

The Role of Social Media in Influencing Online Purchase Decisions Among Generation Z in Melaka

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of social media on online purchase decisions among Generation Z in Melaka, Malaysia. With the rapid growth of social media as a marketing platform, businesses increasingly rely on influencer engagement, User-Generated Content (UGC), and social media platform features to influence consumers' purchasing behavior. This study aims to analyze the effect of social media influencer engagement, UGC, and the implementation of social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram on online purchase decisions and purchase intention among Generation Z in Melaka. A quantitative research approach was employed using a structured questionnaire distributed to Generation Z in Melaka. A total of 349 valid responses were collected and analyzed. Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses, including correlation and multiple regression techniques, were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software to examine the relationships between the study variables. The findings indicate that social media influencer engagement and User-Generated Content (UGC) have a significant positive influence on online purchase decisions among Generation Z in Melaka. Although social media platforms contribute to higher customer engagement, their direct impact on purchase intention is comparatively weaker. The findings provide valuable insights for businesses, particularly local small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Melaka, in developing effective social media marketing strategies targeting Generation Z consumers.

Keywords— Generation Z, Social Media Marketing, Influencer Endorsement, User-Generated Content (UGC), Platform Engagement, Online Purchase Decisions

INTRODUCTION

The rapid rise of social media platforms has revolutionized global marketing by fundamentally reshaping consumer discovery and purchase decision-making, particularly for Generation Z (Gen Z) (Nesbit & Lole, 2025). As digital natives, this cohort spends substantial hours daily on digital platforms where entertainment and commerce seamlessly converge (Smith & Duggan, 2022). In the current 2026 landscape, Gen Z consumer behavior has evolved to be intensely mobile-first and socially mediated; latest studies show that 73% of consumers aged 18–24 rely on smartphones as their primary shopping device, and their purchase journeys have compressed to the point where discovery, evaluation, and transaction occur within a single session (TGM Research, 2026). Rather than following a linear AIDA funnel from awareness to action, Gen Z navigates an infinite, non-linear loop of inspiration and peer validation (Archrival, 2024, cited in itspersonal.agency). However, a significant problem arises: businesses, especially small and medium enterprises (SMEs) targeting Gen Z in Melaka, Malaysia, continue to misallocate substantial portions of their marketing budgets by treating social media platforms as passive broadcasting channels and focusing on vanity metrics (such as views, likes, and follower counts) while failing to understand which specific content characteristics actually drive product

trust, credibility, and conversion (Chatterjee et al., 2022; Pradhan et al., 2022). This problem is exacerbated by the rise of "influencer fatigue" and the viral "de-influencing" counter-movement (where 62% of Gen Z trust peer reviews over sponsored influencer endorsements, and underconsumption core prompts spending cuts by up to 13%), which have left marketers struggling to understand how different content forms, such as organic user-generated content and paid influencer promotions, dynamically shape Gen Z's purchase intentions (AgilityPR, 2024; Ouyang, 2026; Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020).

To establish the novelty of this research, a comprehensive critical review of existing digital marketing literature is warranted. Traditional frameworks often treat "social media content" as a broad, homogeneous construct, overlooking the critical psychological and behavioral distinctions between highly curated influencer-generated endorsements and organic, decentralized User-Generated Content (UGC) (Boeker & Urman, 2022). While prior studies confirm that influencer credibility and homophily foster parasocial relationships that increase brand trust (Liu & Zheng, 2024; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020), growing consumer skepticism reveals that Gen Z is highly sensitive to brand control and commercialization (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). When an influencer's content is perceived as commercial or brand-dictated, Gen Z views this as a moral transgression, leading to active influencer and brand avoidance—particularly when involving macro-influencers who are held to more stringent ethical standards than micro-influencers (Cocker et al., 2021; Pradhan et al., 2022). In contrast, UGC acts as a trusted, authentic electronic word-of-mouth (e-word-of-mouth or e-WOM) that satisfies Gen Z's demand for transparency, thereby reducing cognitive risk and enhancing purchasing confidence (Ismail, 2023; Putri et al., 2024). This study addresses these critical literature gaps by integrating the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) to construct a multi-dimensional framework that simultaneously evaluates three independent social media components—influencer engagement (peripheral cues), UGC (central cues), and platform interactive features—on online purchase decisions (Ohanian, 1990; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The localized novelty of this research lies in empirically testing this dual-processing theoretical model among Generation Z in Melaka, Malaysia, a geographically and culturally unique market dominated by growing SME social commerce but under-represented in major consumer studies (Zahrah et al., 2024).

