

Original Article

Parasocial Relationships and Their Influence on Consumer Purchase Intention Among Gen Z

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Abstract. In the evolving digital marketplace, parasocial relationships (PSRs) or one-sided emotional bonds formed between audiences and media figures have become a powerful force influencing consumer behavior, particularly among Generation Z. This study explores how PSRs impact Gen Z's purchase, where social media usage is among the highest globally and influencer culture is deeply embedded in everyday online interactions. Drawing from existing literature and current marketing practices, the study identifies and analyzes four core PSR-related factors: influencer expertise and credibility, social identification, self-disclosure and authenticity, and brand congruence. Through a review of relevant studies and cultural phenomena such as the Filipino "budol culture" (impulse buying induced by influencers), this research highlights how emotional relatability, cultural alignment, and consistent messaging contribute to trust, loyalty, and increased purchase likelihood among Filipino Gen Z consumers. The study further discusses how marketers can assess and optimize these PSR factors through strategic influencer selection, real-time engagement analytics, consumer feedback, and sustained brand partnerships. Despite global interest in influencer marketing, existing research remains limited in Southeast Asia, particularly in the Philippines. This study addresses that gap by contextualizing PSRs within Filipino values, digital habits, and linguistic preferences. The findings offer valuable insights for digital marketers, educators, and researchers seeking to understand and engage Gen Z consumers through emotionally resonant and culturally informed strategies in the era of social media-driven commerce.

Keywords: Parasocial relationships; Generation Z; Influencer marketing; Purchase intention; Social media.

In today's highly digitized environment, parasocial relationships (PSRs) – the one-sided emotional connections audiences form with media personalities – have become a central feature of Generation Z's online experience. According to Arora and Borkakoty (2024), as digital natives, members of Gen Z are deeply embedded in platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, where they routinely engage with influencers whose content often blends entertainment, personal storytelling, and product endorsement. These influencers serve as perceived companions or trusted figures, shaping the way Gen Z interacts with brands and makes purchasing decisions (Koay et al., 2021; Yuan & Lou, 2020). The increasing emotional investment in these online personalities mirrors real-life friendships, reinforcing a sense of trust and familiarity that makes product recommendations more persuasive (Chen et al., 2021).

Existing research suggests that key PSR-related factors, such as influencer expertise, credibility, authenticity, and value alignment, are significant predictors of consumer engagement and purchase intention. Emotional resonance and perceived similarity—what Croes and Bartels (2021) call “social identification”—play a significant role in strengthening these relationships, particularly when influencers reveal personal stories or adopt relatable tones in their content (Koay et al., 2023; Chantokul & Chantamas, 2023). In the Philippine context, this dynamic is reflected in the phenomenon of “budol culture,” a term denoting impulse-buying behavior induced by charismatic online influencers. Filipino Gen Z consumers often respond positively to influencers who use local humor, colloquial language, and shared cultural narratives, making them more susceptible to persuasive messaging embedded within PSRs (Lacap et al., 2024; Arshad et al., 2023).

Despite the increasing relevance of PSRs in shaping consumer behavior, current research on this subject remains concentrated mainly in Western and East Asian contexts, leaving a critical gap in understanding how these dynamics operate in Southeast Asian countries such as the Philippines. While some studies have begun to explore the influence of digital influencers in the Filipino market (Balita, 2025; Lacap et al., 2024), few have deeply examined how cultural nuances—such as collectivist values, emotional intimacy, and linguistic preferences—mediate the formation and effectiveness of PSRs in driving purchase intentions. Moreover, there is limited empirical evidence on how Gen Z in the Philippines navigates trust, authenticity, and emotional connection in online spaces dominated by social media influencers. This study addresses these gaps by investigating the specific PSR factors that influence Filipino Gen Z's purchasing behavior, thereby informing culturally attuned marketing strategies and digital consumer engagement practices.

The Concept of Parasocial Relationships (PSRs)

The concept of parasocial interaction (PSI) was first introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956, as cited in Lin et al., 2021), describing it as a simulated conversational exchange between audiences and media figures. Over time, repeated exposure to media personas can develop into a parasocial relationship (PSR)—a more enduring emotional bond (Dibble et al., 2016, as cited in Lou & Kim, 2019). Bond (2018) emphasizes the enduring sense of connectedness that audiences experience beyond brief interactions, while Boerman and Van Reijmersdal (2020) explain that PSRs often begin as PSIs and evolve through continued engagement. PSRs mirror real-life relationships, forming through repeated interactions and exposure to influencers' user-generated content (Yuan & Lou, 2020). This is evident among Filipino K-pop fans who describe their emotional connection to idols as deeply personal (Ascue et al., 2023). Despite some scholars using PSI and PSR interchangeably (Liao et al., 2022; Conde & Casais, 2023), Sheng (2024) distinguishes PSI as a brief, momentary experience, while PSRs are sustained and multifaceted, involving intimacy and social integration. Sheng also outlines four developmental stages of PSRs: exposure initiation, experimentation, intensification, and integration, which are shaped by perceived trust and influence.

Parasocial Relationships and Gen Z

Generation Z, as digital natives, has transformed parasocial relationships (PSRs) through their active use of platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, which facilitate frequent and intense parasocial interactions (Närvänen et al., 2023). These PSRs influence consumer behavior, often leading to impulse buying during live-streamed shopping events where emotional trust overrides rationality. Interactive features such as live chat and Q&A deepen perceptions of reciprocity, thereby strengthening emotional ties (Koay et al., 2021). While Gen Z values authenticity, they remain critically aware, favoring influencers who present themselves consistently and authentically (Koay et al., 2023). PSRs also promote brand loyalty through ongoing emotional engagement (Yuan et al., 2016). Despite extensive research on Gen Z's PSRs, gaps remain in understanding how these relationships specifically drive impulse buying in live social commerce and how interactivity uniquely mediates PSRs compared to other generations.

