The Ethical Circuit Breaker: Parasocial Relationships, Fast Fashion, and the Moderating Role of Consumer Ethics Among Generation Z

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ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of social media has fundamentally altered the fashion industry's marketing landscape, replacing traditional celebrity endorsements with highly intimate, influencer-driven digital parasocial relationships (PSR). While prior research, such as the foundational study in Kim, Ko & Kim (2015), establishes that strong parasocial bonds directly drive consumers' intentions to purchase endorsed fashion products, a critical gap remains in understanding how internal moral frameworks intersect with these digital bonds. This conceptual paper addresses this gap by investigating the boundary conditions of PSR's influence, specifically focusing on Generation Z consumers navigating the dichotomy of fast fashion versus sustainable apparel. Grounded in the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), this paper proposes a moderated framework wherein consumer ethics—measured via the Muncy-Vitell Consumer Ethics Scale—acts as a moderating variable between PSR and purchase intention. It is propose that high consumer ethical standards will negatively moderate (weaken) the purchase intention for fast fashion products despite strong PSR, while positively moderating (amplifying) the purchase intention for ethically sourced, sustainable fashion. This framework provides theoretical advancement by demonstrating that digital emotional bonds do not unilaterally override moral socialization, offering significant practical implications for sustainable brand marketing and influencer collaborations in the digital era.

Keywords: Parasocial relationships, consumer ethics, Muncy-Vitell scale, Theory of Planned Behavior, fast fashion, sustainable fashion, influencer marketing, Generation Z.

INTRODUCTION

The advent of Web 2.0 and social network services (SNS) has decentralized traditional media, allowing consumers unprecedented access to public figures and influencers. Consequently, digital users form para-social relationships (PSR)—unilateral, psychologically meaningful bonds with media figures—that function similarly to real-world friendships. In the fashion sector, these digital bonds have become a primary engine for commerce. Prior empirical evidence, notably outlined in Kim, Ko & Kim (2015), confirms that consumers are highly motivated to use SNS to connect with celebrities and that these robust parasocial interactions directly and positively predict intentions to purchase endorsed fashion items.

However, a contemporary theoretical gap has emerged. As Generation Z (Gen Z) becomes the dominant consumer demographic, they present a profound behavioral paradox: they are highly susceptible to influencer-led "haul" videos promoting hyper-consumerist fast fashion, yet they concurrently report the highest levels of climate anxiety and ethical consumption intentions (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022). Existing models, including the framework proposed in Kim, Ko & Kim (2015), effectively capture the mechanism of attraction and reputation driving purchase intention, but they do not account for the moral friction that occurs when an adored influencer promotes a product that fundamentally conflicts with a consumer's internal ethical compass.

The purpose of this conceptual paper is to bridge this gap by introducing consumer ethics as a vital moderating variable in the influencer-consumer dynamic. By integrating the Muncy-Vitell Consumer Ethics Scale into a digital marketing context, this paper contributes to the literature by conceptualizing an "ethical circuit breaker." It challenges the assumption that the influencer halo effect guarantees compliance, proposing instead that deeply socialized ethical boundaries dictate when parasocial influence translates into actual purchase behavior, particularly across the contrasting contexts of fast fashion and sustainable apparel.

Research Objectives

1. **RO1:** To examine the direct effect of parasocial relationships (PSR) with social media influencers on Generation Z consumers' purchase intentions for endorsed fashion products.

2. **RO2:** To determine whether consumer ethics (measured via the Muncy-Vitell scale) significantly and negatively moderate the relationship between PSR and purchase intention when the endorsed product is fast fashion.

3. **RO3:** To determine whether consumer ethics significantly and positively moderate the relationship between PSR and purchase intention when the endorsed product is sustainable fashion.

Research Questions

1. **RQ1:** To what extent does the strength of a parasocial relationship with an influencer positively affect a Generation Z consumer's intention to purchase an endorsed fashion product?

2. **RQ2:** Does consumer ethics significantly moderate (weaken) the relationship between parasocial relationships and purchase intentions in the context of fast fashion endorsements?

3. **RQ3:** Does consumer ethics significantly moderate (strengthen) the relationship between parasocial relationships and purchase intentions in the context of sustainable fashion endorsements?

