets in the world, with Generation Z as its dominant users. The online fashion industry in Indonesia has grown rapidly, and both local and international brands rely heavily on influencer marketing as a primary promotional strategy. A focused study that explores the perceptions of Indonesian Generation Z toward influencer authenticity in the online fashion sector is therefore both timely and necessary.

From a practical standpoint, gaining a deeper understanding of consumer perceptions of authenticity can assist brands and digital marketing practitioners in designing more effective influencer collaborations. By identifying the authenticity cues most valued by Generation Z, companies can select influencers more strategically and craft campaigns that align more closely with consumer expectations. From an academic perspective, this research enriches the literature on influencer marketing by introducing a qualitative lens, highlighting how consumers construct meanings of authenticity, and how these meanings influence their attitudes toward influencers and brands.

In light of these considerations, this study seeks to address the current gap by examining how Indonesian Generation Z perceives authenticity in the context of online fashion influencer marketing. The aim is not only to analyze the impact of authenticity on consumer trust and attitudes but also to uncover the indicators consumers use to evaluate authenticity and how such perceptions shape their engagement with both influencers and brands.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Authenticity and Influencer Characteristics

Authenticity in influencer marketing has increasingly been recognized as a central determinant of marketing effectiveness in the digital age. Scholars argue that authenticity is not a single attribute but a multidimensional construct that encompasses honesty, consistency, transparency, and the ability of influencers to present themselves as genuine human beings rather than mere promotional channels. Obreja (2023), in a qualitative study on Generation Z consumers, highlighted that audiences perceive authenticity when influencers demonstrate alignment between their online personas and offline lives, communicate in a natural and relatable style, and share personal experiences that include imperfections rather than only curated success.

Ünalmiş (2024) further confirmed that the perceived value of advertising content has a direct effect on authenticity evaluations. Content that is informative, contextually relevant, and emotionally resonant strengthens consumers' trust and reinforces their attachment to influencers and the brands they endorse. This echoes the earlier work of Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Moulard (2020), who examined social media influencers as human brands and found that authenticity is often challenged by commercial collaborations; however, when influencers manage to maintain sincerity and self-congruence, audiences continue to perceive them as credible.

Authenticity has also been linked to the concept of *self-congruence*. Ki, Cuevas, Chong, and Lim (2020) showed that influencers perceived as authentic often display values and lifestyles that align with those of their audiences. This congruence leads followers to develop stronger parasocial relationships, resulting in greater trust and purchase intention. Similarly, Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget (2020) found that authenticity acts as a moderating factor in advertising effectiveness, especially when the influencer-brand fit is high. Consumers are more likely to accept promotional messages if they believe that the influencer genuinely identifies with the product.

Other scholars have emphasized that authenticity is closely tied to consistency over time. De Veirman, Hudders, and Nelson (2019) argued that influencers who repeatedly showcase coherent values and narratives across platforms are more likely to be regarded as authentic compared to those whose messaging changes depending on brand sponsorships. This aligns with studies in fashion marketing by Duffett (2025), which demonstrated that Instagram fashion influencers' long-term consistency in lifestyle portrayal was one of the most decisive factors influencing Generation Z's trust and purchase behavior.

Moreover, authenticity has been associated with the notion of transparency. Kim (2024) emphasized that clear disclosure of brand partnerships, rather than undermining credibility, actually increases authenticity perceptions among Generation Z. This generation tends to value honesty and openness, and they are quick to reject influencers who conceal sponsorships or appear insincere in their endorsements. Transparency is therefore not only an ethical requirement but also a strategic tool for reinforcing authenticity.

The importance of authenticity is also evident in sustainability and value-driven contexts. El-Shihy (2025) explored influencer collaborations in the sustainable fashion industry and found that authenticity perceptions are significantly heightened when influencers demonstrate genuine commitment to values such as environmental responsibility and social awareness. For Generation Z, influencers are not only style leaders but also cultural figures who must embody values that resonate with broader societal expectations.

Taken together, these studies converge on the idea that authenticity is both a personal and relational construct. It depends not only on the influencer's own characteristics—such as honesty, openness, and value alignment—but also on the expectations and cultural context of their audiences. As research continues to evolve, authenticity remains a critical lens for understanding how influencers shape consumer trust, engagement, and long-term loyalty in digital fashion marketing.