Factors Influencing Parasocial Relationships Influencer Expertise & Credibility

Several key factors within parasocial relationships (PSRs) significantly affect the effectiveness with which influencers persuade their followers to support endorsed products. Perceived expertise and credibility consistently emerge as primary drivers of persuasive impact. When followers perceive an influencer as competent and sincere, this perception fosters greater trust, thereby increasing consumers' willingness to consider and purchase recommended items (Koay et al., 2023). This trust is foundational in PSRs, where the absence of reciprocal communication is compensated for by followers' emotional investment in the influencer. Another essential contributor to this dynamic is homophily, or the perceived similarity between the influencer and their

audience. When audiences perceive that an influencer shares their values, lifestyle, or cultural background, the influencer becomes more relatable and emotionally resonant (Croes & Bartels, 2021). This perceived affinity fosters a sense of closeness and identification, allowing followers to feel as though the influencer genuinely understands their preferences and needs. In the context of Generation Z—who often prioritize authenticity and social alignment—this perceived relatability becomes a critical component of marketing effectiveness (Chantokul & Chantamas, 2023).

Contrary to earlier assumptions in traditional advertising, physical attractiveness is not a strong determinant of consumer behavior in PSR-driven contexts. While visual appeal may initially capture attention, it does not necessarily lead to deeper engagement or actual purchases. Instead, consumers increasingly prioritize authenticity, emotional connection, and perceived honesty over polished appearances (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Balakrishnan & Griffiths, 2017). As such, influencers who transparently share their experiences, values, and everyday struggles tend to foster deeper trust and greater purchase intention among followers. This shift reflects broader changes in consumer expectations, in which substance and sincerity outweigh aesthetic appeal, especially in digitally mediated interactions, where authenticity is a rare yet highly valued trait.

Parasocial Interaction & Identification

Social identification plays a critical role in the effectiveness of online advertising and consumer purchasing behavior. Croes and Bartels (2021) found that young adults are more inclined to follow influencers they perceive as relatable—whether for entertainment, information, or trend updates. Their study emphasizes that marketing strategies are more impactful when audiences share common values or lifestyles with influencers. Similarly, Arif et al. (2023) highlight the importance of parasocial relationships, concluding that consumers who form a strong personal bond with influencers are more likely to act on those influencers' recommendations, thereby influencing their purchasing decisions.

Self-Disclosure & Authenticity

In a study by Koay et al. (2023), titled *Instagram Influencer Marketing: Perceived Social Media Marketing Activities and Online Impulse Buying*, it was found that self-disclosure and authenticity also play crucial roles in building parasocial relationships. They identified that audiences perceive influencers as more “genuine” if they share personal experiences, emotions, or vulnerabilities with the public. It suggests that when PSRs are established with these factors, endorsements are more likely to influence consumers' purchase intentions. Furthermore, Chantokul and Chantamas (2023) affirmed that when influencers integrate marketing into their personal narratives, audiences are more likely to view these endorsements as credible and relevant. This study highlights that self-disclosure fosters self-brand connection and trust, further strengthening consumer loyalty.

Brand Congruence & Consistency

When influencers promote products that align closely with their established content and personal branding, they tend to exert greater influence on consumer behavior. Arif et al. (2023) emphasized that purchase intentions are significantly strengthened when there is consistency between an influencer's identity and the products they endorse. Their study revealed that consumers are more likely to trust and purchase from influencers who maintain a coherent brand partnership, suggesting that brand congruence enhances credibility and purchase motivation. In a similar vein, Koay et al. (2023) found that congruency between an influencer's content and the brands they promote plays a vital role in deepening parasocial relationships. When endorsements are perceived as a natural extension of the influencer's usual content or niche, audiences interpret these promotions as more authentic and trustworthy, thereby increasing the likelihood of purchase.

Collectively, these factors point to four key factors within parasocial relationships that significantly impact consumer purchasing behavior: influencer expertise and credibility, parasocial interaction and identification, self-disclosure and authenticity, and brand congruence and consistency. However, a notable gap remains in current scholarship. Much of the existing research focuses predominantly on Western consumers and is often confined to specific social media platforms. To address this gap, the present study examines these dynamics in a Southeast Asian context—specifically among Filipino Gen Z audiences—by investigating how parasocial factors shape purchase intentions across popular social media platforms.

Parasocial Relationships and Consumer Purchase Intentions

Parasocial relationships (PSRs) significantly influence consumer purchase intentions, particularly through social

media influencers. Lin et al. (2021) emphasize that trust built through parasocial interactions increases the likelihood that consumers will accept influencer recommendations. Similarly, Wahab and Tao (2019) found that young female consumers in China often make purchasing decisions based on emotional connections rather than traditional marketing, especially when influencers are perceived as relatable. Chen et al. (2021) add that influencers who self-disclose and appear knowledgeable foster stronger emotional attachments, which in turn encourage impulse purchases. Purwanto (2021) further argues that, beyond trust, factors such as envy and perceived aspiration also motivate purchase behavior, as consumers seek to emulate admired influencers.

These studies highlight that both cognitive (e.g., trust, expertise) and emotional (e.g., attachment, envy) factors drive the persuasive power of PSRs. While Lin et al. (2021) and Wahab and Tao (2019) emphasize trust and identification, Chen et al. (2021) and Purwanto (2021) stress emotional closeness and aspirational motivations. A shared conclusion is that PSRs foster familiarity with influencers, making consumers more receptive to their endorsements. However, gaps remain in understanding the long-term effects of PSRs, including brand loyalty and potential overdependence on influencer recommendations – areas that warrant further investigation.

