



I-SMART

*International Seminar and Conference
on Management, Research, and Transformation*

THE INFLUENCE OF TIKTOK INFLUENCER CREDIBILITY ON PURCHASE INTENTION: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF EWOM AND VICARIOUS EXPRESSION

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Abstract. In today's digital landscape, TikTok has become one of the most influential platforms shaping how consumers interact with brands and influencers. This study aims to examine the effect of TikTok influencer credibility on purchase intention, emphasizing the mediating roles of vicarious expression and electronic word of mouth (eWOM). As emotional closeness and parasocial relationships between audiences and influencers continue to strengthen, understanding the psychological mechanisms that drive consumer purchasing behavior on social media becomes increasingly important. A quantitative research approach was employed using a survey method involving 250 Generation Z respondents in Indonesia who actively follow TikTok influencers promoting products. Respondents were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring they had prior exposure to influencer marketing content. The collected data were analyzed using Covariance-Based Structural Equation Modeling (CB-SEM) to test the hypothesized relationships among variables and assess the overall model fit. The findings reveal that influencer credibility has a positive and significant effect on purchase intention. Moreover, both vicarious expression and eWOM significantly mediate this relationship. When audiences perceive influencers as credible based on their trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness they tend to experience emotional involvement through vicarious expression and are more likely to spread positive eWOM. These behaviors collectively enhance consumers' purchase intentions toward the products recommended by influencers. This study contributes to the social media marketing literature by highlighting the psychological and communicative pathways that connect influencer credibility to consumer purchase behavior. Practically, the results provide insights for marketers to develop authentic, credible, and emotionally engaging influencer strategies on TikTok.

Keywords; Influencer Credibility, Vicarious Expression, eWOM, Purchase Intention, Social Media Marketing, Z Generation

1. Introduction

In today's digital era, TikTok has grown to become one of the most influential social media platforms with a very rapid growth of users (Rejeb et al., 2024). Through its unique algorithm and engaging short video format, the platform is not only an entertainment space, but also a strategic channel for marketers to reach young audiences through authentic and emotional content (Chen et al., 2024). This development is changing the way consumers interact with brands, where influencers play the role of key communicators who build closeness and trust through their credibility (Kaur, 2025). Influencer credibility, which includes aspects of expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness, plays an important role in determining the effectiveness of promotional messages (Liu & Zheng, 2024). High credibility can be stimulating *vicarious expression*, which is the tendency of the audience to imitate or express the emotions shown by influencers, thereby strengthening emotional connections and encouraging organic communication on social media in the form of *electronic word of mouth* (eWOM) (Holiday et al., 2023). This social mechanism ultimately increases *purchase intention*,

namely the tendency of consumers to make purchases after being exposed to the social and emotional influence of influencer content (Chen & Dermawan, 2020). However, despite the influence of influencers on *purchase intention*

Much studied, most research still focuses on the direct relationship between influencer credibility and purchase intent without considering the role of mediation *vicarious expression* and communication between consumers through *eWOM*. In addition, previous research has tended to emphasize rational aspects such as beliefs and value perceptions, while the emotional and social mechanisms formed through parasocial interactions have not been widely explored. Only a few studies have examined how influencer-driven emotional expression is transmitted among audiences and influences collective consumer behavior. The interaction between eWOM and vicarious expression as dual mediators in the context of short-video platforms like TikTok remains insufficiently investigated. This theoretical and empirical gap demonstrates the need for research that integrates *influencer credibility*, *vicarious expression* and *electronic word of mouth* as the main determinant of shaping *purchase intention* in modern social media ecosystems like TikTok.

2. Method

This study uses a quantitative approach with a survey method to test the causal relationship between variables that have been established in the research model. This approach was chosen because it allows for an objective measurement of consumer perceptions and behaviors in the context of using TikTok as a digital marketing medium. Quantitative research is considered appropriate to test the influence of *influencer credibility* on *purchase intention* with the mediating role of *vicarious expression* and *electronic word of mouth (eWOM)* through inferential statistical analysis based on structural equation (SEM) model.