Trust, Parasocial Relationships, and Homophily

Trust has consistently been identified as a central mechanism linking influencer authenticity to consumer outcomes. Within the framework of source credibility theory, three primary dimensions—trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness—are highlighted as determinants of message effectiveness (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Ohanian, 1990). In the context of influencer marketing, trustworthiness is often considered the most influential factor because it directly shapes the willingness of audiences to accept persuasive messages.

Several studies have demonstrated that trust operates as a mediator between authenticity perceptions and consumer purchase intention. Kim and Kim (2021) found that when followers perceive influencers as authentic and credible, their trust increases, which subsequently enhances brand credibility and purchase decisions. Similarly, Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) argued that Generation Z tends to trust influencers more than traditional celebrities, particularly when influencers present themselves as relatable and transparent. This demonstrates that authenticity-driven trust is a key predictor of consumer engagement and behavioral outcomes.

Parasocial relationships also play a pivotal role in the influencer–audience dynamic. Originally conceptualized by Horton and Wohl (1956), parasocial relationships describe the one-sided, yet emotionally meaningful, connections that audiences develop with media personalities. In the digital era, these relationships have been extended to social media influencers. Studies by Labrecque (2014) and Tukachinsky & Stever (2019) show that parasocial relationships not only foster stronger identification with influencers but also amplify persuasive effectiveness. When combined with authenticity, these relationships strengthen consumer loyalty and long-term brand attachment.

Homophily, or the perceived similarity between influencer and follower, further reinforces both trust and parasocial bonds. Erdogan (1999) emphasized that similarity in values, attitudes, and lifestyles creates a sense of identification that boosts persuasion effectiveness. In influencer marketing, De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders (2017) observed that audiences are more likely to engage with influencers whose lifestyles mirror their own, as this perceived similarity enhances authenticity and trust. Ki and Kim (2019) extended this argument by showing that homophily increases parasocial interaction, which in turn influences purchase intention.

Recent research also underscores the sequential mediation process that links authenticity, trust, parasocial interaction, and purchase behavior. Sokolova and Kefi (2020) demonstrated that trust in Instagram influencers is positively associated with parasocial interaction, which subsequently predicts purchase intention. Their findings indicate that trust is not merely a direct outcome of authenticity but also a pathway through which parasocial bonds are cultivated. In line with this, Lou and Yuan (2019) found that parasocial relationships strengthen brand attitudes when influencers are perceived as authentic and credible.

Collectively, these studies converge on the argument that trust, parasocial interaction, and homophily form an interconnected triad that amplifies the impact of authenticity in influencer marketing. Trust serves as the foundational mediator, homophily reinforces the perception of authenticity and relatability, and parasocial relationships transform these perceptions into enduring emotional connections that influence consumer attitudes and purchase behaviors.

Influencer Type and Content Strategies

The type of influencer plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of authenticity. Scholars distinguish between different influencer categories such as celebrities, macro-influencers, micro-influencers, and nano-influencers, each with distinct advantages and limitations in terms of reach, engagement, and credibility. Research comparing celebrity influencers with micro-influencers indicates that the latter are often perceived as more authentic and relatable. De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders (2017) showed that micro-influencers are valued for their stronger interaction with followers and for creating content that feels personal and less curated, which enhances trust and

engagement. In contrast, celebrity influencers, while effective in terms of visibility and brand awareness, are frequently seen as commercialized, distant, and less trustworthy (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019).

Micro- and nano-influencers often engage in conversations with their followers, answer questions, and share content from their personal lives, leading to a greater sense of relatability. Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget (2020) highlighted that audiences feel stronger identification with micro-influencers compared to celebrities, which in turn strengthens purchase intention and brand loyalty. This finding supports the argument that the perceived closeness of micro-influencers creates a form of “peer-like” relationship with followers, enhancing their credibility.

Content strategies further affect authenticity perceptions. Ki, Cuevas, Chong, and Lim (2020) emphasized that content which is informative and helpful—such as tutorials, reviews, or behind-the-scenes footage—contributes significantly to perceived authenticity. Conversely, overly polished or purely promotional content often diminishes trust and is interpreted as insincere. Lou and Yuan (2019) found that when influencers embed branded messages into engaging and informative storytelling, followers perceive the content as more authentic compared to straightforward advertisements.