The Role of Social Media in Strengthening PSRs

The rise of social media platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram has transformed how individuals connect, giving rise to parasocial relationships (PSRs). Lacap et al. (2024) highlight that social media interactions significantly enhance self-disclosure, enabling influencers to shape their public image and build personal connections through content like vlogs and updates. This shift has redefined brand-consumer relationships, particularly on platforms such as TikTok, which had over 1.5 billion global users and 62.3 million Filipino users in early 2025 (Balita, 2025).

Social media facilitates PSRs by enabling influencers to share relatable content consistently and engage with followers, thereby fostering familiarity and trust (Castillo & Fernández, 2019). Interactive features, such as live streams and Q&As on Instagram, enhance intimacy and reduce the one-sided nature of PSRs (Koay et al., 2021). Shrivastava et al. (2022) report that more frequent engagement increases purchase intentions, whereas Arshad et al. (2023) note that repeated exposure strengthens emotional comfort among teen users. Taher et al. (2022) further emphasize that consistent content and direct engagement boost trust and positively link influencer reputation with consumer purchasing behavior. Overall, the functionality and design of social media platforms not only promote brand visibility but also foster personal connections that significantly influence consumer decisions. Influencers, through consistent and authentic content, become key drivers of consumer trust, loyalty, and impulse purchasing.

Marketing Strategies Utilizing PSRs

With the growing dominance of social media and content creators, a new form of marketing has emerged—one that leverages influencers' fan bases and digital platforms to reach audiences. In Lithuania, Černikovaitė (2018) found that although peer reviews remain influential, younger consumers are increasingly influenced by fashion and cosmetics influencers. Similarly, Shen et al. (2022) showed that self-congruity and emotional engagement with livestreaming hosts enhance parasocial interactions (PSIs), which in turn increase purchase intentions. Emotional engagement serves as a key mediator in this process.

Mishra and Ashfaq (2023) emphasize that message credibility, authenticity, and influencer trustworthiness are central to gaining consumer trust. In Thailand, Chantokul and Chantamas (2023) revealed that PSRs with celebrity YouTubers significantly affect purchase decisions, with brand trust and self-brand connection as mediators. Raymond et al. (2021) also confirmed the influence of PSR-related factors on the buying behavior of TikTok users in the food and beverage industry. Overall, studies across contexts confirm that influencers shape consumer behavior through strategies that foster emotional engagement and trust. From fashion to food, influencer marketing has become a widely adopted and effective brand strategy.

This literature review synthesizes findings demonstrating that PSRs strongly influence the purchasing decisions of Generation Z, particularly through social media. As digital natives, Gen Z tends to form deep, emotionally engaging parasocial bonds with influencers, which often mirror real-life friendships. Despite their enthusiasm, they remain critically aware, responding most to influencers who demonstrate expertise, authenticity, social identification, self-disclosure, and brand consistency. However, a significant gap remains in Southeast Asian research, particularly in the Philippines. While existing local studies have focused on specific fan cultures, such as

K-pop or TV series, there is limited exploration of how PSRs affect Gen Z's broader consumer behavior. Given the prevalence of "budol culture" in the Philippines—where impulsive buying is often driven by influencer promotion—further research is needed. This review recommends that brands targeting Filipino Gen Z audiences prioritize strategies rooted in self-congruity, authenticity, and trust to maximize the effectiveness of influencer marketing.

Theoretical Framework

Parasocial Interaction (PSI) Theory, developed by Horton and Wohl (1956), explains how audiences form one-sided yet emotionally meaningful relationships with media figures. In the era of social media, this theory has gained renewed relevance, particularly for Generation Z—individuals who have grown up in a digital environment saturated with influencers on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. Gen Z often perceives influencers as relatable friends rather than distant celebrities due to their consistent presence, personal storytelling, and perceived emotional transparency. These characteristics foster strong parasocial bonds, wherein followers feel emotionally connected despite the absence of real interaction.

For Gen Z, parasocial relationships significantly shape how they interpret and respond to influencer content, particularly in the context of consumer behavior. Influencers who share their personal lives authentically and align brand promotions with their individual identity tend to be more persuasive. These emotional connections foster trust and reduce resistance to marketing, thereby increasing the likelihood that Gen Z will act on recommendations. While PSI was initially viewed as a one-way interaction, modern social media tools enhance the illusion of reciprocity, deepening engagement. Thus, PSI Theory not only provides insight into Gen Z's psychological attachment to influencers but also explains their increased likelihood of purchasing endorsed products, owing to the emotional trust built through these perceived relationships.

Statement of the Problem

This study examines how parasocial relationships (PSRs) influence consumer purchase intentions and identifies the key factors that drive this effect. It also aims to provide insights for marketers on how to optimize these factors to enhance marketing strategies.

1. How do parasocial relationships (PSRs) influence consumer purchase intentions of Gen Z?
2. What factors of parasocial relationships (e.g., influencer expertise and credibility, social identification, self-disclosure and authenticity, and brand congruence and consistency) impact their purchase intentions?
3. How can marketers assess and optimize these factors to develop effective strategies for this demographic?

Methodology

A literature review was the primary method used to address the problem statement in a study examining how parasocial relationships (PSRs) influence Generation Z consumers' purchase intentions in the context of social media and influencer marketing. This approach enabled the researcher to synthesize existing knowledge, identify patterns and contradictions in current findings, and highlight gaps in the literature—without requiring primary data collection. In this study, a literature review comprehensively addressed the research questions by drawing on peer-reviewed journal articles, empirical studies, market reports, and theoretical contributions related to PSRs, Gen Z behavior, influencer marketing, and digital consumer psychology.

