

Influencer Credibility?

Reevaluating Influencer Status & Engagement Among Gen-Z TikTok Users

by

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Abstract

"Influencer Credibility? Reevaluating Influencer Status & Engagement Among Gen-Z TikTok Users" examines how influencer status and content type impact Gen-Z's perceptions of credibility, engagement, and purchase intentions on TikTok. Using a 2x2 experimental design, the study tested how high- versus low-status influencers and promotional versus organic content shaped consumer responses among 141 Gen-Z TikTok users.

Results revealed that content type, specifically organic content, significantly increased both perceived credibility and purchase intention, while there was no significant effect of an influencer's status. Additionally, perceived credibility was strongly correlated with engagement behaviors such as liking, sharing, and bookmarking a post. These findings challenge traditional assumptions about follower count and highlight Gen-Z's importance of authenticity over status in digital marketing. The findings contribute to the evolving literature on influencer marketing and offer practical guidance for brands aiming to maximize their return on TikTok influencers.

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Introduction

TikTok: a social media app that has surpassed 1 billion monthly active users globally with users spending an average of just under an hour per day watching videos (SEO AI). Among this user base is Gen-Z, a generation that values authenticity and reliability when engaging with social media content. One of these consumers might watch a seemingly-ordinary influencer walk through their skincare routine, whose casual tone makes the products they recommend feel authentic and trustworthy. However, the next video might reveal a stark contrast: a high-profile influencer promoting the same product in a professionally-edited post. Both posts can capture attention, but which one truly influences the decision to purchase the product? This phenomenon – how social media influencers (SMIs) of different status levels shape consumer behavior - lies at the heart of this study.

As social media continues to serve as a key source of product discovery, brands are increasingly integrating influencer marketing into their budgets (Leung et al., 2022). SMIs are defined as "a subset of digital content creators defined by their significant online following, distinctive brand persona, and patterned relationships with commercial sponsors," (Duffy, 2020). Unlike traditional celebrities, SMIs operate at various levels of influence, from niche creators with small-yet-loyal followings to megainfluencers with millions of followers. TikTok, a leading platform for such SMIs, is particularly impactful due to its algorithm, which curates a personalized feed based on user interests and behaviors – making it a powerful tool for reaching Gen-Z.

The motivation to research SMIs and Gen-Z is twofold. First, the rise of "ordinary" influencers with relatable lifestyles challenges the traditional notion of influencers being celebrities (Kim et al., 2022). Second, with Gen-Z being a "digitally native" generation, their

perception of influencer authenticity and credibility differs from that of older generations, such as Millennials, who are a mix of digital natives and digital immigrants, having not grown up fully immersed in social media (Singer et al., 2023).[1] As of 2021, Gen-Z controls over $360 billion in disposable income and is projected to account for more than 25% of the global income by 2030 (Singer et al., 2023, Winck 2020). Additionally, TikTok's emphasis on short-term, algorithm-driven video content offers SMIs a unique platform to reach and engage Gen-Z (Haenlein et al., 2020).

Despite the recent increase in literature surrounding influencer marketing, several gaps remain. Much of the existing literature focuses broadly on social media platforms such as Instagram, leaving TikTok's unique environment relatively underexplored. On TikTok, the traditional markers of status, such as follower count, may function differently due to the platform's algorithmic visibility and virality. This creates a need to investigate how Gen-Z interprets status signals and credibility in this specific context. Moreover, although Gen-Z's preference for authenticity is well-studied, few studies have empirically tested how they respond to promotional versus organic content, especially in interaction with influencer status. These research gaps limit our theoretical understanding of how status and authenticity function jointly in shaping trust, credibility, and consumer behavior.