Emotional storytelling has been recognized as another crucial element in content authenticity. Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Moulard (2020) suggested that influencers who use narratives rooted in personal experience foster stronger emotional bonds with audiences, which heightens authenticity and trust. Similarly, authenticity perceptions are strengthened when influencers demonstrate value alignment with their audiences. El-Shihy (2025), in the context of sustainable fashion, found that when influencers integrate socially responsible or environmentally conscious messages into their content, Generation Z audiences perceive them as more credible and authentic.

Transparency in sponsorship disclosure has also been shown to reinforce authenticity. Kim and Kim (2021) argued that clear disclosure of brand partnerships not only enhances ethical credibility but also aligns with Generation Z’s preference for openness. Audiences often respond negatively to hidden sponsorships, perceiving them as manipulative, which erodes trust. Therefore, transparent content strategies become essential in building long-term trust and brand loyalty.

Taken together, these studies emphasize that both the type of influencer and the nature of content strategies determine how audiences evaluate authenticity. Micro- and nano-influencers are often considered more authentic due to their personal and relatable style, while content strategies that are transparent, emotionally engaging, informative, and value-driven enhance audience trust. Conversely, when influencer types or content strategies lean excessively toward commercialization, authenticity is weakened, reducing the effectiveness of influencer marketing campaigns.

Cultural Factors, Transparency, and Value Alignment

Authenticity perceptions are not formed in a vacuum; they are deeply shaped by cultural norms, social contexts, and generational values. Research in Middle Eastern and Asian contexts highlights that transparency in sponsorship disclosure is crucial for shaping trust. Audiences in these regions, particularly Generation Z, are highly sensitive to whether influencers openly acknowledge brand partnerships. Kim and Kim (2021) demonstrated that sponsorship disclosure increases perceptions of honesty and reduces skepticism, even when content is overtly promotional. Similarly, Evans, Phua, Lim, and Jun (2017) found that consumers reacted more positively to influencers who explicitly disclosed their commercial affiliations, as non-disclosure was often perceived as manipulative.

The importance of transparency aligns closely with the ethical expectations of Generation Z. This generation, often described as digital natives with strong social awareness, tends to hold influencers accountable for openness and ethical conduct. Lou and Yuan (2019) revealed that transparency in branded content enhances consumer trust and strengthens parasocial bonds, especially when influencers also demonstrate consistent values across platforms. For Gen Z, authenticity is not only about being “real” but also about being honest and ethically transparent in digital communication.

Beyond transparency, cultural and value alignment plays a decisive role in authenticity evaluations. Generation Z is widely recognized as a value-driven cohort. They are more likely to engage with influencers who embody values that resonate with their identities, such as sustainability, inclusivity, and social justice. El-Shihy (2025), in the context of sustainable fashion, found that when influencers champion environmental responsibility and ethical consumption, audiences not only perceive them as more authentic but also attribute greater credibility to the endorsed brands. This highlights how value alignment strengthens both influencer credibility and brand image.

The cultural dimension of authenticity also extends to the fit between influencer content and audience expectations in different societies. Research by Xiao, Wang, and Chan-Olmsted (2018) emphasized that cultural

congruence between influencer and audience enhances authenticity perceptions, as consumers interpret messages through their socio-cultural lens. In collectivist cultures such as many parts of Asia, influencers who demonstrate community-oriented values and cultural sensitivity are evaluated more positively compared to those perceived as overly individualistic or purely commercial.

Additionally, value alignment in influencer marketing has been linked to long-term brand loyalty. Studies by Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Moulard (2020) showed that when influencers remain true to their core values despite commercial pressures, they maintain authenticity in the eyes of their followers. This consistency not only builds trust but also fosters resilience in brand–consumer relationships. Generation Z, in particular, appreciates influencers who balance commercial collaborations with personal values, viewing them as credible cultural figures rather than mere marketing tools.

In fashion marketing, where consumer identity is closely tied to symbolic consumption, authenticity derived from value alignment becomes especially powerful. Duffett (2025) demonstrated that Gen Z consumers respond positively to fashion influencers who integrate themes of cultural relevance, sustainability, or diversity into their narratives. Conversely, influencers who neglect these values risk being seen as inauthentic and opportunistic, leading to disengagement or backlash.