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Purchase Intention

Purchase intention represents consumers' evaluative readiness to acquire a product and is widely used to assess likely marketplace responses (Liu et al., 2026). Recent influencer-marketing research finds that parasocial relationships can positively shape purchase intentions, in part by fostering trust and perceived closeness that make followers more receptive to recommendations (Ashraf et al., 2023; Han & Balabanis, 2023). Experimental evidence likewise indicates that followers with stronger parasocial relationships report greater purchase intentions toward endorsed products, supporting the conceptualization of purchase intention as the outcome of parasocial influence (Breves et al., 2021). These relational dynamics are fundamentally anchored in perceived similarity and familiarity, which operate as core psychological processes that humanize mediated figures. Through these processes, the viewer projects relatable traits onto the figure, effectively blurring the lines between media consumption and personal social engagement.

Furthermore, the virality of content acts as a significant catalyst in this process, where perceived influencer openness and the willingness of followers to share information further amplify parasocial interactions and, consequently, conversion metrics. Beyond these relational dynamics, the credibility and information quality provided by influencers serve as critical cognitive antecedents that consolidate these emotional bonds and directly drive engagement (Cunha, 2026).

The transition from digital intimacy to commercial behavior is well documented. The study detailed in Kim, Ko & Kim (2015) investigated Korean SNS users, demonstrating that beyond merely admiring or imitating a celebrity, strong parasocial attachments indicate a profound level of trust that directly drives consumers to

purchase celebrity-promoted products. The research confirmed a significant positive correlation between the strength of the consumer-celebrity parasocial relationship and the intention to purchase fashion products featured on their SNS. Recent studies echo these findings, highlighting that Gen Z's purchase intentions are heavily mediated by the authenticity and perceived closeness of nano- and micro-influencers (Leite & Baptista, 2022).

As consumers increasingly perceive these mediated figures as authentic peers, the psychological proximity generated through repeated exposure heightens the perceived social cost of rejecting an endorsed offering. However, this social pressure often encounters the moderating influence of consumer ethics, which may trigger a critical reassessment if the endorser's professional choices conflict with the consumer's established moral boundaries.

2.2 Parasocial Relationships

The concept of parasocial interaction, initially coined by Horton and Wohl in 1956, describes the illusion of face-to-face relational intimacy experienced by audiences toward media personas. In the modern digital paradigm, social media platforms continuously feed this intimacy through semi-interactive, highly personalized content. When users encounter influencers online, they interact and form emotional bonds analogous to those shared with physical friends and family. These digital connections are often strengthened by the influencer's perceived similarity to the follower, which fosters a sense of authenticity and deep familiarity (Ballester et al., 2024; Kanwar & Huang, 2022).

Parasocial relationships are defined by one-sided, illusionary bonds wherein audiences cultivate feelings of intimacy and familiarity with media personas despite the inherent lack of reciprocity (Liu et al., 2026). These psychological attachments transcend mere admiration, as digital platforms foster perceived interpersonal engagement through frequent self-disclosure and real-time interaction, effectively simulating the intimacy of real-life friendships (Breves & Liebers, 2024; Du et al., 2025). These bonds act as social-emotional catalysts that trigger cognitive and behavioral responses, compelling followers to adopt the values and consumption patterns modeled by these figures (Nadroo et al., 2025; Sheng et al., 2023). Specifically, these established parasocial bonds often enhance source credibility and brand evaluations, which may systematically reduce the critical scrutiny consumers apply to sponsored content (Breves et al., 2021).

By consistently sharing personal narratives and offering glimpses into their private lives, social media influencers cultivate these intimate bonds to establish themselves as trusted sources of advice (Breves & Liebers, 2022). This sense of sincerity is further augmented when influencers utilize platforms to engage in participatory behaviors, such as replying to comments or sharing lifestyle insights, which validates the follower's perception of a reciprocal connection (Sharkasi & Rezakhah, 2023), (Taher et al., 2022). Such intense connections frequently result in followers perceiving the influencer as an expert or a peer, thereby increasing their susceptibility to the influencer's persuasive communication and product endorsements (Hudders & Lou, 2022; Liu & Zheng, 2024).

2.3 Consumer Ethics and the Muncy-Vitell Scale

Consumer ethics refers to the moral principles that guide individuals in their acquisition, use, and disposition of goods (Muncy & Vitell, 1992). Unlike corporate ethics, which focuses on the seller, consumer ethics evaluates the buyer's moral boundaries. The Muncy-Vitell Consumer Ethics Scale is the preeminent metric for this construct, evaluating consumer tolerance across dimensions such as passively benefiting from illegal acts, questionable "no harm/no foul" practices, and actively "doing good" (Vitell & Muncy, 2005). This framework allows researchers to categorize how specific behavioral norms—ranging from returning used merchandise to engaging in digital piracy—influence broader market conduct.