The population in this study is Generation Z in Indonesia who actively use TikTok and follow influencers who promote certain products. The number of samples used was 250 respondents, determined using the purposive sampling technique with the following criteria: (1) active TikTok users aged 18–26 years, (2) following at least one influencer who promotes products, and (3) having watched product promotion content presented by the influencer. The selection of this method aims to ensure that respondents truly represent a group of users who have direct experience with *influencer marketing activities* on TikTok.

To minimize potential bias from online respondents, the researcher conducted a screening process that automatically filtered out individuals who did not meet the sampling criteria. Responses that appeared inconsistent, incomplete, or showed patterns of careless answering were removed during data cleaning to ensure the validity and reliability of the dataset.

The Influence of Tiktok Influencer Credibility on Purchase Intention: The Mediating Role of Ewom and Vicarious Expression

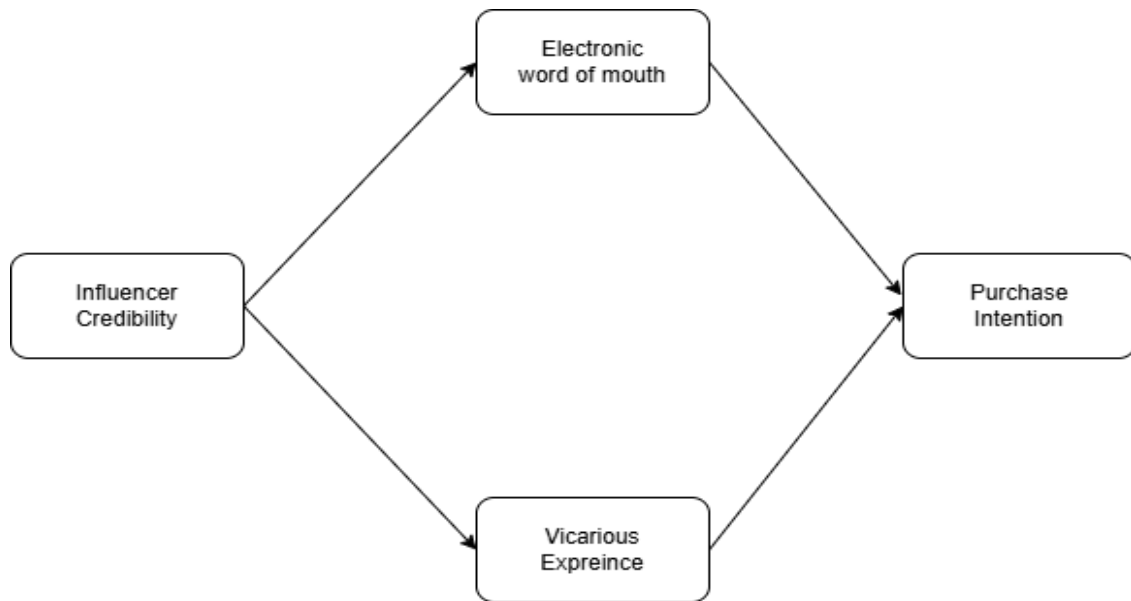


Fig 1. Conceptual Framework

3. Result And Discussion

3.1 Result

This study succeeded in collecting data from 250 respondents who met all the inclusion criteria that had been set. All participants confirmed that they were active users of the Tiktok platform and had been influencers who brought product promotions on the platform. Data collection was carried out through an online survey and all respondents expressed their willingness to participate voluntarily. The demographic profile of the respondents on which the analysis is based in this study is presented in detail in Table 1

Tabel 1. Characteristic Responden

Characteristics	Attribute	Total	%
Gender	Man	116	46,4
Gender	Woman	134	53,6
Age	<20 years old	39	15,6
Age	20–25 years old	109	43,6
Age	26–30 years	63	25,2
Age	>30 years old	39	15,6
Have watched product promotion content brought by influencers	2–3 times	120	48,0
Have watched product promotion content brought by influencers	3–4 times	66	26,4
Have watched product promotion content brought by influencers	>5 times	34	13,6

Have you ever watched product promotional content presented	<5 times	50	2,0
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Based on the results of the description of the characteristics of the respondents in Table 1, it is known that out of a total of 250 participants, the majority of respondents were female as many as 134 people (53.6%), while men amounted to 116 people (46.4%). This suggests that TikTok users who are more actively following and paying attention to product promotional content from influencers are dominated by women, which is in line with previous research that women tend to be more responsive to influencer-based promotions on social media due to emotional engagement and trust factors (Jin et al., 2019). Based on age group, most of the respondents were in the age range of 20-25 years as many as 109 people (43.6%), followed by 63 people (25.2%) aged 26-30 years (25.2%), and the age group under 20 years and over 30 years old at 15.6% respectively. This distribution indicates that the younger generation, especially Generation Z and early Millennials, are the dominant users of TikTok who are the main targets in digital marketing strategies.