Taken together, these studies underscore that authenticity in influencer marketing is strongly conditioned by cultural context, the transparency of sponsorship, and the alignment of personal and generational values. For Generation Z, authenticity is less about flawless self-presentation and more about ethical transparency, shared values, and cultural resonance. These dimensions elevate authenticity from a superficial attribute to a relational and moral construct that deeply influences consumer trust, loyalty, and long-term engagement.

Conceptual Framework

Based on the reviewed literature, this study develops a conceptual framework that integrates authenticity, trust, homophily, and parasocial relationships as central constructs in explaining the effectiveness of influencer marketing among Generation Z consumers in the online fashion industry. The framework emphasizes that authenticity perception is not an isolated variable but is shaped by external drivers such as influencer type, content strategies, cultural context, and value alignment.

First, the type of influencer and the strategies they employ in creating content significantly influence how authenticity is perceived. Micro- and nano-influencers, for instance, tend to produce content that is more personal, relatable, and interactive compared to celebrity influencers, which enhances perceptions of genuineness and credibility (De Veirman et al., 2017; Schouten et al., 2020). Similarly, content strategies that emphasize informativeness, emotional storytelling, and transparency in sponsorship disclosure further reinforce authenticity (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Kim & Kim, 2021).

Second, cultural factors and value alignment act as contextual determinants of authenticity. In collectivist and value-driven societies, such as Indonesia, Generation Z audiences are particularly sensitive to whether influencers demonstrate transparency and share values related to sustainability, inclusivity, or social justice. When influencers embody values that resonate with their audiences, authenticity perceptions and brand credibility are significantly strengthened (El-Shihy, 2025; Xiao et al., 2018).

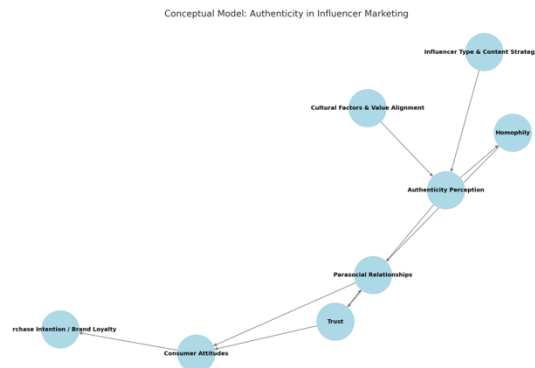
Authenticity perception then serves as a critical antecedent to trust and homophily. Trust, rooted in the source credibility framework, reflects followers' confidence in an influencer's honesty, expertise, and intentions (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Ohanian, 1990). Homophily, defined as the perceived similarity between influencer and follower, further reinforces authenticity and enhances social identification (Erdogan, 1999; Ki & Kim, 2019). Together, trust and homophily create fertile ground for parasocial relationships to develop.

Parasocial relationships represent one-sided but emotionally meaningful connections between influencers and followers (Horton & Wohl, 1956). These relationships amplify the effects of authenticity and trust, creating stronger emotional attachment and identification with both the influencer and the endorsed brand (Labrecque, 2014; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

Finally, trust and parasocial relationships jointly influence consumer attitudes, which encompass evaluations of both influencers and the promoted brands. Positive consumer attitudes subsequently drive purchase intention and brand loyalty. In the online fashion industry, where symbolic consumption and identity expression are central, these outcomes are particularly critical for long-term brand success (Duffett, 2025).

Thus, the proposed conceptual framework positions authenticity perception as the pivotal construct linking influencer characteristics, cultural and value alignment, and consumer outcomes. It highlights a sequential process in which influencer type and content strategies, together with cultural values, shape authenticity; authenticity fosters trust and homophily; trust and homophily reinforce parasocial relationships; and these relationships ultimately drive consumer attitudes and purchase behavior.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model: Authenticity in Influencer Marketing



Source: Developed by the Author, 2025

3. Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore Generation Z consumers' perceptions of authenticity in influencer marketing within the online fashion industry. Qualitative approaches are considered appropriate when the objective is to gain in-depth understanding of meanings, experiences, and interpretations rather than to test predetermined hypotheses. Creswell (2018) emphasized that qualitative research is particularly valuable for exploring complex social phenomena where context and participant perspectives are central. Similarly, Denzin and Lincoln (2018) highlighted that qualitative inquiry allows researchers to capture the richness and diversity of lived experiences that are not easily quantifiable.