The literature review provided a comprehensive overview of how PSRs affect Generation Z's purchasing behavior and the factors that drive this effect. It included discussions of psychological mechanisms such as emotional attachment, trust, self-disclosure, and social identification, which previous studies have shown to affect consumer behavior significantly (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Labrecque, 2014; Lin et al., 2021). It also examined marketing strategies that leverage these parasocial connections, particularly those using platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, where interactivity and authenticity are crucial (Koay, Teok, & Soh, 2021; Castillo & Fernández, 2019).

Through a synthesis of global and regional studies, the review identified how influencer credibility, perceived similarity, and consistent self-presentation contribute to consumer trust and impulse buying, particularly in live-stream commerce and digital brand endorsements (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Mardhiana, 2024; Purwanto, 2021). Additionally, the review paid particular attention to the Southeast Asian and Philippine context, where "budol culture"—a term for impulsive, influencer-driven purchases—reflects the growing influence of PSRs on Filipino consumers (Vero ASEAN, 2023; Ascue et al., 2023).

The literature review also explored challenges such as audience skepticism, over-reliance on influencer recommendations, and emerging concerns over authenticity, highlighting the need for more localized, demographic-specific research (Koay et al., 2023; Wahab & Tao, 2019). Finally, a comparative analysis of findings from various cultural contexts, including China, Thailand, and Lithuania, provided a broader understanding of how PSRs operate differently across regions, offering insights for both scholars and marketers targeting Gen Z in the Philippines and beyond (Černikovaite, 2019; Chantokul & Chantamas, 2023; Yuan et al., 2020). Overall, the literature review effectively synthesized current evidence and theoretical insights, comprehensively addressing the research questions and contributing to a deeper understanding of how parasocial relationships shape Generation Z's consumer behavior without requiring primary data collection.

Results and Discussion

How do Parasocial Relationships (PSRs) influence consumer purchase intentions of Gen Z?

The impact of parasocial relationships (PSRs) on Generation Z's consumer behavior is both profound and multidimensional, shaped by the generation's inherent familiarity with digital platforms and their emotional responsiveness to online content. As digital natives, Gen Z individuals are continuously exposed to a wide range of influencer-generated content across platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, resulting in the gradual formation of emotional bonds with these media figures. These bonds, while one-sided, often mimic the intimacy and dynamics of real-life friendships (Yuan & Lou, 2019; Koay et al., 2021).

Research suggests that these relationships significantly influence purchase intentions, especially in environments where interaction is encouraged through comments, livestreams, and direct messaging. For instance, live shopping sessions on platforms such as TikTok foster real-time interaction, thereby increasing emotional investment and impulsive purchasing (Chen et al., 2021). Influencers become trusted figures whose opinions are perceived as authentic and reliable, thereby reducing consumers' cognitive resistance to marketing messages. This dynamic has been particularly observed in Filipino Gen Z, where the local phenomenon of "budol culture"—a term referring to impulse buying triggered by persuasive social media content—serves as a testament to PSRs' capacity to affect purchasing decisions (Arshad et al., 2023).

In the Philippine context, the use of culturally resonant content further strengthens PSRs, where influencers who integrate local language, humor, or traditions into their narratives evoke a stronger sense of kinship among viewers. Consequently, such emotional proximity leads to greater consumer trust and purchase behavior, underscoring the pivotal role of PSRs in shaping this demographic's commercial decisions (Balita, 2025; Lacap et al., 2024). The formation of parasocial relationships is grounded in repeated exposure to influencers, consistent messaging, and these personalities' ability to convey relatability. Lou and Kim (2019) explain that PSRs evolve from parasocial interactions (PSIs) that begin as one-off engagements and develop into long-term emotional attachments through continual engagement. This process is further reinforced when influencers share personal stories, respond to audience comments, and maintain a consistent presence, allowing followers to feel as though they "know" the influencer intimately.

Trust plays a central role in this dynamic. Influencers perceived as authentic, honest, and knowledgeable are more likely to sway their followers' buying decisions. According to Lin et al. (2021), trust mediates the relationship between parasocial interaction and purchase intention. As trust increases, so does the likelihood that a follower will act upon a recommendation, particularly when the product or service aligns with the influencer's established persona. This becomes even more salient in a collectivist culture such as the Philippines, where community-based decisions and relational cues heavily influence consumer behavior. Moreover, the emotional investment involved in PSRs makes Gen Z more susceptible to impulse buying. Chen et al. (2021) found that when influencers openly share their experiences and demonstrate product use, followers feel a stronger connection that can override rational decision-making processes. Impulse buying becomes an emotional response rather than a calculated one, as consumers seek to emulate or support the influencer. Koay et al. (2021) further illustrate how PSRs can lead to habitual engagement and recurring purchase behavior. Gen Z consumers who feel emotionally close to influencers are not only more likely to buy endorsed products but also to share and advocate for them within their social networks. This phenomenon leads to a self-reinforcing cycle in which PSRs become self-reinforcing: emotional closeness leads to purchases, which strengthen trust, which in turn deepens the relationship.

Social identification also plays a vital role in PSRs. Croes and Bartels (2021) found that Gen Z individuals are more

likely to follow influencers they perceive as similar to them in terms of values, lifestyle, or background. This identification enhances the influencer's persuasiveness, as followers view them not as distant celebrities but as peers or aspirational versions of themselves. The relatability factor is especially crucial for Gen Z, who are often skeptical of overt advertising and prefer subtle, value-driven marketing. Self-disclosure by influencers is another key element in the development of PSRs. Koay et al. (2023) note that influencers who reveal aspects of their personal life—including struggles, vulnerabilities, and everyday experiences—are perceived as more genuine. This authenticity fosters deeper emotional connections, encouraging followers to trust and act on their endorsements. In the Filipino context, where authenticity and "pakikisama" (camaraderie) are culturally valued, such openness enhances the effectiveness of marketing strategies.