The rise of SMIs presents a challenge for brands: how to select the "correct" influencer in order to receive the maximum return on their investment. Brands face crowded markets and need to be strategic about how they can attract consumer attention that will lead to purchases. This can be understood through the Attention, Interest, Desire and Action (AIDA) model, a model

[1] While this study focuses on Gen-Z due to their unique relationship with digital media and SMI content, I acknowledge that attitudes might differ for other generations, such as Millennials, who engage in social media in a different manner.

typically applied in marketing activities to highlight the stages a consumer travels through, from initial product interest to final purchase. SMIs help bridge the gap between Attention (where a consumer first learns about a brand or product) and Action (where the consumer makes a final purchase decision). In this process, perceived credibility plays a critical role. One of the main issues consumers face is determining what marketing messages are credible, defined as the perceived believability of information by individuals who may struggle to discern genuine content with fake or misleading claims (Viviani & Pasi, 2017), as they are often inundated with marketing claims.

The purpose of this research is to explore a crucial, yet understudied, aspect of influencer marketing: how SMI status and content type (organic vs. promotional) interact to influence perceived credibility and purchase intention, particularly among Gen-Z users on TikTok. In doing so, it contributes to both academic understanding and practical marketing strategy. While high-status SMIs, with large followings and perceived authority, can potentially boost a brand's marketing through their credibility, low-status SMIs often appear more relatable and trustworthy– potentially enhancing perceptions of authenticity. Brands must navigate this tradeoff when selecting SMIs: do they prioritize reach, or resonance?

This study examines two dimensions that together address the credibility challenge. The first is influencer status, defined by an SMI's category and rank within a social system (Jensen et al., 2011), operationalized in this study via follower count. The second is content type – whether a post is organic (unpaid, experience-centric) or promotional (explicitly sponsored) – which influences how audiences attribute motivation and authenticity to the SMI (Kim & Song, 2020). While organic content tends to be perceived as more genuine, promotional content may trigger skepticism – especially if not aligned with the influencer's persona or values.

This research is grounded in three key theories: Source Credibility Theory, which evaluates how trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness influence persuasion (Ohanian, 1990); Attribution Theory, which considers how audiences infer SMI motivation (Graham & Folkes, 1990); and Social Comparison Theory, which explains how users relate to SMIs through upward or lateral comparisons (Festinger, 1954). By examining content through the lens of these theories, this study aims to explore how SMI status and content type interact to shape Gen-Z users' attitudes towards influencers and their purchase intentions.

By examining how these variables interact, this study offers new insights into what makes an influencer effective on TikTok– not just in terms of visibility, but in terms of trust and impact. Prior studies (e.g., Shan et al. (2019)) have explored influencer identity perceptions broadly, but few have explicitly analyzed status as a factor in shaping consumer perceptions. Similarly, the role of content type in moderating these effects–particularly among Gen-Z–remains under-researched. This study aims to fill those gaps through a 2x2 experimental design that tests these dynamics empirically.

Ultimately, this research aims to offer brands actionable guidance: how to craft influencer partnerships that align with Gen-Z's expectations for transparency, relatability, and trustworthiness. In doing so, it also contributes to broader conversations about credibility, status, and authenticity in the digital age.

Research Question: ***How do Gen-Z's perceptions of influencer credibility change based on the influencer's status and the type of content shared?***

Literature Review

What Do We Know About SMIs and Influencer Marketing

Brands continue to utilize influencer marketing (IM) as a digital communication strategy, leveraging its power to build consumer trust, shape perceptions, and ultimately drive purchase behavior. The global IM market reached $13.8 billion USD in 2022, and will continue to grow as 75% of brand marketers indicated plans to increase investment in the space (Geyser 2022, as cited in Kim et al., 2022). In contrast to traditional advertising, IM empowers social media influencers (SMIs) to seamlessly integrate their content with marketing messages, showcasing a brand's offerings to consumers in a genuine and relatable manner. In today's digital age, effectively promoting a brand's product or service holds significance as consumers often turn to social media recommendations before making purchasing decisions (Singer et al., 2023). The effectiveness of IM lies in its capacity to infuse brand communications with a touch and establish credibility–particularly appealing to audiences to value authenticity.