In the context of influencer marketing, authenticity is inherently subjective and shaped by personal, social, and cultural interpretations. As noted by Flick (2014), qualitative designs are especially suitable for examining constructs that are context-dependent and constructed through social interactions. This study therefore employs a case-oriented approach, focusing on the narratives and experiences of Generation Z consumers in Indonesia who actively engage with fashion influencers on digital platforms.

Research Strategy

Given the study's focus on detailed understanding, a phenomenological approach is applied. Phenomenology is concerned with exploring how individuals experience and interpret a particular phenomenon in their everyday lives. According to Moustakas (1994), phenomenological research provides insights into the essence of participants' lived experiences, while van Manen (2016) noted that it helps uncover the meanings participants assign to their social worlds. This approach aligns with the study's aim to uncover how Generation Z constructs authenticity when interacting with influencers.

Sampling and Participants

The research employs a purposive sampling technique to ensure participants are relevant to the study objectives. Purposive sampling is widely used in qualitative research to select individuals who can provide rich and relevant data (Patton, 2015). In this study, participants consist of Generation Z consumers (aged 18–25) residing in Indonesia, who actively follow fashion influencers on Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube, and have engaged with branded fashion content.

Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) suggested that qualitative studies achieve sufficient saturation with 12–20 participants when the sample is homogeneous. In line with this, the study aims to interview approximately 15–20 participants to capture diverse perspectives while maintaining analytical depth.

Data Collection

Data are collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. Semi-structured interviews provide flexibility to probe deeper while maintaining comparability across respondents (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Questions are designed to explore participants' perceptions of authenticity, trust, homophily, parasocial relationships, and how these influence their attitudes toward influencers and brands. Yin (2018) emphasized that interviews are effective tools for case-based inquiry, allowing researchers to access participants' subjective meanings.

To complement interviews, document analysis of selected influencer content (posts, stories, and videos) is also conducted. Bowen (2009) stated that document analysis enriches qualitative research by providing contextual data that triangulate with interview findings. This dual strategy strengthens the validity of the research.

Data Analysis

The study employs thematic analysis to analyze qualitative data. Braun and Clarke (2006) described thematic analysis as a flexible and systematic method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. The process involves familiarization with the data, coding, theme development, and interpretation. Nowell et al. (2017) emphasized that thematic analysis provides rigor when combined with reflexivity and transparent documentation.

NVivo software is used to support data management and coding. Bazeley and Jackson (2013) highlighted that computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software facilitates systematic handling of large amounts of text, improves traceability, and strengthens reliability.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure the quality of the research, the criteria of (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) are applied. Credibility is enhanced through triangulation of interviews and content analysis, as well as member checking with selected participants. Transferability is addressed by providing thick descriptions of the context and participants. Dependability is ensured by maintaining an audit trail of decisions throughout the research process, and confirmability is achieved through reflexivity and researcher self-awareness.

4. Results

Theme 1: Authenticity as Consistency and Transparency

Participants consistently described authenticity as being “real” and “consistent” in both personal and sponsored content. They emphasized that influencers who maintain the same communication style, lifestyle portrayal, and values across different contexts are more likely to be trusted. Transparency in disclosing brand partnerships was repeatedly highlighted as a crucial indicator of authenticity. This finding aligns with Kim and Kim (2021), who demonstrated that sponsorship disclosure enhances trust among Generation Z consumers, and Lou and Yuan (2019), who confirmed that transparency increases perceived credibility in branded content.

Moreover, several participants reported disengagement when influencers appeared overly polished or staged in their posts, suggesting that authenticity is damaged when commercial motives overshadow personal identity. This supports Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Moulard (2020), who argued that authenticity is threatened when influencers compromise self-congruence for commercial gain.

