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From Authority to Authenticity: A Systematic Review of Gen Z's Divergent Responses to KOLs and KOCs

Yahui Liu
School of Communication, Universiti Sains Malaysia

Sharifah Nadiah Syed Mukhiar
School of Communication, Universiti Sains Malaysia
Corresponding Author Email: nadiahmukhiar@usm.my

Shuhaida Binti MD Noor
School of Communication, Universiti Sains Malaysia, School of Communication, Universiti Sains Malaysia,11800, Gelugor, Penang

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Abstract

As Generation Z becomes the main driving force in the digital economy, the traditional marketing approach that relies heavily on Key Opinion Leaders is facing a significant crisis of trust. This shift is driven by a growing authenticity paradox where highly polished commercial content triggers strong consumer skepticism and psychological resistance. This study aims to systematically clarify the differentiated positioning and synergistic mechanisms of Key Opinion Leaders（KOLs） and Key Opinion Consumers（KOCs） within the Gen Z market. Adhering to the PRISMA guidelines, we conducted a systematic literature review of 49 empirical studies published between 2015 and 2026. We employed thematic analysis to examine three core psychological mechanisms, specifically authenticity, parasocial interaction, and behavioral responses. These factors elucidate the fundamental differences in how Gen Z interacts with varying influencer types. This research provides a new theoretical perspective on the commodification of authenticity and suggests a strategic move from seeking broad exposure to building deep and authentic relationships for sustainable brand loyalty.

Keywords: Generation Z, Key Opinion Leaders（KOLs), Key Opinion Consumers (KOCs), Persuasion Knowledge, Parasocial Interaction

Introduction

Social media has grown from a simple network for connecting people into a complex space where individuals build their identities and exchange values. In the field of digital sociology and communication, this shift has disrupted traditional models of persuasion. For a long time, marketing relied on a top down approach driven by authority figures and celebrity endorsements. According to recent industry data, the sector has experienced exponential growth over the past five years (Statista, 2024). Brands depended on reaching as many people as possible through macro influencers or Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs). However, this method based purely on generating high traffic no longer fits the psychological needs of younger audiences.

Generation Z is at the center of this change as the first true group of digital natives. Because they have grown up with the internet, they are highly aware of marketing tactics and show strong resistance to content that feels overly commercial or idealized. Current academic discussions point to an interesting problem known as the authenticity paradox. As digital content becomes more polished and heavily controlled by brands, young audiences become more skeptical and often try to avoid these advertisements completely (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Unlike previous generations who based their trust on looking up to celebrities, Generation Z builds trust through a sense of personal connection and shared identity. As a result, the highly packaged and performative nature of KOLs often creates a psychological distance that makes them less convincing.

At the same time, the rise of Key Opinion Consumers (KOCs) or micro influencers highlights a shift from following authority to finding common ground. Based on social identity theory and parasocial interaction, KOCs use their raw and unedited authenticity to connect with audiences. This perceived similarity helps them bypass the natural defenses of digital natives (Kay et al., 2020). By changing the focus from an idealized other to someone who feels reachable and familiar, peer groups and micro influencers are proving to be highly effective at building trust and encouraging purchase decisions, even in heavily commercialized spaces. Although a substantial body of literature exists on influencer marketing, three primary limitations persist. First, most studies treat influencers as a homogenous group and fail to systematically distinguish the psychological differences between aspirational KOLs and relatable KOCs (Cheng et al., 2024; Ong et al.,2024). Second, many studies rely on general population samples and overlook the unique psychological characteristics of Gen Z, such as their extreme pursuit of authenticity and the need to alleviate loneliness (Choi et al.,2024; Babu et al.,2024). Third, existing research often isolates trust from purchase intentions without an integrated framework explaining the complete path from relationship building to behavioral conversion (Sharma et al.,2025; Kant et al.,2025).

To address these gaps, this study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method to analyze 49 core empirical studies. The research aims to answer the following questions:
RQ1: What psychological mechanisms, such as authenticity and parasocial interaction, enable KOCs to win Gen Z trust compared to traditional KOLs?