The Scope of Social Media Influencers

SMIs are defined as individuals with a significant online following, a distinctive brand persona, and recurring partnerships with commercial sponsors (Duffy, 2020). They exist across a wide spectrum of social status, ranging from creators with less than 10,000 followers to megainfluencers like Charli D'Amelio, who boasts over 150 million followers. This spectrum introduces challenges in how viewers perceive credibility and expertise when engaging with their content. Unlike traditional celebrity advertising, SMIs elicit a deeper level of engagement from consumers through perceived authenticity, driven by perceived similarities and genuine personal connections followers feel toward influencers (Shoenberger & Kim, 2022). SMIs can also act as opinion leaders who can help guide consumer decisions, as they often specialize in specific areas

and possess relevant expertise knowledge (Khamis et al., 2016, as cited in Li & Peng, 2021). Their credibility is not solely determined by the number of followers they have, rather how they strike a balance between relatability and authenticity.

TikTok's Disruption of Traditional Influence

TikTok has played a significant role in the development of IM. Its unique "For You Page" algorithm allows both high and low-status SMIs to effectively reach targeted audiences, branching away from traditional "celebrity advertising" where only those with large followings could be influencers. TikTok's short-form videos match Gen-Z's media habits and enhance opportunities for brands to reach younger audiences in more casual, non-commercial ways (Haenlein et al., 2020). For example, Alix Earle, who now boasts over 7 million followers, started off as a freshman at the University of Miami by posting "Get Ready With Me" videos, offering content that felt unfiltered and authentic. The platform's design allows for the emergence of creators who feel less aspirational and more authentic– challenging what influence looks like.

How Gen-Z Views Authenticity

According to Singer et al. (2023), there are generational differences in how authenticity is defined and perceived. While Millennials value transparency, content quality, and professionalism, Gen-Z prioritizes emotional openness, vulnerability, and personal connection. Gen-Z tends to see SMIs as peers or close friends, but are quick to spot and call out any inauthentic interactions. The "de-influencer" movement, for example, emerged in response to the oversaturation of inauthentic content on social media, encouraging more intentional consumption aligned with their values (Leung et al., 2022). Kim et al. (2022) highlights that "consumers tend to perceive influencers as relatively self-serving and not overly altruistic," a perception that may

challenge SMIs' credibility among Gen-Z, who value alignment with their personal values. For Gen-Z, authenticity is not a choice: it is key to assessing an SMI's overall credibility.

Credibility, the AIDA Model, and the SMI Advantage

The AIDA model – Attention, Interest, Desire, and Action – provides a framework for comprehending how SMIs guide consumers through the decision-making process. IM allows SMIs to weave brand messaging into their personal content to simultaneously capture attention and foster trust. Research shows that 63% of Gen-Z and Millennials trust influencers over brands, highlighting the persuasive power of SMIs (Grieb et al. 2019, as cited in Singer et al., 2023), underscoring the role of parasocial relationships. SMIs are able to connect brands with highly-targeted audiences effectively as they often have a deep understanding of their audience and create content that resonates with them (Ki et al., 2020, as cited in Singer et al., 2023). This expertise, along with the dimensions of trustworthiness and attractiveness can make SMIs credible, persuasive messengers (Ohanian, 1990) that allow for an effective connection between the SMI and consumers. Expertise allows SMIs to act as reliable sources within their respective category to make sure promotional messages are perceived as informed and professional. For example, Kyle Thomas, a TikToker with over 34 million followers, is most known for posting engaging, informative videos about his rescue animals. His genuine passion and expertise of wildlife have enabled him to successfully launch his own merchandise line, authentically leveraging the trust and loyalty he has built amongst his followers.

Why Content Type Matters

While SMIs may be credible, the type of content they post continues to play a critical role in how that credibility is evaluated. Organic content, consisting of unpaid, experience-centric posts that reflect an influencer's personal lifestyle or values, is typically seen as more authentic

due to the absence of overt commercial intent (Kim & Song, 2020). These posts often feel more personal, less scripted, and aligned with the influencer's day-to-day persona, making them particularly resonant with Gen-Z. Promotional content, on the other hand, involves brand-sponsored posts designed to drive consumer action, and by nature introduces explicit commercial motivations. As a result, promotional content is often scrutinized more closely by consumers and has been shown to diminish perceived authenticity when not carefully aligned with the influencer's tone or values (Kim & Song, 2020; Audrezet, de Kerviler & Moulard, 2020; Boerman, Willemsen & van der Aa, 2017). Still, not all promotional content is received negatively—its effectiveness often depends on how transparently and seamlessly it is integrated within the influencer's broader content strategy, an issue that remains underexplored in the literature.