Theme 2: Trust as the Foundation of Influence

Trust emerged as a central theme throughout participants' narratives. Many described how their trust in an influencer's honesty and expertise shaped their willingness to consider promoted products. They emphasized that trust is built not only through consistent and transparent messaging but also through influencers' ability to demonstrate knowledge and credibility in the fashion domain. This is consistent with the source credibility model (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Ohanian, 1990), which highlights trustworthiness and expertise as critical factors influencing persuasion.

Participants also stressed that influencers who disclosed imperfections or personal struggles were seen as more trustworthy. Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) similarly noted that Generation Z perceives influencers as more relatable and credible than traditional celebrities when they display honesty and vulnerability.

Theme 3: Homophily and Relatability with Influencers

Homophily—the perceived similarity between influencers and their followers—was found to strengthen identification and relatability. Participants expressed greater attachment to influencers who shared their cultural

backgrounds, fashion sense, or personal values. Erdogan (1999) explained that similarity fosters persuasion through social identification, while Ki and Kim (2019) confirmed that homophily strengthens parasocial bonds and increases purchase intention.

Interestingly, participants emphasized that influencers who blend aspirational lifestyles with relatable imperfections (e.g., candid moments or behind-the-scenes sharing) were perceived as more authentic. This supports Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget (2020), who found that relatability differentiates micro-influencers from celebrities, making them more effective in building consumer trust.

Theme 4: Parasocial Relationships as Emotional Engagement

Parasocial relationships emerged as another key theme, with participants describing influencers as “friends” or “companions” despite the one-sided nature of the interaction. They reported turning to influencers for fashion inspiration, lifestyle guidance, and even emotional reassurance. Horton and Wohl (1956) first conceptualized parasocial interaction as this sense of intimacy from a distance, and later research (Labrecque, 2014; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020) confirmed that parasocial engagement amplifies the impact of authenticity and trust on consumer attitudes.

Participants explained that emotional connections with influencers often made them more receptive to brand endorsements, perceiving these as personal recommendations rather than commercial persuasion. This finding illustrates how parasocial bonds function as a psychological bridge between authenticity and consumer behavior.

Theme 5: Value Alignment and Cultural Resonance

Participants stressed the significance of value alignment, particularly regarding sustainability, inclusivity, and cultural awareness. Many reported unfollowing influencers who failed to embody or respect these values. Conversely, influencers who embraced sustainability initiatives or showcased local cultural identity in fashion content were evaluated as more authentic. El-Shihy (2025) highlighted that value-driven authenticity enhances brand credibility among Generation Z, while Xiao, Wang, and Chan-Olmsted (2018) showed that cultural congruence strengthens influencer marketing effectiveness.

In the Indonesian context, participants appreciated influencers who balanced global fashion trends with local styles and values. Duffett (2025) similarly demonstrated that cultural relevance significantly improves engagement and purchase intention among Gen Z audiences in emerging markets.

Table 1. Summary of Themes, Supporting Quotes, and Interpretations

Theme	Supporting Quotes from Participants	Interpretation (with Literature Support)
Authenticity as Consistency and Transparency	“I trust influencers who act the same whether they are posting about fashion or just their daily life.” / “I unfollow when they never admit it’s an ad—it feels fake.”	Authenticity is strengthened by consistency and disclosure. Lack of transparency damages trust (Kim & Kim, 2021; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Audrezet et al., 2020).
Trust as the Foundation of Influence	“I believe her recommendations because she always shares honest reviews, not just the good parts.” / “He looks like he knows fashion, that’s why I listen.”	Trustworthiness and expertise drive persuasion, in line with source credibility theory (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Ohanian, 1990; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).
Homophily and Relatability	“She dresses like my friends, so I can imagine myself wearing the same clothes.” / “I feel closer to influencers who share my culture and lifestyle.”	Perceived similarity fosters identification and parasocial bonds (Erdogan, 1999; Ki & Kim, 2019; Schouten et al., 2020).
Parasocial Relationships	“I feel like she’s my friend even though we’ve never met.” / “Sometimes I wait for his content to feel inspired or motivated.”	Parasocial interaction creates emotional closeness and enhances persuasion (Horton & Wohl, 1956;

		Labrecque, 2014; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).
Value Alignment and Cultural Resonance	“I only follow influencers who care about sustainability.” / “I like when they mix global fashion trends with Indonesian style—it feels more real.”	Authenticity is tied to values and cultural sensitivity (El-Shihy, 2025; Xiao et al., 2018; Duffett, 2025).