RQ2: What distinct roles do KOLs and KOCs play in the purchase conversion path?
The findings reveal a triple shift in digital influence. The anchor of trust moves from an idealized other to a reachable self. The relationship form evolves from distant admiration to

intimate involvement. Finally, the behavioral function diverges from broad broadcasting to niche penetration. Based on these findings, we construct an integrated "KOL-KOC Duality" framework to provide theoretical grounds for complementary influencer strategies in the post-traffic era.

Methodology

This study utilizes a systematic literature review methodology, employing systematic searches and analysis of existing literature to explore the trust mechanisms and behavioral differences of Generation Z towards Macro-influencers (KOLs) and Micro-influencers (KOCs). The specific methodology is outlined below:

This study exclusively utilizes the Web of Science (WOS) Core Collection electronic database for literature retrieval. WOS was selected due to its extensive collection of high-quality, influential academic journals, providing a comprehensive range of relevant research literature in social sciences and marketing.

The search employed a specific Boolean string combining keywords related to "Generation Z," "Influencers" (including KOL, KOC, Micro-influencers), and "Trust/Consumer Behavior." The search was restricted to articles published between 2015 and 2026 to ensure relevance to the emerging KOC phenomenon. The initial search yielded 142 articles. After removing duplicate entries and applying initial screening, relevant articles addressing the specific comparison between influencer types were identified. Ultimately, a total of 49 articles were included in this review.

The following were the inclusion and exclusion criteria:
Inclusion Criteria:
(a) Source Type: Research articles published in peer-reviewed academic journals.
(b) Topic Relevance: Studies that explicitly integrate all three core dimensions: (i) social media influencers (including KOLs, KOCs, or micro-influencers), (ii) Generation Z consumers (or equivalent terms such as post-millennials/digital natives), and (iii) trust-related psychological mechanisms or behavioral outcomes (e.g., authenticity, parasocial interaction, purchase intention, decision making).
(c) Language: Articles written in English. (d) Timeframe: Articles published from 2015 to 2026.
Therefore, this review systematically examines English-language academic articles that strictly intersect Gen Z consumer behavior with influencer trust mechanisms published over the last decade.

Exclusion Criteria:
(a) Non-academic Sources: Articles published in non-academic outlets (e.g., commentaries, news reports, white papers, trade magazines).
(b) Lack of Specificity (Topic): Studies that discuss social media usage broadly (e.g., platform addiction, general usage patterns) without a specific analytical focus on influencers or opinion leaders.
(c) Lack of Specificity (Population): Studies utilizing mixed-age samples (e.g., "general adult population") where data specific to Generation Z cannot be isolated or distinguished.

(d) Irrelevant Context: Studies unrelated to consumer psychology or marketing outcomes (e.g., pure computer science studies on recommendation algorithms, clinical medical interventions).
(e) Duplicates: Duplicate publications or reprints.

The screening process involved three stages. Stage 1: Initial Screening. Relevant articles were initially identified through keyword searches within the WOS database (n=142). Stage 2: Title and Abstract Screening. Titles and abstracts of the initially screened articles were reviewed to further refine the selection based on the inclusion criteria. This process excluded 73 articles that fell outside the research scope. Stage 3: Full-Text Review and Selection. Full texts of the remaining 70 articles were assessed, excluding those that did not meet the specific criteria regarding empirical data or age segmentation (n=20). This resulted in a final set of 49 articles for the review. Finally, data extraction was performed on the 49 included articles.

Content analysis was employed to address the research objectives. Relevant sections of each article outlining the definitions, characteristics, and trust drivers of KOLs and KOCs were identified, read, and reread to gain familiarity with the data. Through content analysis, key distinctions regarding "Expertise" (KOLs) and "Relatability" (KOCs) were generated.

For the synthesis of findings, the various trust mechanisms described in each article were first categorized and coded. Subsequently, thematic analysis was used to identify core themes associated with Gen Z's responses, specifically: (1) The Authenticity Paradox, (2) Para-social Interaction, and (3) Persuasion Knowledge. To ensure credibility and dependability (Creswell, 2018), the coding process involved rigorous re-examination of the data to refine themes and ensure consistency with the empirical evidence.