To address these empirical and theoretical gaps, this study is guided by three primary research objectives: first, to analyze the direct effect of social media influencer engagement on the online purchase decisions of Gen Z in Melaka; second, to examine the extent to which UGC influences their purchase intentions compared to traditional corporate advertising; and third, to evaluate the impact of interactive platform features (e.g., polls, direct messaging, and live streams on TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook) on customer engagement and transaction intent. The primary theoretical contribution of this study is the successful integration of ELM and TPB in a regional Malaysian context, demonstrating how central cognitive validation and peripheral affective cues interact to shape purchase intentions within a compressed digital journey. Practically, this study provides SMEs in Melaka with a validated, data-driven blueprint for digital resource allocation, demonstrating that while interactive platform engagement fosters surface-level interaction, authentic micro-influencer partnerships and customer-led UGC campaigns are the genuine drivers of actual purchase conversion. Structurally, the remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section II provides a detailed review of the literature, underpinning theories, and hypothesis development; Section III outlines the positivist, deductive quantitative methodology and convenience sampling design; Section IV details the empirical findings, including SPSS-driven demographic profiles, Cronbach's alpha reliability, Pearson correlations, and multiple regression analyses; Section V provides a comprehensive discussion of theoretical and practical implications, research limitations, and future research avenues; and Section VI concludes the paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The rise of social media has greatly changed marketing by influencing how companies communicate with customers and how those customers select what to buy (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2020). For Generation Z, social media serves as a primary source of information, brand discovery, and peer recommendations (Smith & Duggan, 2022). Gen Z spends substantial hours daily on digital platforms, with over 70% of this time dedicated to apps like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. These platforms seamlessly merge socializing, entertainment, and commerce, causing consumers to encounter branded messages organically (Boeker & Urman, 2022).

Consequently, traditional ads are frequently eclipsed by raw, authentic peer content and micro-influencer reviews, which are perceived as highly relatable (Putri et al., 2024).

A. Underpinning Theories

This study integrates the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) to explain the cognitive and behavioral mechanisms of social media marketing (Liu & Zheng, 2024; Raza et al., 2021).

1) Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM): ELM posits that individuals process persuasive messages via two routes: central and peripheral. The central route demands high cognitive elaboration, focusing on message argument quality and detail. The peripheral route relies on simple heuristics or cues, such as source credibility, attractiveness, or likability (Liu & Zheng, 2024). In the digital marketing context, UGC typically prompts central processing because it offers objective and detailed peer reviews. In contrast, influencer endorsement often triggers peripheral processing, where Gen Z consumers are persuaded by parasocial interactions and perceived source credibility (Chatterjee et al., 2022).

2) Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB): TPB asserts that behavioral intention is shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Sekaran & Bougie, 2020). In social media spaces, peer reviews, comments, and engagement metrics provide powerful digital social proof that acts as subjective norms, reducing perceived purchase risks and generating positive purchase intentions (Yasin et al., 2022).

B. Hypotheses Development

1) Influencer Endorsement (H1): Influencers are perceived as relatable peers rather than corporate entities, which fosters high trust (Ismail, 2023). Micro-influencers, specifically, generate substantial engagement due to homophily and one-sided emotional bonds referred to as parasocial relationships (Yusof et al., 2021). Credibility and peer-like authority significantly increase brand trust and online purchase intention (Hermanda et al., 2019; Liu & Zheng, 2024). Thus:

H1: Engagement with social media influencers will positively influence Generation Z's online purchase decisions.

2) User-Generated Content (H2): UGC comprises organic product reviews, unboxing videos, and ratings shared by everyday consumers (Putri et al., 2024). Because UGC is viewed as independent of brand interests, it carries superior credibility and transparency compared to traditional advertisements (Ismail, 2023). This reduces purchase risk and drives positive attitudes toward online shopping (Liaw et al., 2022). Thus:

H2: User-Generated Content (UGC) on social media will positively influence Generation Z's purchase intention more significantly than traditional advertising.

3) Platform Engagement (H3): Interactive platform features like polls, direct messages, and comments allow direct dialogue between brands and users (Zahrah et al., 2024). Interactivity fosters relational trust and quickens the decision process (Nguyen & Simkin, 2022). Thus:

H3: The implementation of social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram will positively influence customer engagement and subsequently increase purchase intention among Generation Z.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A quantitative research design within the positivism paradigm was utilized, adopting a deductive approach where hypotheses are derived from ELM and TPB (Bell et al., 2022). This correlational, cross-sectional study collected data at a single point in time using a structured digital questionnaire.