5. Discussion

The present study explored how Generation Z consumers in Indonesia perceive authenticity in influencer marketing within the online fashion sector. Through thematic analysis, five interconnected themes emerged: authenticity as consistency and transparency, trust as the foundation of influence, homophily and relatability, parasocial relationships as emotional engagement, and value alignment with cultural resonance. Together, these findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how authenticity functions as a central construct linking influencer attributes, contextual factors, and consumer responses.

Authenticity as Consistency and Transparency

The study found that participants interpret authenticity as consistency across both personal and branded content, supported by transparent disclosure of sponsorships. Influencers who maintain congruence between their self-presentation and commercial collaborations are considered more trustworthy. This resonates with Kim and Kim (2021), who argued that sponsorship disclosure significantly improves credibility among Generation Z consumers, and Lou and Yuan (2019), who demonstrated that transparency in influencer marketing enhances message trust.

However, this study adds nuance by showing that Indonesian Gen Z consumers regard nondisclosure not simply as a minor omission but as a breach of integrity. Several participants described unfollowing influencers who avoided disclosure, suggesting that transparency is seen as a moral obligation rather than merely a legal or ethical guideline. This extends Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Moulard (2020), who warned that commercial pressures threaten authenticity when influencers compromise self-congruence. In the Indonesian context, shaped by collectivist values, authenticity is evaluated through honesty, openness, and moral responsibility, thus making transparency indispensable.

Trust as the Foundation of Influence

The findings highlight trust as the cornerstone of influencer effectiveness. Participants consistently described trust in terms of honesty, expertise, and long-term consistency. This aligns with the source credibility framework (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Ohanian, 1990), which posits that trustworthiness and expertise are essential to persuasion. It also echoes Djafarova and Rushworth (2017), who found that influencers are perceived as more credible than traditional celebrities when they share authentic and vulnerable experiences.

The present study extends these insights by emphasizing that Gen Z consumers build trust not only from expertise but also from perceived vulnerability. Influencers who openly shared struggles, failures, or imperfections were seen as more authentic and thus more trustworthy. This suggests a shift from traditional notions of authority-based credibility toward relational credibility, where influencers earn trust through emotional honesty. For the online fashion industry, this indicates that trust-building strategies should highlight transparency, expertise, and relatability simultaneously.

Homophily and Relatability with Influencers

Homophily—perceived similarity between influencers and followers—was another dominant theme. Participants valued influencers who shared their fashion sense, cultural background, or lifestyle aspirations. This finding reinforces Erdogan (1999), who noted that similarity fosters persuasion, and Ki and Kim (2019), who showed that homophily increases parasocial bonds and purchase intentions.

This study contributes further by revealing that for Gen Z, authenticity emerges when influencers balance aspirational lifestyles with relatability. Participants explained that influencers who blended polished, stylish images with candid, “behind-the-scenes” moments felt more authentic. This balance mirrors Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget’s (2020) conclusion that micro-influencers are more effective than celebrities because they combine aspirational appeal with relatability. In practice, brands should seek influencers who mirror their audiences’ identities while also projecting aspirational elements, thus reinforcing both trust and desirability.

Parasocial Relationships as Emotional Engagement

Parasocial relationships were strongly evident in participants' narratives. Many described influencers as "friends" or "companions," deriving emotional support, fashion inspiration, and lifestyle guidance from them. This directly reflects Horton and Wohl's (1956) conceptualization of parasocial interaction, as well as Labrecque's (2014) finding that parasocial bonds deepen consumer–brand attachment in digital contexts.

Sokolova and Kefi (2020) demonstrated that parasocial engagement strengthens the influence of authenticity and credibility on purchase intentions. This study supports their findings but also adds depth by revealing how parasocial closeness in Indonesia is amplified by shared values and cultural familiarity. Participants' willingness to adopt influencer recommendations was often grounded in emotional attachment, suggesting that parasocial bonds function as a psychological mechanism linking authenticity to behavioral outcomes.

Theoretically, this reinforces the idea that parasocial interaction is not a peripheral effect but a central pathway through which authenticity translates into persuasion. Practically, it suggests that brands should encourage influencers to cultivate genuine emotional connections through storytelling, interaction, and relatable content.