In addition, in terms of the frequency of viewing product promotional content brought by influencers, as many as 120 respondents (48%) stated that they had watched 2–3 times, 66 respondents (26.4%) watched 3–4 times, and 34 respondents (13.6%) more than 5 times. These results illustrate that most audiences have a fairly high level of exposure to promotional content on TikTok, indicating that influencer marketing has become part of their media consumption routine. Overall, the characteristics of these respondents showed that the study participants represented a group of TikTok active users that were relevant to the research context, namely the younger generation with a high level of engagement with influencer promotional content on social media.

This study applies the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) based on covarians with the help of software AMOS as an analysis tool. In the initial stage, a pre-designed conceptual model was prepared based on the formulation of the research hypothesis. Furthermore, the data obtained is examined to ensure that no data is lost and meets the assumptions and criteria needed in SEM analysis. The next stage includes testing validity and reliability to ensure that each indicator is able to accurately and consistently represent variables. After the instrument is declared feasible, an evaluation of the suitability of the model (model fit) is carried out to assess the extent to which the developed model is in accordance with empirical data. If the model meets the eligibility criteria, the analysis is continued with testing the relationship between variables according to the hypothesis that has been established in the study (Hair et al., 2022).

In SEM analysis, a data normality test is carried out first to ensure that the data obtained follows the normal distribution. Based on the results of the analysis, the normality test with a value of -1.383 shows that there is no value *critical rasio* by *multivariate* that exceeds the value limit *cutoff* ± 2.58 . Therefore, the distribution of data in this study can be categorized as a normal distribution and is suitable for further analysis. After the normality test, the next step is to test *outlier* in univariate and multivariate data. Testing *outlier* aims to avoid biases that can affect research results (Hair et al., 2022). The output results show that *Z-score* minimum and maximum are in the range of ± 3 , which is -1.966 and 2.490 which indicates that the data used does not have *outlier univariate*. For testing *outlier univariate*, a comparison between the values of the

The Influence of Tiktok Influencer Credibility on Purchase Intention: The Mediating Role of Ewom and Vicarious Expression

table *chi-square* with the distance output value *Mahalanobis* highest 32,121. Table values *chi-square* 127,877 and the study did not have *outlier multivariate*. Thus, the data of this study has met the criteria of normality and is based on the *outlier*:

This study involved four main variables, namely *Influencer Credibility (IC)* as an independent variable, *Vicarious Expression (VE)* and *Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM)* as a mediating variable, and *Purchase Intention (PI)* as a dependent variable. The operational definitions and indicators of each variable are summarized in the following table:

Tabel 2. Measurement, Loadings, CR, and AVE

No	Construct	Questionnaire Statements	Indicator	Loading Factor	CR	AVE
1	<i>Influencer Credibility</i>	Influencers are highly skilled in their fields.	IC1	0,901	0,936	0,755
2		These influencers are very trustworthy.	IC2	0,906		
3		These influencers are very interesting personally.	IC3	0,905		
4		The behavior of influencers is very consistent with the message conveyed.	IC4	0,869		
5	<i>Vicarious Expression</i>	I often feel like I experience things that influencers experience.	VS1	0,882	0,934	0,780
6		I often express the experiences of influencers.	VT2	0,854		
7		I often imagine myself as an influencer.	VE3	0,890		
8		often share influencer experiences with others.	VE4	0,906		
9	<i>Electronic Word of Mouth</i>	I often give product reviews online.	EW1	0,837	0,957	0,842
10		I often recommend influencer products to friends.	EW2	0,851		
11		I'm very interested in sharing influencer product content.	EW3	0,903		
12		I am very confident in giving product opinions online.	EW4	0,918		
13	<i>Purchase Intention</i>	I really intend to buy the product.	PI1	0,918	0,942	0,845
14		I really consider influencer products.	PI2	0,919		
15		I plan to buy the product in the near future.	PI3	0,921		

Based on the results of the convergent validity test shown in Table 2, all indicators in each construct have a *loading factor* value above 0.70, which means that each question item is able to represent the latent variable well (Hair et al., 2019). For the Influencer Credibility variable, the loading factor value ranged from 0.869 to 0.906, with a *Composite Reliability (CR)* of 0.936 and an *Average Variance Extracted (AVE)* of 0.755.