The phenomenon of budol culture in the Philippines exemplifies how PSRs translate into real-world consumer behavior. Budol culture thrives on emotional persuasion, collective participation, and a sense of shared experience. Filipino influencers often use humor, relatability, and storytelling to present products in a way that feels organic rather than promotional. The communal nature of budol transactions, usually characterized by viewers commenting "nabudol na naman ako" ("I got convinced to buy again"), reinforces the social validation of impulse purchases driven by PSRs (Arshad et al., 2023).

Additionally, the role of social media platforms in facilitating PSRs cannot be overstated. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube offer interactive features, including comments, likes, live streams, and direct messaging, that enable followers to engage with influencers on a personal level. These features simulate interpersonal communication, making the influencer-follower relationship feel more reciprocal (Shrivastava et al., 2022). Despite the positive implications of PSRs for marketing, there are concerns about their ethical dimensions and long-term effects. Purwanto (2021) argues that while trust is essential, influencers must balance authenticity with responsibility. Overreliance on PSRs can lead to consumer vulnerability, particularly among younger audiences, who may struggle to distinguish genuine endorsements from paid promotions.

Nonetheless, when leveraged ethically and thoughtfully, PSRs offer powerful opportunities for brands to connect with Gen Z. By aligning influencer partnerships with shared values, maintaining transparency, and encouraging authentic storytelling, brands can foster trust and loyalty. The sustained engagement enabled by PSRs ensures that influencers are not merely advertising channels but emotional touchpoints within Gen Z's digital ecosystem. In summary, parasocial relationships significantly influence Generation Z consumers' purchase intentions, particularly in the Philippine context. Rooted in emotional closeness, perceived authenticity, and interactive engagement, these one-sided yet impactful relationships shape not only what Gen Z buys but how they perceive brands and products. As digital platforms continue to evolve, the strategic use of PSRs will remain a cornerstone of effective influencer marketing for this emotionally connected, critically aware generation.

What factors of Parasocial Relationships (e.g., influencer expertise and credibility, social identification, self-disclosure and authenticity, and brand congruence and consistency) impact their purchase intentions?

The relationship between parasocial interactions and consumer purchase behavior is shaped by several interlocking factors, especially among Generation Z. This generation, known for its deep immersion in digital environments and social media ecosystems, develops nuanced emotional attachments to influencers through continuous exposure and perceived intimacy. The psychological framework of parasocial relationships (PSRs), while inherently one-sided, is rich in emotional engagement and often mirrors real-life social connections. Within this context, four central factors consistently emerge in literature as critical to influencing Gen Z's purchasing intentions: influencer expertise and credibility, social identification, self-disclosure and authenticity, and brand congruence and consistency.

Influencer Expertise and Credibility

A foundational element shaping the effectiveness of influencer marketing within parasocial relationships is the influencer's perceived expertise and credibility. When audiences believe that an influencer possesses relevant knowledge or authentic experience, their opinions tend to carry more weight in consumer decision-making. According to Hwang and Zhang (2018), influencer credibility—rooted in trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness—has a significant effect on followers' attitudes and behavioral intentions. Notably, among these traits, knowledge and trustworthiness are far more influential than mere physical appeal. When influencers demonstrate a genuine understanding of the products they endorse, they are perceived as more credible, thereby increasing the likelihood of purchase among followers.

Further supporting this, Lou and Kim (2019) found that message credibility is closely tied to the perceived congruence between the influencer's persona and the content they produce. Audiences are more likely to trust influencers who remain consistent with their personal brand and communicate sincerely. This is especially relevant in the Philippine context, where Generation Z consumers tend to be highly engaged but discerning, often seeking authenticity in the personalities they follow. Thus, when influencers maintain a consistent and transparent approach in their product endorsements, they not only strengthen parasocial bonds but also reduce followers' resistance to marketing persuasion. In essence, credibility serves as the bridge linking emotional attachment to actual consumer behavior, making it a vital factor in shaping purchase intentions within digital communities.

Social Identification

The second factor, social identification, plays a significant role in fostering strong PSRs and ultimately drives consumer behavior. Social identification refers to the process by which individuals define themselves through affiliation with a group or persona with whom they share values, beliefs, or lifestyles. Croes and Bartels (2021) found that the strength of PSRs increases when consumers feel a sense of identification with the influencer. This emotional and psychological connection enables influencers to transcend their role as entertainers or content creators and become quasi-peers or aspirational figures.

Among Gen Z, who often seek meaning and community online, the sense of "I see myself in them" is a key driver of purchasing behavior. This identification is especially potent when influencers represent subcultures or lifestyle niches—be it minimalist fashion, veganism, or tech-savvy entrepreneurship—that resonate with specific Gen Z cohorts. In such cases, buying a product is not merely about consumption but becomes an act of cultural or personal expression, deepening the parasocial bond and reinforcing brand loyalty.

Self-Disclosure and Authenticity

Another key factor that fortifies parasocial relationships and boosts purchase intention is self-disclosure and authenticity. Koay et al. (2023) demonstrated in their study on Instagram influencer marketing that influencers who frequently share personal stories, emotions, and everyday struggles create a stronger sense of authenticity. This sense of "realness" enhances emotional closeness between the influencer and their audience, thereby increasing the likelihood that followers will trust and act on product recommendations.