Value Alignment and Cultural Resonance

The findings underscore that Generation Z consumers are value-driven, emphasizing sustainability, inclusivity, and cultural sensitivity as prerequisites for authenticity. Participants frequently unfollowed influencers who ignored or contradicted these values, while they expressed loyalty to those who embodied them. This aligns with El-Shihy (2025), who found that sustainability-driven messaging enhances credibility, and Xiao, Wang, and Chan-Olmsted (2018), who demonstrated that cultural congruence strengthens influencer marketing effectiveness.

This study advances the literature by contextualizing authenticity within Indonesia, where local cultural resonance was critical. Participants praised influencers who integrated global fashion trends with Indonesian styles or cultural references, interpreting this as more authentic. Duffett (2025) similarly showed that cultural relevance shapes Gen Z engagement in emerging markets. In this context, authenticity is not simply about individual honesty but about shared cultural and moral values.

Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to theory by integrating authenticity, trust, homophily, parasocial relationships, and value alignment into a coherent framework. While previous research often examined these constructs separately (e.g., Erdogan, 1999; Ki & Kim, 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020), this study demonstrates their interconnectedness in shaping influencer effectiveness. Authenticity emerges as the pivotal construct, mediating the relationship between influencer attributes and consumer outcomes.

Additionally, the research extends influencer marketing theory by embedding authenticity within cultural and generational contexts. By focusing on Generation Z in Indonesia, the study shows that authenticity is socially constructed, value-laden, and context-dependent. It suggests that traditional Western-centric models of authenticity may not fully capture how consumers in collectivist societies evaluate influencers.

6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

Conclusion

This study examined how Generation Z consumers in Indonesia perceive authenticity in influencer marketing within the online fashion industry. Using a qualitative approach, five major themes emerged: (1) authenticity as consistency and transparency, (2) trust as the foundation of influence, (3) homophily and relatability, (4) parasocial relationships as emotional engagement, and (5) value alignment and cultural resonance.

The findings reveal that authenticity is not only a matter of self-presentation but also a moral and cultural construct shaped by honesty, transparency, and shared values. Authenticity serves as the central mechanism through which influencer type, content strategy, and contextual factors influence consumer trust, homophily, parasocial bonds, and ultimately, consumer attitudes and purchase intentions. This underscores authenticity as the pivotal driver of influencer marketing effectiveness among Gen Z.

Theoretical Implications

The study contributes to influencer marketing literature by integrating authenticity, trust, homophily, parasocial interaction, and value alignment into a unified framework. While previous studies have often treated these constructs

in isolation, this research demonstrates their interdependence and highlights authenticity as the mediating force connecting influencer characteristics and consumer behavior. Furthermore, by situating the study in Indonesia, it extends the cultural scope of influencer marketing research, showing that authenticity is contextually constructed and deeply tied to local cultural values and generational identities.

Practical and Managerial Implications

For practitioners in the fashion industry, the findings offer actionable guidance:

1. **Influencer Selection:** Brands should prioritize micro- and nano-influencers who demonstrate transparency, relatability, and value congruence with their audiences, rather than relying solely on celebrity reach.
2. **Content Development:** Authenticity is enhanced when influencers combine aspirational aesthetics with candid, imperfect, and behind-the-scenes content.
3. **Transparency Practices:** Clear disclosure of sponsorships is critical in building and maintaining trust, especially among Gen Z audiences who are highly sensitive to perceived dishonesty.
4. **Value-Driven Marketing:** Campaigns that emphasize sustainability, inclusivity, and cultural sensitivity are more likely to resonate with Gen Z consumers and strengthen brand loyalty.
5. **Cultural Localization:** In emerging markets like Indonesia, influencers who integrate global fashion trends with local cultural identity are perceived as more authentic, providing brands with competitive differentiation.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited by its qualitative design and focus on a specific demographic—Generation Z consumers in Indonesia’s fashion industry. Future research could adopt a mixed-methods or quantitative approach to validate these findings across broader populations and contexts. Comparative studies across cultures may further illuminate how authenticity perceptions vary globally. Additionally, longitudinal research could explore how authenticity perceptions evolve as influencer marketing strategies mature and as consumer expectations shift over time.

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