The Influence of Tiktok Influencer Credibility on Purchase Intention: The Mediating Role of Ewom and Vicarious Expression

This shows that the influencer credibility construct has very high reliability and good convergent validity, indicating that the expertise, trust, appeal, and consistency of the influencer's message are consistently measured by respondents. The Vicarious Expression variable also showed excellent results with loading *factor* values ranging from 0.854 to 0.906, CR values of 0.934, and AVE of 0.780, which confirms that indicators that measure emotional engagement and audience self-identification with influencers are consistent and valid.

Furthermore, the Electronic Word of Mouth variable has a *loading factor* value between 0.837 to 0.918, CR of 0.957, and AVE of 0.842, indicating very strong reliability and validity in explaining user behavior in providing reviews, recommendations, and sharing content online. The Purchase Intention variable also met the measurement criteria with a *loading factor* ranging from 0.918 to 0.921, a CR value of 0.942, and an AVE of 0.845, which indicates that the construct of buying intent is accurately measured through indicators of intention, consideration, and purchase plan. Overall, CR values exceeding 0.70 and AVE above 0.50 in all constructs indicate that all variables in this study model have excellent internal reliability and convergent validity, making them suitable for use in subsequent structural model analysis

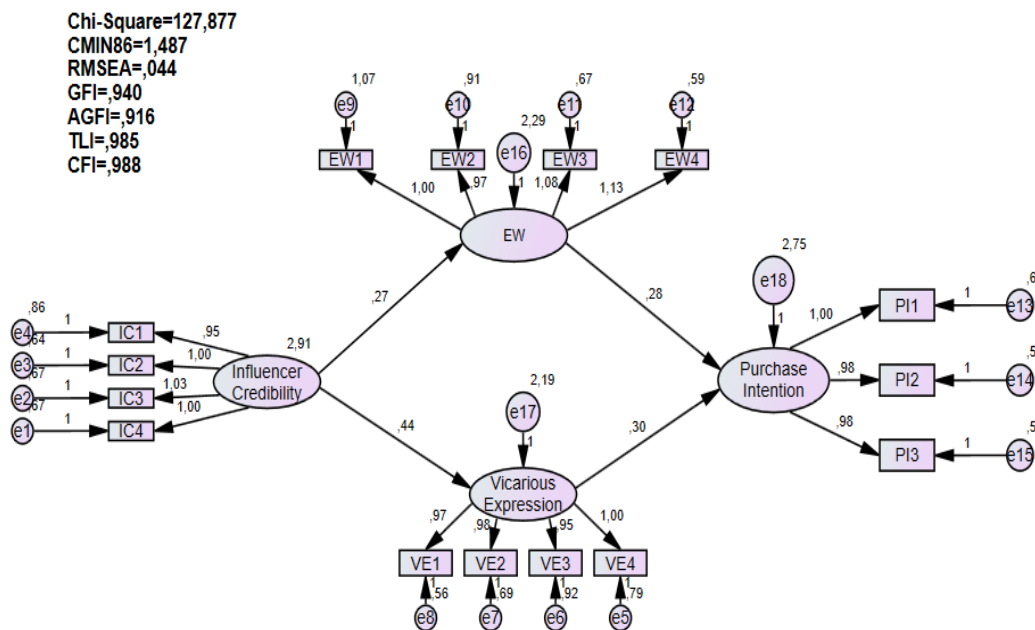


Fig 2. Structural Equation Modeling Result

Table 3. Goodness Of Fit (GOF)

Goodness of Fit	Analysis Results	Cut of Value	Model Evaluation
Chi-Square	127.877	Expected small	Marjinal Fit
CMIN/DF	1.487	< 2,000	Fit
AGFI	0.916	> 0.90	Fit
GFI	0.940	> 0.90	Fit