Furthermore, recent applications of this scale have shifted toward investigating how digital-era consumption behaviors, such as the use of influencers or engagement with algorithmic recommendation systems, challenge traditional notions of ethical consumption (Thompson et al., 2025). Specifically, emerging research explores whether the parasocial dynamics inherent in influencer marketing—where personal narratives blend with

commercial promotion—alter consumer perceptions of what constitutes deceptive advertising (Waltenrath, 2024).

These ethical frameworks are increasingly relevant in the context of sustainable fashion, where consumers must navigate the trade-off between perceived influencer authenticity and the environmental or social impact of the promoted goods. Current research emphasizes that as influencer marketing becomes more pervasive, the demand for transparent communication regarding sponsored content and brand partnerships has escalated to protect consumer autonomy (Ercegovac & Tankosić, 2023; Lastimosa et al., 2026). Moreover, contemporary literature suggests that this evolution in communication necessitates a shift toward the "trans-parasocial" model, which accounts for the shift from one-sided illusions to the increasingly reciprocal, co-created interactions found between influencers and their audiences (Lou, 2021).

While Kim, Ko & Kim (2015) noted that celebrity reputation—including dimensions like reliability and social contribution—affects the formation of parasocial bonds differently across genders, it did not measure the *consumer's* intrinsic ethical baseline. If a consumer holds strict moral views regarding environmental sustainability and fair labor (scoring high on the Muncy-Vitell dimension of "doing good" and low tolerance for "questionable practices"), this intrinsic ethical stance poses a potential barrier to the persuasive power of a fast-fashion influencer.

2.4 The Fast Fashion vs. Sustainable Fashion Dichotomy

The contemporary fashion market is heavily polarized. Fast fashion relies on rapid production cycles, low-cost labor, and synthetic materials to replicate high-fashion trends at scale. Influencers frequently drive fast fashion consumption through "hauls," normalizing overconsumption. Conversely, sustainable fashion prioritizes ethical labor practices, circular economy principles, and reduced environmental footprints (Fakhreddin & Foroudi, 2022). While influencers exist in both niches, the underlying moral implications of the promoted products differ vastly, requiring a nuanced evaluation of how followers process these endorsements. Consumer processing of these endorsements is further complicated by the deinfluencing trend, in which creators actively discourage excessive consumption and promote more affordable or responsible alternatives (Tuominen et al., 2025). Such deinfluencing content, however, is not without its own commercial logic, since the creator's credibility is often leveraged to position the alternative products as equally desirable and identity-consistent, meaning that the persuasive mechanism shifts from encouraging purchase to encouraging a different, more ethically framed purchase (Ge, 2024).

Specifically, influencers act as pivotal facilitators of knowledge dissemination, yet they frequently struggle to reconcile their personal commitment to environmental or human rights advocacy with the commercial pressures of brand partnerships (Jacobson & Harrison, 2021). Research indicates that when influencers advocate for sustainable alternatives, they must navigate the tension between their commercial obligations and the need to maintain message authenticity to effectively influence purchase intentions (Kapoor et al., 2022). Consistent with this tension, virtual influencers have been proposed as a way to sidestep the backlash that human influencers face when promoting pro-environmental causes, since message senders retain greater control over their fictional personas (Gerrath et al., 2024). Such a strategy, however, raises questions about transparency, since audiences may be less able to judge the sincerity of a fictional persona's environmental commitments than those of a human creator whose lifestyle can be scrutinized.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

This conceptual model is anchored in the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). Proposed by Ajzen (1991), TPB is a foundational psychological framework asserting that behavioral intentions are shaped by three core components: attitude toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. In the context of digital fashion consumption, TPB provides the necessary scaffolding to explain how influencer marketing operates. The parasocial relationship functions as a powerful *subjective norm*; the influencer acts as an aspirational peer whose endorsement socially validates the purchase (She et al., 2024).

Simultaneously, the influencer's content shapes the consumer's *attitude* toward the product. However, TPB also dictates that behavior must align with deeply held cognitive evaluations. By integrating TPB, we argue that consumer ethics acts as a severe cognitive filter. When an influencer (subjective norm) promotes a fast fashion product, a consumer with high ethical standards will experience a cognitive dissonance that negatively shifts their attitude toward the specific behavior (purchasing the unethical garment), ultimately suppressing the behavioral intention regardless of the subjective norm's strength.