Findings

Through a coding analysis of the 49 included empirical studies, we identified three core themes. The quantitative distribution of these themes exhibits a distinct outcome-oriented characteristic. While studies regarding the antecedents of authenticity remain relatively concentrated with 8 articles (e.g., Pradhan et al, 2023), research exploring parasocial interaction mechanisms has seen a gradual increase with 14 articles (e.g., Sun et al, 2022). However, the vast majority of the literature, comprising 27 articles, ultimately focuses on purchase intention and behavioral conversion (e.g., Panopoulos et al, 2022). This distribution highlights the fundamental disparities in marketing effectiveness between KOLs and KOCs.

The Restructuring of Trust Sources

In digital marketing research targeting Gen Z consumers, influence mechanisms are undergoing a structural shift from external worship to internal identification. The authoritative halo of traditional celebrities is gradually being replaced by social media influencers characterized by their "reachability." Intergenerational comparative studies confirm a significant displacement of trust anchors. Unlike Generation X or Y, Gen Z demonstrates higher levels of identification and credibility assessment toward social media influencers. Furthermore, this trust relationship based on a horizontal perspective translates more effectively into purchase intention, indicating that the appeal of the "idealized other" has ceded ground to peer groups capable of eliciting stronger resonance (Bratina, 2024).

This reconstruction of identity directly alters the acceptance threshold for commercial placements. When perceived brand control intensifies, macro-influencers or KOLs often exacerbate consumer avoidance behaviors due to their inherent distance. Conversely, micro-influencers or KOCs can effectively buffer the negative effects of brand control through tighter psychological bonds with the audience, thereby maintaining interaction stability within commercial contexts (Pradhan et al., 2023). This shift toward trust necessitates the introduction of a notable "authenticity paradox" where KOLs with highly polished content and flawless personas are more likely to trigger trust crises among Gen Z consumers. In contrast, KOCs producing rough or even flawed content acquire higher trust weights due to their "unprocessed" characteristics. As digital natives, Gen Z consumers possess extensive persuasion knowledge that enables them to acutely identify manipulative cues behind marketing intentions. Perceptions of high brand control generate strong psychological resistance. KOLs, given their strong association with commercial attributes, significantly amplify this negative effect and lead Gen Z to adopt advertising avoidance behaviors. Comparative generational studies reveal that unlike previous generations who worshipped celebrities, Gen Z exhibits higher skepticism toward the "idealized lives" showcased by KOLs. Overly perfect images are interpreted as performative and detached from reality, creating a psychological distance that undermines the foundation of trust.

The core mechanism driving this trust transfer lies in perceived homophily and the reduction of psychological distance. Empirical data indicate that Gen Z responds more positively to online brand advocacy by local influencers. This is not solely driven by geographical factors but because localized identity features stimulate higher levels of perceived homophily and credibility. This confirms that a cultural and psychological "proximity effect" outperforms transnational or internationalized images (Rambocas & Metivier, 2024). This similarity plays a crucial defensive role when addressing high-involvement issues. Even in commercial contexts with explicit sponsorship disclosure, KOCs with high similarity characteristics can effectively lower consumer perception of manipulative intent. Conversely, in the absence of this similarity foundation, sponsorship disclosure is highly prone to triggering audience psychological defense mechanisms (Kim & Jeong, 2024). This suggests that in the cognitive processing of Gen Z, sponsorship disclosure itself does not directly cause fluctuations in purchase intention. Instead, it must operate through a mediating chain involving brand cognition and influencer credibility. Thus, credibility serves as the core filter for commercial information entering the consumer decision-making system (Sesar et al., 2023).

Regarding the specific maintenance of trust relationships, the authenticity of content presentation and strategic alignment are particularly critical. Although Gen Z exhibits a stronger tendency for imitation than Millennials, this behavior is strictly constrained by judgments of authenticity. Only subjects perceived as authentic and credible can trigger effective imitation rather than a blind following of traffic symbols (Soni & Bhukya, 2025). To construct this sense of reality, different types of influencers must adopt differentiated content strategies. Celebrities with inherent halos need to disclose personalized content to dissolve distance and approach a reachable self-image. Meanwhile, KOCs who already possess civilian attributes are better suited to establishing perceived appropriateness through hybrid or professional content, thereby reinforcing behavioral intentions such as green participation through mediating paths (Kim & Jeong, 2025). This pursuit of authenticity ultimately determines the path of information influence. Authentic influencer content

activates the central cognitive path of consumers and promotes self-determined sustainable behavioral intentions. In contrast, superficial content lacking substance can only generate weak and transient effects via the peripheral path (Rajput & Gandhi, 2025), thereby firmly establishing authenticity as the primary currency of trust for Gen Z.