The target population was Gen Z social media users (born 1997-2012) residing in Melaka, Malaysia, who possess online shopping experience (Raza et al., 2021). Convenience sampling, a non-probability sampling technique, was employed to collect data via Google Forms distributed through digital platforms including WhatsApp, Telegram, and Instagram (Sekaran & Bougie, 2020). Out of a large regional population, a sample size of $N = 349$ valid responses was obtained, which exceeds the typical minimum requirements for structural behavioral modeling (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2020).

The instrument comprised five sections (Table 1), measuring demographic information and the independent/dependent constructs using validated 5-point Likert scales (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). The measurement items were adapted from Putri et al. (2024) for Influencer Endorsement, Zahrah et al. (2024) for UGC, Nguyen and Simkin (2022) for Platform Engagement, and Choudhury and Harrigan (2021) for Purchase Decisions. A pilot test of $N = 30$ respondents recorded a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.721, indicating sound reliability (Petersen, 2019).

Table 1 Research Instrument and Variable Measurement

Section	Construct / Variable	Items	Scale / Source
Section A	Demographics	5	Nominal / Ordinal
Section B	Influencer Endorsement (IV1)	5	5-point Likert / Putri et al. (2024)
Section C	User-Generated Content (IV2)	5	5-point Likert / Zahrah et al. (2024)
Section D	Platform Engagement (IV3)	5	5-point Likert / Nguyen & Simkin (2022)
Section E	Online Purchase Decision (DV)	5	5-point Likert / Choudhury & Harrigan (2021)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Demographic Profile

Table 2 outlines the demographic characteristics of the $N = 349$ Gen Z respondents in Melaka. The sample was dominated by male respondents (63.6%) and those aged 21-23 years old (71.9%). Most participants were in tertiary education or newly employed (46.1%) with an educational/professional focus in Engineering, STEM & IT (71.1%). Furthermore, 44.1% spent over 5 hours daily on social media platforms, indicating high digital presence.

Table 2 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 349)

Demographic Variable	Category	Freq.	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	222	63.6
	Female	127	36.4
Age	18-20 years old	65	18.6
	21-23 years old	251	71.9
	24-26 years old	26	7.4
	27 years old and above	7	2.0
Professional Focus	Technology Management & Business	100	28.7
	Engineering, STEM & IT	248	71.1
	Unspecified / Missing	1	0.3
Current Activity	Tertiary Education (Diploma/Cert.)	40	11.5
	Tertiary Education (Degree Year 2)	60	17.2
	Tertiary Education (Degree Year 3)	88	25.2
	Tertiary Education / Employed (Year 4+)	161	46.1
Daily Social Media Usage	Less than 1 hour	34	9.7
	1-3 hours	82	23.5
	3-5 hours	78	22.3

	More than 5 hours	154	44.1
	Unspecified / Missing	1	0.3

B. Reliability Analysis

Reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha (α) as shown in Table 3. Influencer Endorsement ($\alpha = 0.698$), Platform Engagement ($\alpha = 0.698$), and Online Purchase Decision ($\alpha = 0.640$) demonstrated acceptable internal consistency for exploratory research. User-Generated Content achieved a good reliability coefficient ($\alpha = 0.735$).

Table 3 Reliability Coefficients of Constructs

Construct / Scale	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)
Influencer Endorsement (IV1)	5	0.698
User-Generated Content (IV2)	5	0.735
Platform Engagement (IV3)	5	0.698
Online Purchase Decision (DV)	5	0.640

C. Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive analysis revealed very high positive perceptions across all constructs. Influencer Endorsement items registered high means, with the statement "I feel confident trying products recommended by influencers" scoring the highest ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 0.708$). UGC items had means between 4.25 and 4.52, with "I trust reviews from real customers more than advertisements" registering the highest agreement ($M = 4.52$, $SD = 0.717$). Platform Engagement items ranged from 4.40 to 4.53, led by brand responsiveness ($M = 4.53$). Purchase Decision was highly positive, where "Social media plays a strong role in shaping my online purchase decisions" achieved a mean of 4.56.

D. Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation (Table 4) indicated positive, statistically significant linear relationships among all constructs ($p < 0.001$). Influencer Endorsement ($r = 0.814$) and UGC ($r = 0.795$) exhibited very strong correlations with Online Purchase Decisions. Platform Engagement also recorded a strong correlation ($r = 0.688$).

Table 4 Pearson Correlation Matrix

Construct	IV1	IV2	IV3	DV
IV1: Influencer Endorsement	1.000	.755**	.776**	.814**
IV2: User-Generated Content	.755**	1.000	.769**	.795**
IV3: Platform Engagement	.776**	.769**	1.000	.688**
DV: Online Purchase Decision	.814**	.795**	.688**	1.000

E. Multiple Regression Analysis

Multiple linear regression was conducted using the Enter method. The regression model (Table 5) was highly robust, with $R = 0.860$, $R^2 = 0.739$, and Adjusted $R^2 = 0.737$, meaning 73.9% of the variance in Online Purchase Decisions is collectively explained by the three social media constructs. The model is highly significant: $F(3, 345) = 325.376$, $p < 0.001$.

Table 5 Multiple Linear Regression Analysis Coefficients

Predictor	B	Std. Error	β	t	Sig.
(Constant)	0.846	0.122	—	6.962	<.001
IV1: Influencer Endorsement	0.486	0.044	0.527	11.091	<.001
IV2: User-Generated Content	0.387	0.041	0.446	9.540	<.001
IV3: Platform Engagement	-0.059	0.045	-0.064	-1.322	.187

F. Discussion of Hypotheses

1) H1: Social Media Influencer Engagement (Accepted): The significant regression coefficients ($B = 0.486$, $p < 0.001$) support H1. Influencer endorsements generate trust and strong parasocial interaction (PSI) among Gen Z consumers, acting as opinion leaders who shape attitudes through the peripheral processing route of the ELM (Hermenda et al., 2019; Liu & Zheng, 2024).

2) H2: User-Generated Content (Accepted): H2 is supported by highly significant regression values ($B = 0.387$, $p < 0.001$). UGC acts as strong digital social proof, enhancing purchase intention under the TPB framework. This aligns with ELM's central route, as detailed peer feedback is highly valued for its transparency and authenticity (Ismail, 2023; Putri et al., 2024).

3) H3: Platform Engagement (Rejected): Despite a strong bivariate correlation ($r = 0.688$, $p < 0.001$), platform engagement had a non-significant direct effect in the regression model ($B = -0.059$, $p = 0.187$), rejecting H3. This indicates that interactive features are insufficient to motivate actual purchases without credible content elements (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2020; Nguyen & Simkin, 2022).

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Theoretical Implications

This research successfully integrated the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) to explain the digital buying behavior of Gen Z within a localized geographical context. It highlights that cognitive processing of objective peer feedback (central route) and affective bonding with micro-influencers (peripheral route) jointly predict online transaction decisions. Furthermore, it exposes that platform interaction metrics (subjective engagement) do not directly translate into transaction intent unless accompanied by credible source cues.

B. Practical Recommendations for SMEs

Local Malaysian SMEs targeting Gen Z in Melaka should focus social media marketing budgets on content credibility rather than surface-level metrics. First, SMEs should engage micro-influencers who build high parasocial trust (Yusof et al., 2021). Second, brands must foster UGC by incentivizing customer reviews and unboxing clips, which provide necessary peer-validated social proof (Ismail, 2023). Lastly, interactive platform features (live streams, Q&A polls) should be utilized to distribute authentic influencer and customer testimonials (Zahrah et al., 2024).

C. Limitations and Future Research

This study is geographically restricted to Gen Z consumers in Melaka, and relies on self-reported questionnaires. Future studies could incorporate a broader national sample across different Malaysian states. Differentiating between product categories (e.g., fashion, food, electronics) would also clarify how purchase decisions vary across diverse consumer markets (Wahyuni & Thohiriyah, 2018).

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that social media influencer engagement and User-Generated Content (UGC) are the primary drivers of online purchase decisions among Generation Z in Melaka, Malaysia. While social media platforms effectively foster customer engagement and interaction, platform features alone do not directly influence transaction intention unless backed by persuasive content and social proof. To engage Gen Z consumers effectively, businesses, especially local SMEs, must move beyond passive broadcasting and surface-level engagement metrics. Instead, they should invest in building trust through micro-influencer collaborations and authentic peer-to-peer content, thereby establishing a credible and relatable digital presence.

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