This is further supported by Chantokul and Chantamas (2023), who revealed that influencers who embed product endorsements within personal narratives or life stories foster stronger emotional bonds. For instance, when an influencer discusses a skincare brand in the context of their struggle with acne, followers are more likely to perceive the endorsement as genuine rather than transactional. In the Filipino context, authenticity is deeply valued, particularly in online spaces that often foster exaggerated personas. Influencers who maintain a consistent tone, disclose paid partnerships, and openly discuss product limitations are perceived as more trustworthy, which in turn drives stronger purchase intentions. Moreover, self-disclosure often reduces perceived distance between the influencer and their followers, thereby intensifying the illusion of friendship or mutual understanding. This feeling of closeness fosters emotional investment, making product endorsements feel more like a friend's recommendation than a marketing ploy.

Brand Congruence and Consistency

The final—and increasingly recognized—factor is brand congruence and consistency—the alignment between an influencer's persona and the brands they endorse. According to Arif et al. (2023), influencers who consistently promote products that align with their known values and content niche are more effective in driving consumer action. This congruence reassures followers that the influencer is not simply capitalizing on their trust for monetary gain but is endorsing something they genuinely believe in. Koay et al. (2023) also support this, noting that when there is an intense match between the influencer's established identity and the endorsed product, the PSR is enhanced. For example, a well-known fitness influencer promoting sports supplements is perceived as far more credible than the same influencer endorsing unrelated tech gadgets. Consistency across branding, messaging, and personal values increases the perceived authenticity of the endorsement, thereby fostering deeper trust. In the Philippine digital landscape, this factor resonates strongly. Filipino Gen Z consumers are particularly perceptive of insincere promotions, and inconsistencies in branding often lead to negative commentary and loss of credibility. When influencers are selective with partnerships, maintain long-term brand associations, and articulate how the product aligns with their personal values, they are more likely to drive favorable consumer

outcomes.

Interconnected Dynamics and Cultural Relevance

While each of these four factors—credibility, social identification, authenticity, and brand congruence—can independently influence purchase intentions, their true strength lies in their interconnectedness. A credible influencer who is also authentic and shares relatable values forms the ideal composite for Gen Z marketing. These characteristics collectively foster strong parasocial relationships, which in turn translate into measurable consumer behaviors such as impulse buying, brand advocacy, and long-term loyalty.

Cultural relevance further amplifies the impact of these factors. In the Philippines, the prevalence of “budol” culture—wherein consumers are humorously aware of being easily swayed into purchases by influencers—illustrates a complex blend of skepticism and emotional susceptibility. Filipino Gen Z followers often approach influencer marketing with a mix of humor, critique, and genuine interest, indicating that these factors must work together to overcome consumer defenses and inspire real action (Balita, 2025; Lacap et al., 2024).

In conclusion, the impact of parasocial relationships on Gen Z’s consumer purchase intentions is driven by four major interrelated factors: influencer expertise and credibility, social identification, self-disclosure and authenticity, and brand congruence and consistency. These factors, individually and collectively, serve as crucial mechanisms that convert passive media consumption into active consumer behavior. In the Filipino market, where emotional resonance, humor, and authenticity play critical roles, marketers must pay close attention to these elements to effectively engage Gen Z audiences. By fostering trust, relatability, and consistency, influencers can cultivate enduring parasocial bonds that drive meaningful and lasting consumer engagement.

How can marketers assess and optimize these factors to develop effective strategies for this demographic?

In the age of social media and digitally mediated identities, parasocial relationships (PSRs) have emerged as a powerful tool for influencing consumer behavior, particularly among Generation Z. Born into a world where digital content is both ubiquitous and interactive, Gen Z navigates social platforms not only to consume entertainment or information but also to establish emotional bonds with influencers. These one-sided, yet psychologically potent, parasocial connections increasingly shape how this demographic makes purchasing decisions. As such, for marketers targeting Gen Z—especially in culturally dynamic environments such as the Philippines—it is essential to strategically assess and optimize the key PSR-related factors that influence consumer behavior. To effectively engage Gen Z audiences, marketers must move beyond traditional advertising models and instead adopt data-driven, empathy-informed strategies that recognize the importance of emotional connectivity, authenticity, and interactive engagement. This can be achieved through six core practices: measuring engagement, gathering direct feedback, partnering with the right influencers, encouraging consistent storytelling, fostering interactive engagements, and focusing on long-term partnerships.

Measuring Engagement Through Social Media Metrics

One of the most immediate and scalable ways for marketers to evaluate PSR effectiveness is by analyzing real-time engagement metrics across social media platforms. Unlike vanity metrics such as follower counts, deeper indicators—such as likes, comments, shares, watch time, and story interactions—offer valuable insights into how Gen Z audiences emotionally respond to influencer content (Shrivastava et al., 2022). For instance, high comment volumes may indicate not only active attention but also a willingness to engage in dialogue, a key marker of perceived intimacy and trust. In the Filipino context, where digital communication is often vibrant and emotionally expressive, the nature of engagement (e.g., humorous replies, “budol” confessions, or tagged friends) also signals cultural relevance. By identifying patterns in these interactions, marketers can distinguish between influencers who merely entertain and those who successfully cultivate long-term emotional resonance—a crucial distinction when building brand loyalty through PSRs.

Gathering Direct Feedback from Gen Z Audiences

Quantitative metrics are invaluable, but qualitative insights must complement them. Marketers should actively seek out the voices of their target audience through focus groups, surveys, or social listening. These methods provide a nuanced understanding of what Gen Z values most in their parasocial connections. In the Philippines, exploring locally specific behaviors, such as the “budol culture”—a lighthearted term for impulse buying triggered by online persuasion—can help marketers understand how emotions, humor, and peer validation influence consumer decision-making (Balita, 2025). Such cultural insights can inform the design of emotionally resonant

campaigns and refine influencer selection to align with the expectations of Filipino Gen Z consumers. Moreover, open-ended feedback enables marketers to assess the extent to which key PSR drivers, such as authenticity, credibility, and social identification, are present in their campaigns. These drivers, when measured qualitatively, often reveal the underlying reasons why an influencer's message resonates—or fails to resonate—with their audience.