The trust logic of Gen Z has shifted from vertical looking up, characterized by worship of the KOL halo, to horizontal resonance, characterized by seeking the reality of KOCs. For this generation, trust stems not from authority but from the sentiment that they see themselves in the influencer. This reconstruction of the trust source presents new challenges and opportunities for brand marketing strategies, specifically regarding how to build deeper emotional connections with Gen Z through authentic and relatable content to achieve the effective transmission of brand value.

The Quasi-Socialization of Relationship Morphology

The relationship morphology between Generation Z and social media influencers is undergoing a profound transformation from distant admiration to intimate involvement (Vuong et al., 2025). This shift redefines the theoretical implications of Parasocial Interaction (PSI) (Horton & Wohl, 1956) by moving from a one-way worship of KOLs to an emotional symbiosis with KOCs. Sun et al. (2022) provides critical evidence within the context of Chinese luxury consumption. The study reveals that "friend-peer" influencers, who serve as the archetype for KOCs, possess significantly higher influence efficacy than celebrities and opinion leaders. This finding indicates a systematic substitution where relationship intimacy replaces the status halo. Subsequent research deepens this analysis through the lens of Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954). Tian et al. (2023) points out that perceived similarity drives assimilation emotions such as optimism, admiration, and desire. In contrast, idealized identification triggers contrast emotions like envy, depression, and resentment. KOCs leverage their high similarity traits to avoid the negative emotional consequences caused by the idealized distance of KOLs. Consequently, this drives positive brand attitudes and purchase intentions through self-improvement motives.

This mechanism is further refined in political communication studies. Cheng et al. (2024) discovers that similarity and interactivity in source characteristics, rather than mere professional expertise, have become the key antecedents of parasocial relationships (PSR). This enhances the perception of information quality and the acceptance of political advocacy. It implies that KOCs and KOLs operate through differentiated influence channels. Furthermore, Flecha-Ortiz et al. (2023) demonstrates through empirical research on TikTok that the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of PSR function synergistically between Gen Z's satisfaction and purchase intentions. This finding challenges traditional media effects research that often treats PSI dimensions in isolation.

Intergenerational comparative studies provide longitudinal evidence for this transformation. Ong et al. (2024) finds significant differences in information processing preferences between Gen Z and Millennials in destination marketing. Gen Z displays higher sensitivity to advertising disclosure which suggests their relationship expectations contain a stronger psychological contract of reciprocity. Qualitative research on an Irish sample in Alves de Castro (2023) identifies relatability as a core driver. Along with trust and PSR, relatability constitutes one of the three pillars of Gen Z following behavior. This concept was subsequently validated in big

data research. Marti-Ochoa et al. (2025) found that nano-influencers achieve significantly higher engagement through authenticity and relatability. This allows them to outperform the efficacy of macro-influencers. This conclusion is reinforced by dual comparative studies in employer branding contexts. Janssen & Rudeloff (2025) confirms that corporate influencers, acting as internal KOCs, generate a stronger positive impact on employer branding than third-party influencers through perceived fit and PSI. This effect is replicated in Durst & Klopf (2024) within skilled trade industries where the authenticity advantage derived from the daily insights of employee-KOCs significantly shapes Gen Z's career preferences.