Goodness of Fit	Analysis Results	Cut of Value	Model Evaluation
<i>TLI</i>	0.986	> 0.95	Fit
<i>CFI</i>	0.988	> 0.95	Fit
<i>RMSEA</i>	0.031	< 0.80	Fit

The results of the goodness of fit test in Table 3 show that the research model has a good fit with the data used. The Chi-square value of 127,877 is considered *marginal fit* because although it is expected to be small, this result is still acceptable considering that large sample sizes can affect its value. The CMIN/DF ratio of 1,487 has met the ideal criteria (< 2,000) that indicates a good model fit between the empirical data and the theoretical model. The AGFI value of 0.916 and the GFI of 0.940 also exceeded the minimum limit of 0.90, indicating that the proportions of variance and covariance described by the model are quite high.

Furthermore, the TLI (0.986) and CFI (0.988) indices, both greater than 0.95, indicate that the model has *an excellent incremental fit*. Meanwhile, the RMSEA value of 0.031 which is below 0.08 indicates a low rate of approximation error. Overall, all the main indicators of goodness of fit show that the SEM model used in this study is feasible and has an excellent level of suitability so that it can be used for further hypothesis testing.

Table 4. Hypothesis Testing

Influencer Relationship			Estimate	C.R.	P
E-WOM	<---	Influence credibility	0,270	4,387	0,000
Vicarious Expression	<---	Influence credibility	0,437	7,004	0,000
Purchase intention	<---	Vicarious Expression	0,305	3,702	0,000
Purchase intention	<---	E-WOM	0,276	3,191	0,001

Based on the results of the hypothesis test in Table 4, all relationships between variables in the research model showed a positive and significant influence. The *Critical Ratio (C.R.)* value for each pathway is above 1.96 and the *p-value* is less than 0.05, which means that all hypotheses are accepted. First, Hypothesis 1 the Influencer Credibility variable had a positive and significant effect on Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) with an estimated value of 0.270, C.R. 4.387, and a p-value of 0.000, which shows that the higher the influencer's credibility, the greater the audience's tendency to spread positive eWOM. Second, Hypothesis 2, Influencer Credibility also has a positive and significant effect on Vicarious Expression with an estimated value of 0.437, C.R. 7.004, and a p-value of 0.000, indicating that audiences who value influencers as credible will be more likely to engage emotionally and imitate the influencer's expression and behavior.

Furthermore, Hypothesis 3, Vicarious Expression has a positive and significant effect on Purchase Intention with an estimated value of 0.305, C.R. 3.702, and a p-value of 0.000, which means that the stronger the audience's emotional involvement with the influencer, the higher their intention to buy the recommended product. Finally, Hypothesis 4, eWOM also had a positive and significant effect on Purchase Intention with

an estimated value of 0.276, C.R. 3.191, and a p-value of 0.001, showing that positive communication between TikTok users contributes to increasing purchase intent. Thus, these results confirm that influencer credibility not only influences purchase intent directly, but also through the mediating role of eWOM and vicarious expression that strengthen such influence in the context of marketing on the TikTok platform.

Table 5 Mediating Testing

Parameter	Estimate	Lower	Upper	P
IC>EW>PI	,075	,032	,138	,007
IC>AND>PI	,133	,075	,199	,004

The results of the mediation test in Table 5 show that the two mediation variables, namely *Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM)* and *Vicarious Expression (VE)*, play a significant role in mediating the influence of *Influencer Credibility (IC)* on *Purchase Intention (PI)*. Hypothesis 6, the IC, EWOM, PI mediation pathway had an estimated value of 0.075 with $p = 0.007$ and a confidence interval of 0.032–0.138, indicating a significant indirect influence, where the credibility of influencers was able to increase consumer purchase intent through the encouragement to spread positive opinions or product recommendations on social media.

Meanwhile, Hypothesis 7, the IC,VE,PI pathway also showed a significant mediation influence with an estimated value of 0.133, $p = 0.004$, and a confidence interval of 0.075–0.199, which means that influencer credibility can encourage audience emotional engagement through the process of self-identification and imitation of influencer behavior, thereby strengthening purchase intent for the promoted product. Overall, these results confirm that both *eWOM* and *vicarious expression* act as partial mediators that strengthen the relationship between influencer credibility and purchase intent, suggesting that influencer influence on consumer behavior is not only rational but also influenced by social and emotional mechanisms in interactions on the TikTok platform.