However, TPB also dictates that behavior must align with deeply held cognitive evaluations. By integrating TPB, we argue that consumer ethics acts as a severe cognitive filter driven by cognitive dissonance. When a trusted influencer (a strong subjective norm) promotes a fast fashion product, a consumer with high ethical standards experiences cognitive dissonance—a psychological conflict between their internal moral identity and their external parasocial attachment. To resolve this discomfort, the consumer triggers an "ethical circuit breaker." This mechanism prioritizes internal moral alignment over social compliance, negatively shifting their attitude toward the specific behavior (purchasing the unethical garment) and ultimately suppressing the behavioral intention regardless of the subjective norm's strength.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Building upon the empirical baseline that SNS users' parasocial relationships positively affect intentions to purchase endorsed products (as established in Kim, Ko & Kim (2015)), this paper propose a moderated conceptual model. In this framework, Parasocial Relationships (PSR) serve as the independent variable, and Purchase Intention is the dependent variable. Consumer Ethics operates as a dual-directional moderating variable, whose effect is contingent upon the ethical nature of the endorsed product (Fast Fashion vs. Sustainable Fashion).

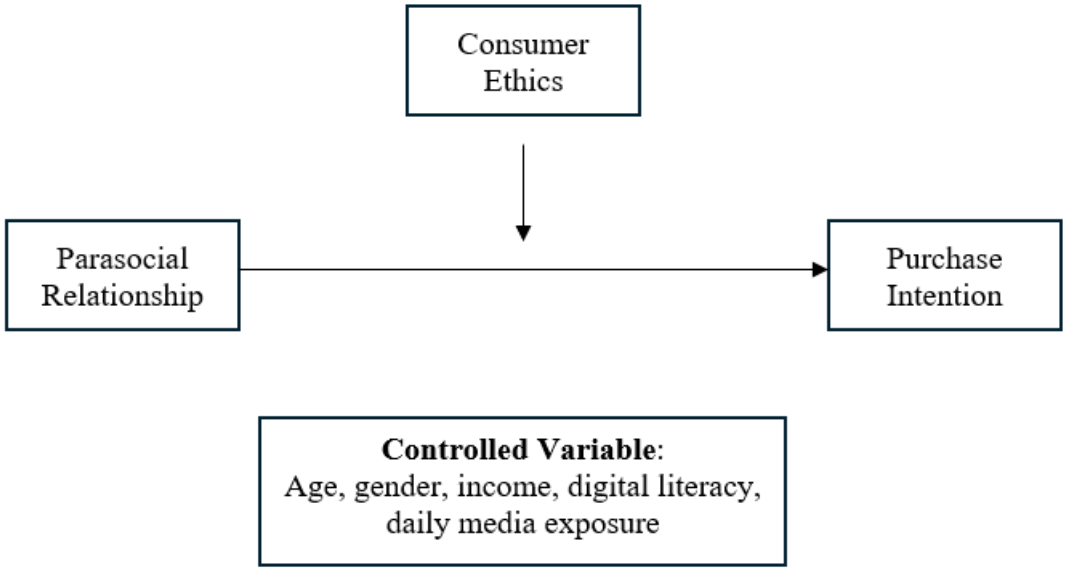

Figure 1: Proposed conceptual framework

For the first proposed hypothesis, this is consistent with previous literature on SNS media effects, the strength of the parasocial relationship between an SNS user and an influencer positively and directly influences the consumer's purchase intention for the endorsed fashion product. This direct relationship was established in previous literature. It illustrates that a stronger Parasocial Relationship (PSR) with an influencer directly drives the consumer's Purchase Intention for the endorsed product.

The next proposed hypothesis is when the endorsed product is identified as fast fashion (associated with questionable environmental and labor practices), high consumer ethics will negatively moderate the relationship between PSR and purchase intention. Specifically, for highly ethical consumers, the positive effect of PSR on

purchase intention will be significantly weakened. If the product is sustainable fashion, high consumer ethics acts as an "amplifier" (strengthening the arrow).

Finally, When the endorsed product is identified as sustainable fashion (associated with environmental stewardship and fair trade), high consumer ethics will positively moderate the relationship between PSR and purchase intention. For highly ethical consumers, the positive effect of PSR on purchase intention will be significantly amplified. There is also a proposed control variables in the form of variables like age, gender, and income that will be held constant during empirical testing to ensure the observed effects are genuinely caused by PSR and Consumer Ethics.