However, research by Leung et al. (2022) demonstrates that promotional content can still be effective when carefully executed. The concept of engagement elasticity, which refers to the responsiveness of consumer engagement with SMIs, follows a U-shaped pattern, underscoring that even sponsored content can still be effective if it resonates with a SMI's audience (Leung et al., 2022). Leung et al. (2022) also found that high sponsor salience, or the prominence of a brand in a SMI's promotional post, can be beneficial if it enhances the post's informativeness and perceived value. This challenges the assumption that all promotional content is negative, and further highlights the importance of strategic content framing.

Attribution and Understanding Motives

Gen-Z's reception of SMI content is also heavily shaped by motivational attributions, or how they interpret the SMI's reason for endorsing a product. For example, when exposed to promotional content, Gen-Z users might attribute the influencer's endorsement to extrinsic

motivations such as compensation or a free brand trip, reducing perceived credibility. In contract, intrinsic motivations, like genuine interest or personal use of a product, are more likely to enhance trust (Graham & Folkes, 1990, Vrontis et al., 2021). In contrast, Gen-Z users might interpret organic content as intrinsically motivated, aligning with the SMI's authentic interests and values. This distinction fosters greater trust and credibility, as consumers are drawn to influencers who appear as "ordinary" people who aren't motivated by commercial interests (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021; Haenlein et al. 2020). For instance, creators like Becca Bloom, who boasts more than 2 million followers on TikTok, openly shares about her daily routines and can often retain stronger engagement even when promotions appear. Bloom's content feels anchored in personality, not commercial strategy, reinforcing the perception of intrinsic motivation and, in turn, credibility.

Status as a Heuristic in Evaluating Influence

Understanding the concept of status is crucial for examining how SMIs build credibility and influence consumer behavior. Status serves as a quality signal, helping to reduce consumer uncertainty by providing cues about an individual's expertise, trustworthiness and relevance. In IM, where consumers often lack firsthand experience with products or services, status becomes a vital heuristic for evaluating credibility.

Status can be understood as a position within a social system, incorporating both horizontal dimensions (e.g., category or industry) and vertical dimensions (e.g., rank within that category) (Jensen et al., 2011). For SMIs, status is often defined by follower count, and is segmented as follows: nanoinfluencers (<10,000 followers), microinfluencers (10,000-100,000 followers), macroinfluencers (100,000-1,000,000 followers) and megainfluencers (>1,000,000 followers) (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). With these definitions, macro and megainfluencers are

assigned “high” status, while micro and nanoinfluencers are assigned “low” status, with each tier influencing perceived credibility differently based on factors like expertise, relatability and trustworthiness (Vrontis et al., 2021). However, these cues might not operate uniformly across demographics. For Gen-Z, high status may signal polish, but not necessarily trust, especially when authenticity is compromised. Conversely, low-status SMIs may cultivate a stronger sense of credibility through perceived reliability and emotional proximity.

H1: Status increases purchase intention.

How Status Functions Across Tiers

High-status SMIs often evoke upward comparisons, as audiences might admire their success and assume their endorsements are grounded in expertise (Anderson, Hildreth & Howland, 2015). Yet, this aspirational quality can backfire if their messaging feels overly-curated or disconnected from the everyday lifestyle. Low-status SMIs, in contrast, often build trust by appearing more accessible and engaged with their audience (Delia & Maria, 2019). Research suggests that frequent interaction and informal tone enhance perceptions of relatability, especially when the SMI’s lifestyle aligns with their followers. In this context, status is not inherently good or bad, it just interacts with how the SMI is perceived on dimensions of expertise and intent.