Research in live streaming contexts reveals the dynamic construction process of relationship quality. Maghraoui & Khrouf (2025) finds that influencer-follower fit promotes Gen Z's trust in brands while reputational capital reinforces this relationship. Notably, Durst & Klopf (2024) provides the most direct causal evidence for the partnership advantage of KOCs. By directly comparing KOLs and KOCs in TikTok live commerce, the study confirms that the influencer type moderates the chain of social relatedness, satisfaction, and loyalty. Deepening research into emotional mechanisms expands the boundary effects of PSI. Hammond et al. (2025) notes that perceived loyalty, willingness to share, and perceived openness are antecedents of PSI which subsequently influence purchase intentions. This indicates that Gen Z's relationship investment has both instrumental and affective facets. Gui & Huang (2025) further refines this chain by showing that hedonic and utilitarian values influence specific engagement behaviors like sharing and commenting through the differential mediation paths of credibility and PSR. This reveals a differentiated mechanism of motivation-relationship-behavior. The most significant theoretical breakthrough lies in emotional attachment research. Ateş et al. (2024) confirms that emotional connection is not a substitute for trust but acts as a catalyst. This mechanism amplifies the conversion effect of trust on unplanned purchases. This "emotional amplifier" explains why the deep relationships cultivated by KOCs can generate commercial efficacy that surpasses the broad coverage of KOLs. Collectively, Gen Z's relationship expectations exhibit the characteristics of "Partnership-oriented PSI." This paradigm prioritizes two-way reciprocity over one-way admiration, values relatability over perfect distance, and emphasizes emotional involvement over rational calculation. This transformation requires brands to reconfigure their influencer strategies from a KOL "endorsement" mode to a KOC "collaboration" mode.

Functional Differentiation and Decision Journey Synergy

The consumer decision-making journey of Generation Z has evolved into a complex synergistic mechanism that begins with sensory attraction, deepens through psychological homophily, and is realized through situational interaction. Within this framework, physical attractiveness often dominates online behavior more than expertise during the initial stages (Panopoulos et al., 2022), with brand perception being largely driven by the single dimension of attractiveness (Chiu & Ho, 2023). Particularly in specific categories such as electronic products, the weight of attractiveness and trustworthiness significantly exceeds that of professional knowledge (Choi et al., 2024). However, for visual stimulation to translate into lasting purchase intention, it must pass through multiple psychological filters. Validation of the TEARS model indicates that beyond traditional credibility indicators, establishing similarity and relatability with consumers is core to predicting Gen Z purchase intention (Kant et al., 2025; Sharipudin et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2022), as this psychological connection based on homophily effectively eliminates commercial defense mechanisms (Rizomyliotis et al.,

2024). In this process, parasocial interaction (PSI) plays a key bridging role; it not only directly mediates the relationship between source credibility and purchase intention (Pham et al., 2021) but also enhances visit intention for high-involvement products like tourism by boosting self-efficacy (Bratina & Faganel, 2024). Meanwhile, identity identification further projects the consumer's ideal self onto the brand (Fong et al., 2025). Compared to Gen X or Millennials, Gen Z exhibits a significantly stronger tendency for imitation and trust in influencers (Babu et al., 2024), and the endorsement effect drives their loyalty more significantly (Shahid & Ikram, 2024).

Regarding specific conversion paths, different types of influencers show clear functional differentiation. Macro-influencers /KOLs primarily rely on perceived usefulness and entertainment to maintain attention and generate buzz, yet their credibility itself does not directly predict purchase intention (San et al., 2025). In contrast, the authenticity of peer groups and micro-celebrities/KOCs has become a critical factor for viral propagation (Nguyen et al., 2022). Especially in impulse buying scenarios, their authentic content is more likely to trigger utilitarian and hedonic browsing, thereby promoting recalled impulse buying (Ref. 49). Furthermore, virtual influencers can achieve higher seller trust than humans in specific disclosure contexts (Rizomyliotis et al., 2024). This mechanism demonstrates specific logical adaptations across vertical sectors. For dining influencers, authenticity and playfulness directly determine fan attitudes (Pereira et al., 2025), while TikTok short videos effectively enhance intention through a combination of entertainment and expertise (Tran et al., 2025). In the realm of green consumption, environmental values positively moderate the impact of credibility (Ding, 2024). Ultimately, the loop from trust to decision-making often requires emotional and cognitive mediators. In sectors such as Halal food (Nugraha et al., 2024), fashion (Handranata & Kalila, 2025), and live-streaming e-commerce (Marklen et al., 2024), trust transforms into final loyalty (Ref. 83) and purchase behavior through the mediating roles of brand attitude (Renganathan et al., 2025), emotional attachment (Duffett & Mxunyelwa, 2025), or congruity (Widaningsih & Putranto, 2025). This transformation has been confirmed as a nearly complete path across different cultural backgrounds (Sharma et al., 2025; Vašaničová et al., 2025) and within specific trust models (Elfi et al., 2025; Putri et al., 2023).