3.2 Discussion

The results showed that the proposed model had a good level of conformity with empirical data, as indicated by the *Goodness of Fit (GOF) value* that met the acceptance limit (CMIN/DF = 1.487; CFI = 0.988; RMSEA = 0.031). This indicates that the structural model developed is able to accurately represent the relationship between the variables of *influencer credibility*, *vicarious expression*, *electronic word of mouth (eWOM)*, and *purchase intention* in the context of using TikTok. The results of the hypothesis test showed that *influencer credibility* had a positive and significant effect on *eWOM* ($\beta = 0.270$; $p < 0.001$) and *vicarious expression* ($\beta = 0.437$; $p < 0.001$). These findings show that influencers who are considered credible in terms of expertise, trust, and attractiveness are better able to stimulate the emotional engagement of audiences and encourage them to spread positive information or reviews related to the products being promoted. Furthermore, *vicarious expression* ($\beta = 0.305$; $p < 0.001$) and *eWOM* ($\beta = 0.276$; $p = 0.001$) were also shown to have a significant effect on *purchase intent*, indicating that emotional resonance and social communication play an important role in converting interest in influencers into real purchasing behaviors.

The Influence of Tiktok Influencer Credibility on Purchase Intention: The Mediating Role of Ewom and Vicarious Expression

The results of the mediation test further showed that good *eWOM* ($\beta = 0.075$; $p = 0.007$) or *vicarious expression* ($\beta = 0.133$; $p = 0.004$) acts as a significant partial mediator in the relationship between *influencer credibility* and *purchase intention*. Thus, the influence of influencer credibility on purchase intent does not only occur directly through promotional messages, but also indirectly through emotional engagement and communication between users.

These findings are consistent with previous research by (Zhang & Choi, 2022) and (Peterson et al., 2025) who found that influencer trustworthiness and attractiveness significantly encourage audience engagement and generate positive word-of-mouth behavior. The results of this study also reinforce the findings of (Nadroo et al., 2024) which explain that vicarious expression where audiences emotionally express themselves through influencers plays a key role in strengthening parasocial interactions. Through stronger parasocial interactions, audiences feel more personally connected to the influencer, which in turn increases their motivation to purchase the products being promoted.

This study provides a clearer theoretical linkage by integrating both emotional mechanisms (vicarious expression) and social mechanisms (eWOM) into one comprehensive model. In previous research, these mechanisms were often examined separately, leaving a gap in understanding how emotional engagement and social communication interact simultaneously in digital environments. Generation Z's purchase intention on TikTok is shaped not only by influencer credibility but also by the combined effects of heightened emotional involvement through parasocial interactions and active participation in social communication through eWOM.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study concludes that *influencer credibility* has a positive and significant influence on *purchase intention*, both directly and indirectly through the mediating role of *vicarious expression* and *eWOM*. When audiences view influencers as credible figures, they tend to be emotionally engaged, identify with the influencer, and be inspired to share positive experiences and recommendations that ultimately strengthen the purchase intent of the promoted product. These findings confirm that the effectiveness of influencer marketing on TikTok is shaped not only by rational persuasion but also by emotional and social mechanisms that drive consumer behavior in digital environments. Theoretically, this research contributes by integrating emotional mechanisms (vicarious expression) and social mechanisms (eWOM) into one combined model, something that many previous studies still examined separately. This makes the model more complete in explaining how parasocial processes influence Generation Z's purchase intention on short-video platforms.

Practically, marketers are advised to collaborate with influencers who have authenticity, expertise, and consistency of message in order to build credibility and emotional closeness to the audience. From a managerial perspective, these findings suggest that brands should not only evaluate influencers based on follower count, but also on their emotional resonance and ability to stimulate social interaction, because these two aspects significantly increase purchase intention. From an academic perspective, future research is suggested to expand this model by adding other emotional variables such as *parasocial interaction* or *perceived intimacy*, as well as conducting cross-generational comparisons to understand the broader dynamics of consumer behavior. Longitudinal or

experimental research is also recommended to explore how an influencer's credibility and emotional engagement evolve over time in the context of digital marketing.

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