Research Method

In terms of operationalization of the conceptual framework, future research should employ a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design utilizing Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to test the proposed moderation effects and appropriate for examining complex causal relationships within a conceptual framework (Dinç, 2024; Sharkasi & Rezakhah, 2023).

With regards to the target population, it should consist of Generation Z consumers (born between 1997 and 2012 – target respondent are those who are 18 years old and above) who actively use platforms heavily saturated with fashion influencers, such as TikTok and Instagram. A purposive sampling method should ensure respondents follow at least one fashion influencer. In terms of measurement items, here are the list of proposed items to be adopted :

- Parasocial Relationships: Can be measured using the Parasocial Relationships in Social Media (PRISM) scale or the adapted 6-item scale utilized in Kim, Ko & Kim (2015).
- Purchase Intention: Measured via standard TPB-aligned behavioral intention scales (e.g., Jiang et al., 2010, as referenced in Kim, Ko & Kim (2015)).
- Consumer Ethics: Assessed using the updated Muncy-Vitell Consumer Ethics Scale (Vitell & Muncy, 2005), specifically isolating the "Questionable Practices" and "Doing Good" dimensions.

Within the PLS-SEM framework, the moderation effect must be explicitly mapped to the experimental vignettes. Participants will be exposed to a randomized scenario: a known fast-fashion brand (e.g., Shein) or a known sustainable brand (e.g., Patagonia). The structural model will weigh the sub-dimensions of the Muncy-Vitell scale accordingly: the "Questionable Practices" and "Passively Benefiting" sub-dimensions will be modeled as the primary moderators for the fast-fashion vignette (testing Hypothesis 2), whereas the "Doing Good" sub-dimension will be weighted as the primary moderator for the sustainable fashion vignette (testing Hypothesis 3).

Furthermore, to avoid treating Generation Z as a unified group and to account for external constraints, the empirical implementation must incorporate specific control variables. Alongside standard demographics (age, gender), the model must control for *intra-generational income constraints* (to isolate moral intent from actual purchasing power), *daily social media consumption hours*, and *digital literacy* to account for variations in media exposure and scepticism.

DISCUSSION

The proposed conceptual framework offers substantial theoretical and practical advancements. Theoretically, it challenges the determinism of the "celebrity halo effect". While existing models treat parasocial attachment as a direct conduit to purchase intention, this paper integrates moral psychology into the digital consumer journey. By utilizing the Muncy-Vitell scale as a boundary condition, the framework demonstrates that emotional attachments formed in digital spaces do not operate in a moral vacuum. Gen Z consumers are capable of decoupling their relational intimacy with a digital creator from their economic behaviors when deeply ingrained ethical boundaries are crossed.

Practically, these insights demand granular strategies for digital marketers and fashion brands, particularly when navigating dual-niche influencer partnerships. Influencers frequently transition between fast fashion "hauls" and sustainable advocacy, creating mixed moral signals. Sustainable brands cannot rely solely on an influencer's high engagement metrics; they must conduct comprehensive content audits to assess the influencer's historical promotion of fast fashion. To manage these transitioning influencers, brands should implement strict exclusivity clauses preventing concurrent fast-fashion sponsorships and require influencers to explicitly narrate their transition toward sustainability to their audience. This transparent communication aligns the parasocial relationship with the audience's high ethical baselines, ensuring the resulting purchase intention is not merely additive, but exponentially amplified.

CONCLUSION

As social media services continually narrow the perceived distance between celebrities, influencers, and consumers, the mechanisms driving digital commerce must be rigorously updated to reflect the complexities of the modern consumer mindset. While Kim, Ko & Kim (2015) established the foundational premise that parasocial relationships drive purchase intentions within the fashion industry, the contemporary Gen Z consumer requires a more nuanced model. By integrating the Theory of Planned Behavior and the Muncy-Vitell Consumer Ethics Scale, this conceptual paper establishes that internal moral boundaries act as vital circuit breakers in the digital marketplace.

Ultimately, understanding how consumer ethics moderates parasocial influence equips academics and industry practitioners to better navigate an era where digital intimacy and moral accountability inextricably collide. This framework highlights a broader, fundamental shift in the marketing landscape: the transition from traditional, top-down celebrity marketing toward highly segmented, value-driven digital communities. In these communities, relational trust is contingent upon ethical alignment, dictating that future brand viability relies not just on who is speaking, but on whether their moral actions withstand the scrutiny of an ethically conscious generation.

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