Discussion

While contemporary influencer marketing paradigms remain heavily tethered to the traditional Source Credibility Model—prioritizing expertise and reach—this systematic review exposes a fundamental theoretical rupture within the Generation Z demographic. The synthesis reveals that the prevailing reliance on "vertical authority" is increasingly incompatible with Gen Z's consumption logic, necessitating a reconceptualization of how trust is negotiated and how influence is operationalized.

Central to this paradigm shift is the displacement of trust anchors from an idealized distance to an accessible proximity. Unlike previous generations who utilized expertise as a heuristic for credibility, Gen Z prioritizes homophily and self-congruity. This creates a challenging "Authenticity Paradox": high-production content, typically the hallmark of professional KOLs, now frequently triggers Gen Z’s persuasion knowledge, activating defensive skepticism rather than aspiration (Kim & Jeong, 2024). Conversely, the unrefined nature of KOC content bypasses these defenses, securing higher trust weights not through objective quality, but through a perceived absence of manipulative intent (Soni & Bhukya, 2025). This phenomenon

is not uniform, however; it is nuanced by individual value systems, such as Green Consumption Values, which serve as a boundary condition for how authenticity is interpreted (Rizomyliotis et al., 2024).

This cognitive shift in trust anchors precipitates a corresponding transformation in relational morphology. The interaction between influencer and follower has evolved from a static, observational "parasocial interaction" to a dynamic, "intimate involvement." While KOLs continue to function within a broadcasting model, KOCs facilitate a form of "projective parasitism," where followers actively mimic lifestyles to construct their own identities. This deepened involvement, however, introduces complex risks. As identified in this review, emotional attachment now acts as an "amplifier" (Ateş et al., 2024), implying that emotion catalyzes trust rather than merely succeeding it. This mechanism functions as a double-edged sword: the failure of a KOC to maintain their "accessible reality" can lead to a sense of betrayal more damaging than a KOL's commercial failure, creating a volatility that brands must carefully navigate (Kant et al., 2025).

These psychological and relational shifts manifest operationally as a functional differentiation within the consumer decision journey. A critical misalignment exists in current practice, where influencer types are often treated as interchangeable substitutes. Theoretical evidence suggests a distinct division of labor: KOLs serve effectively as "category gatekeepers" during the problem identification phase (Duffett & Mxunyelwa, 2025), yet their efficacy decays significantly during the deep conversion stage due to a rupture between "competence trust" and "benevolence trust" (San et al., 2025). In contrast, KOCs achieve "niche penetration" by leveraging peer network embedding Nguyen et al. (2022) and the synergistic power of UGC (Panopoulos et al., 2022). Brands failing to recognize this differentiation risk optimizing for the wrong metrics at the wrong stage, resulting in systematic inefficiencies.

In terms of theoretical contributions, this study not only addresses the reconstruction of digital trust introduced earlier but also provides substantial theoretical support for the broader social science debates surrounding the commodification of authenticity. Traditional persuasion theories and source credibility models often position expertise and authority as core drivers, yet these frameworks fail to fully explain the advertising avoidance behaviors of digital natives in highly commercialized environments. By introducing the authenticity paradox as a central concept, this research effectively extends existing social identity theories. We found that Generation Z often develops strong psychological defenses when facing macro influencers who exhibit high brand control and flawless personas. Conversely, micro influencers successfully buffer this defense mechanism by displaying unpolished authenticity and high perceived homophily. This finding significantly broadens our understanding of parasocial interactions, indicating that horizontal resonance based on similarity has substantively replaced vertical authority based on admiration within the modern digital ecology. Therefore, the integrated dual framework proposed in this study transcends the limitations of traditional marketing perspectives and offers a novel theoretical pathway for digital sociology to explain how youth demographics utilize identity construction to resist commercial manipulation.