Partnering with the Right Influencers

The effectiveness of any PSR-driven campaign hinges on the strategic selection of influencers who possess not only credibility and reach but also cultural authenticity and emotional intelligence. In the Philippine market, successful influencers often reflect the linguistic and social nuances of their followers. Those who speak in colloquial Filipino or Taglish (a mix of Tagalog and English), use regional humor, or reference shared local experiences are perceived as more relatable and trustworthy. This level of authenticity enhances emotional proximity and strengthens parasocial bonds (Koay et al., 2023). Therefore, marketers must look beyond numerical popularity and consider the influencer's persona-audience fit. An influencer who appears "too polished" or excessively commercial may elicit skepticism, especially among Gen Z, who value transparency and reject traditional advertising tropes. Instead, marketers should prioritize voices that resonate with niche communities—whether K-pop fandoms, sustainable fashion advocates, or academic achievers—as these influencers can foster deeper identification and emotional engagement.

Encouraging Consistent Storytelling

To deepen the sense of intimacy in PSRs, marketers should work closely with influencers to integrate brand messaging into personal narratives. Unlike traditional product placements, which may feel forced or inauthentic, storytelling provides a natural context for product use and enhances the credibility of the endorsement. For example, a Filipino lifestyle influencer might introduce a skincare brand by sharing their personal journey dealing with acne in the country's humid climate. This approach not only makes the product relatable but also taps into emotional empathy, a powerful trigger for Gen Z consumers. Koay et al. (2023) emphasize that storytelling rooted in vulnerability and realism significantly boosts the emotional impact of marketing content. Moreover, when product recommendations are woven into the fabric of the influencer's everyday life, they appear more like organic experiences rather than sales pitches. This strengthens the parasocial dynamic by reinforcing the perception that the influencer is genuinely sharing advice rather than merely promoting for financial gain.

Fostering Interactive Engagements

Another vital strategy is promoting interactivity within the influencer's content. Parasocial relationships flourish when followers feel acknowledged and included in the conversation. Features such as live Q&A Sessions, interactive polls, comment replies, and Instagram Stories with reaction options enable audiences to participate in the influencer's digital life, even if only in small ways. These micro-interactions contribute to a feeling of reciprocity, which is central to sustaining emotional bonds (Shrivastava et al., 2022). Interactive engagement is particularly effective among Filipino Gen Z, who tend to be highly expressive and community-driven in their online behavior. Influencers who frequently respond to comments, ask for viewer input, or even feature follower-generated content can foster a stronger sense of "belonging" in their audience. Marketers should leverage these tools to facilitate real-time interaction between influencers and followers, thereby enhancing a feeling of closeness and increasing purchase intention.

Focusing on Long-Term Partnerships

Finally, marketers should prioritize long-term collaborations over one-off influencer deals. Sustained partnerships offer multiple advantages: they foster brand consistency, deepen influencer-brand alignment, and allow followers to build lasting associations between the influencer and the product. Over time, this consistency nurtures trust and reinforces the brand's place within the consumer's lifestyle. In cultures such as the Philippines, where loyalty and emotional memory play central roles in brand attachment, long-term relationships between influencers and brands are more deeply rooted. For example, when an influencer repeatedly promotes the same skincare or food product over several months, followers are more likely to perceive it as compelling and authentic. As Lacap et al. (2024) argue, repetition, combined with emotional storytelling, can transform a product from a commodity into a trusted part of consumers' identities.

In sum, optimizing parasocial relationship factors for effective Gen Z marketing requires a multifaceted and culturally sensitive approach. By analyzing social media engagement, seeking direct feedback, choosing culturally

relevant influencers, emphasizing authentic storytelling, encouraging interactive experiences, and building long-term partnerships, marketers can craft campaigns that resonate emotionally, align with Gen Z's digital behavior, and drive meaningful consumer actions. As the digital and cultural landscapes continue to evolve, particularly in vibrant markets such as the Philippines, it is increasingly essential for marketers to recognize that parasocial dynamics are not merely psychological curiosities—they are foundational elements of modern brand strategy. By aligning marketing efforts with the emotional and relational patterns that define Gen Z's digital lives, brands can position themselves not just as products, but as trusted companions in the journey of identity, expression, and community.

Conclusion

The growing relevance of parasocial relationships (PSRs) in influencing Generation Z's purchasing behavior carries significant implications for marketers and educators in the Philippines. As the boundaries between media consumption and consumerism continue to blur, understanding the mechanisms of PSRs is crucial, especially in a country such as the Philippines, where digital connectivity, emotional expressiveness, and strong social media engagement are cultural hallmarks. This study contributes to that understanding by examining the influential factors of PSRs and how they can be optimized to develop effective marketing strategies targeting Filipino Gen Z consumers.

First, the role of influencer credibility and perceived expertise in strengthening PSRs has clear implications for brand strategy in the Philippine digital economy. As Filipino Gen Z audiences frequently rely on online personalities for lifestyle advice, beauty recommendations, and product reviews, influencers who are perceived as knowledgeable and trustworthy exert substantial persuasive power. This is especially evident in sectors such as fashion, beauty, and technology, where perceived expertise confers authority. Brands operating in the Philippines should therefore prioritize partnerships with influencers whose credibility is rooted not only in fame but in demonstrable experience, product knowledge, and authenticity (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Farahdiba, 2022).