Future research directions regarding the evolution of influence should focus on three emerging frontiers. First, the technological boundary of trust warrants urgent examination.

The proliferation of virtual influencers introduces a category of "non-human KOCs" (Choi et al, 2024), raising the question of whether the "uncanny valley" or, conversely, the "perfect controllability" of AI agents will reinforce or disrupt the current premium on human authenticity. Second, the ethical dimensions of "intimate involvement" must be scrutinized. Scholars should investigate whether the KOC-follower dynamic constitutes a form of emotional exploitation or digital labor, exploring how Gen Z navigates the tension between commercial mimicry and genuine identity construction. Third, the structural effects of platform ecosystems require deeper analysis. Future inquiry should isolate how algorithmic biases—weighing "organic" KOC content against "paid" KOL content—structurally reshape Gen Z's perception of reality and consumption norms.

Translating these insights into managerial praxis requires a strategic pivot. First, brands must adopt a stage-based portfolio configuration. Rather than viewing KOLs and KOCs as binary choices, they should be deployed as a synchronized ecosystem: KOLs for cognitive disruption during product launches, transitioning to vertical KOCs and nano-influencers (Marti-Ochoa et al., 2025) for trust consolidation and conversion. Second, authenticity must be managed through "strategic self-disclosure." Influencers should be guided to embed personal narratives within professional content (Kim & Jeong, 2025), maintaining the illusion of accessibility without stripping away commercial viability. Third, strategies must be tailored to sub-cultural segments. Recognizing that the "authenticity effect" is heterogeneous, brands should differentiate content strategies—utilizing "entertaining authenticity" for low-involvement categories (Rizomyliotis et al., 2024) while emphasizing "professional consistency" for values-driven consumers (Rizomyliotis et al., 2024).

Conclusion

This study has systematically reviewed the extant literature on Gen Z influencer marketing to construct an integrated theoretical framework. The analysis yields the following key conclusions:

(a) Trust Anchor Displacement: The locus of credibility has fundamentally shifted from the "idealized other" (KOL), characterized by expertise and distance, to the "accessible self" (KOC), defined by homophily and proximity.

(b) Functional Duality: There exists a systemic differentiation in efficacy, where KOLs dominate the cognitive awareness stage through "broadcasting," while KOCs drive behavioral conversion through "niche penetration" and emotional amplification (Ateş et al., 2024).

(c) Relational Transformation: Relationship morphology has matured from passive "parasocial interaction" to active "parasocial involvement," where emotional attachment serves as a critical catalyst for unplanned purchasing behaviors (Soni & Bhukya, 2025).

This study is subject to specific limitations.

(a) Contextual Constraints: The reviewed body of knowledge is heavily concentrated on hedonic categories (fashion, tourism, cosmetics) and specific geographic regions (emerging Asian markets, Europe). This focus limits the immediate generalizability of findings to high-risk functional categories (e.g., finance, healthcare) or distinct cultural contexts such as Latin America or Africa.

(b) Methodological Constraints: The predominance of cross-sectional survey designs in current literature restricts the ability to draw definitive causal inferences regarding the temporal evolution of trust and relationship decay.

To advance the field, future research should address the following directions:

(a) Contextual Expansion: Future studies should validate the KOL-KOC duality framework within high-involvement service sectors and underrepresented cultural markets to test the robustness of the "horizontal resonance" mechanism.

(b) Longitudinal and Experimental Designs: Research must move beyond snapshots of sentiment to utilize longitudinal data that tracks how "accessibility" evolves into "familiarity" or "fatigue," and employ experimental methods to isolate the causal impact of specific authenticity cues.

(c) Integration of the "Non-Human" Variable: Further research is needed to examine how Generative AI and virtual influencers disrupt traditional definitions of authenticity, potentially creating a hybrid category that combines the aesthetic perfection of KOLs with the customizable intimacy of KOCs.

By elucidating the systemic divergence between KOLs and KOCs, this review provides a robust theoretical lens for understanding the "horizontal shift" in Gen Z's consumption logic, offering a roadmap for brands to navigate the transition from mere attention acquisition to sustainable relational depth.

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