Furthermore, the social identification factor resonates deeply within Filipino cultural values, particularly *pakikisama* (companionship) and *kapwa* (shared identity). Filipino Gen Z consumers are more likely to engage with influencers they perceive as relatable—those who reflect their lifestyle, struggles, humor, and values. For instance, influencers who share “real talk” moments about financial struggles, body positivity, or mental health create a perception of shared experience that mirrors authentic friendship. This emotional connection, in turn, drives consumer behavior, including product trials and repeat purchases. Marketers can harness this tendency by promoting campaigns that highlight relatability over perfection, using storytelling that mirrors the lived realities of Gen Z audiences in urban and provincial settings alike (Croes & Bartels, 2021).

Another key implication stems from the importance of self-disclosure and authenticity in sustaining parasocial bonds. Filipino Gen Z audiences, like their counterparts worldwide, are adept at detecting inauthentic content. Influencers who openly share personal narratives, struggles, or failures appear more “human” and trustworthy, strengthening the parasocial connection and lowering the resistance to product endorsements. For example, a beauty influencer who candidly shares the ups and downs of their skincare journey is more likely to foster purchase intent than one who only showcases curated success. Philippine-based marketers should encourage influencers to share sincere, unscripted content that emphasizes personal experience with a product or service rather than polished advertisements (Koay et al., 2023; Chantokul & Chantamas, 2023).

The concept of brand congruence—how well a product aligns with an influencer's image and values—also holds critical weight in the Filipino context. Filipino consumers are quick to notice mismatched endorsements, especially when influencers promote products that are incongruent with their usual persona or lifestyle. This can weaken trust and diminish the effectiveness of marketing. Thus, marketers should carefully evaluate whether an influencer's values, tone, and audience align with their brand. For example, partnering with a sustainability-focused influencer for an eco-friendly product launch is more strategic than selecting a generic celebrity endorsement. Such congruence enhances authenticity, which is central to successful PSR-based persuasion (Arif et al., 2023; Koay et al., 2023).

Additionally, this study highlights the decisive role of local culture in shaping PSRs, particularly the phenomenon of *budol* culture in the Philippines. This term, often used humorously to describe the impulsive purchasing of products recommended by influencers, is a uniquely Filipino expression of social commerce. It reflects how

persuasive social media endorsements can override rational decision-making, especially when presented by influencers perceived as close or trustworthy. Marketers can tap into this cultural nuance by developing relatable and localized campaigns that use humor, colloquial language, and Filipino references. The emotionality embedded in budol culture—whether it is the thrill of a bargain or the desire not to be left out—can be transformed into an engine of effective marketing, if handled ethically and with consumer well-being in mind (Arshad et al., 2023).

Another implication of this study is the opportunity to use digital metrics and data-driven insights to assess and refine PSR-based strategies. In the Philippine digital landscape, where social media is deeply embedded in daily life, marketers can track metrics such as comment sentiment, direct message interactions, and content shares to measure emotional engagement. High levels of interaction indicate strong parasocial bonds and can signal when an influencer is particularly effective at driving brand-related behavior. Filipino marketers can also utilize focus groups and surveys to gain deeper insights into what traits their audiences value in influencers—such as *makatao* (empathetic), *madiskarte* (resourceful), or *makulit* (playfully persistent)—and align these traits with brand positioning (Shrivastava et al., 2022).

Equally important is the need to foster long-term partnerships between brands and influencers. This study shows that sustained collaboration deepens parasocial ties and builds trust over time. In the Philippines, where relationships are often perceived as ongoing and evolving rather than transactional, such consistency enhances brand loyalty. When an influencer repeatedly showcases a product over months—integrating it into their daily routine or lifestyle content—the endorsement becomes more believable. Filipino consumers begin to associate the brand with the influencer’s identity, thereby reinforcing purchase intention and encouraging repeat purchases.

Moreover, encouraging interactive engagement between influencers and followers is crucial for strengthening parasocial dynamics. Filipino Gen Z consumers value social reciprocity, and influencers who respond to comments, conduct live sessions, and mention followers by name foster a stronger sense of community. These interactions humanize the influencer and reinforce the illusion of friendship, a key element of PSRs. Brands should encourage influencers to use interactive features, such as polls, Q&A stickers, and giveaways, to foster greater involvement. In a culture that values personal connection and emotional resonance, such efforts can significantly amplify the influence of endorsements.

Finally, this study highlights the importance of ethical marketing practices in the context of PSRs. Because Gen Z’s trust in influencers can make them particularly vulnerable to manipulation, marketers have a responsibility to promote transparency and honesty. In the Philippines, where regulations on influencer marketing are still developing, there is a need for more straightforward guidelines on product sponsorships, affiliate links, and paid partnerships. Influencers and brands alike must ensure that audiences are informed when content is sponsored and avoid misleading claims. Doing so not only protects consumers but also strengthens trust—an essential ingredient in any parasocial bond.

The dynamics of parasocial relationships provide a robust framework for understanding and shaping the behavior of Filipino Gen Z consumers. The study’s findings suggest that influencer credibility, relatability, authenticity, brand congruence, and cultural alignment are critical factors in forming strong PSRs that influence purchase decisions. For Philippine marketers, these insights underscore the need to select culturally resonant influencers, promote genuine storytelling, engage audiences interactively, and uphold ethical practices. By doing so, brands can develop emotionally intelligent strategies that not only boost sales but also foster long-term loyalty among Gen Z consumers in the Philippines.

Contributions of Authors

Author 1: conceptualization, team lead, integration of theoretical concepts
Author 2: monitor the complete drafting and final synthesis of the review
Author 3: conducted the comprehensive literature search on PSRs
Author 4: provided contextual insights
Author 5: applied findings to marketing strategies
Author 6: research adviser

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