How Status and Content Type Work Together

Status and content type jointly influence how audiences perceive credibility. High-status SMIs may be better received when sharing promotional content, as their expertise lends legitimacy to branded messaging (Graham & Folkes, 1990). Conversely, low-status SMIs might be more effective when posting organic content, where their relatabiltiy and lack of overt

sponsorship align with Gen-Z's expectations. This interaction creates a credibility tradeoff, in which each type of influencer performs best under certain content conditions.

H2A: High status increases purchase intention more for promotional content than low status.

H2B: Low status increases purchase intention more for organic content than high status.

Credibility as a Function of Fit

Finally, audiences evaluate credibility based not just on status or content, but on the alignment between the two. When there's a mismatch, such as a low-status SMI posting overtly-promotional content, Gen-Z may perceive the message as insincere or profit-driven. However, when the message aligns with the influencer's perceived role and motivation, credibility is more likely to be preserved or enhanced.

H3: Low-status influencers sharing organic content will be perceived as more credible than high-status influencers sharing organic content, while high-status influencers sharing promotional content will be perceived as more credible than low-status influencers sharing promotional content.

Methodology

This study employed a mix-methods approach 2x2 experimental design to examine how SMI status (high vs. low) and content type (promotional vs. organic) affect Gen-Z consumers' perceptions and engagement with SMIs. The study design draws on frameworks used in prior SMI research (e.g., Djafarova & Rush, 2017; Campbell & Farrell, 2020) and tests the hypotheses outlined in the previous section.

Figure 1. 2x2 Experimental Design Matrix

	Organic Content	Promotional Content
High-Status SMI	Perceived as authoritative, yet potentially less relatable	Leverages expertise, mitigates skepticism via status signals
Low-Status SMI	Maximizes authenticity and relatability; highly credible	Risk of appearing inauthentic or 'selling out'; lower perceived trust

Independent Variables

Influencer Status

SMIs were categorized into two status levels based on follower count, using Campbell & Farrell's (2020) classification of SMIs:

- High-status SMIs were defined as megainfluencers with over 1,000,000 followers.
- Low-status SMIs were defined as nanoinfluencers with less than 10,000 followers.

Participants were notified of these distinctions through an introductory statement emphasizing the range of TikTok follower counts and what those numbers represent in terms of popularity. In both high- and low-status conditions, the influencer was described as operating within the same category (beauty/lifestyle) and producing content with similar tone and production value. This helped control for confounds related to niche, attractiveness, or content quality.

Content Type:

Two types of influencer content were tested:

- Promotional content included explicit product endorsements, discount codes, and #Sponsored hashtags—reflecting commercial partnerships.

- **Organic content** involved casual mentions of a favorite product without overt promotion, links, or branding—reflecting experience-based, personally motivated posts.

Each condition's text was scripted to embed either commercial or lifestyle cues clearly, while maintaining consistent voice and length. Hashtags and calls-to-action were manipulated to reflect content type while controlling for tone.

Dependent Variables

Dependent variables were collected via a post-exposure survey and included:

- **Perceived Credibility and Authenticity**

  Participants rated the influencer's trustworthiness, expertise, and perceived honesty using 7-point Likert items (e.g., *"I find this influencer credible"*, *"I would trust their recommendation"*).

- **Purchase and Engagement Intent**

  Participants evaluated their likelihood of purchasing the featured product and interacting with the influencer's content (e.g., *"This post would make me more interested in the product," "I would engage with this post by liking or sharing it"*).

- **Knowledgeability and Social Fit**

  Additional items measured perceptions of the influencer's category knowledge and fit within the TikTok ecosystem.

All items were adapted from prior validated SMI measurement instruments and scaled from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Manipulation Checks

To verify that participants interpreted the experimental conditions as intended, two manipulation check questions were administered:

- Status Comprehension: “Approximately how many followers does this influencer have?” (multiple-choice)
- Content Type Evaluation: “How promotional is this post?” (promotional or not very promotional)

Participants who failed manipulation checks were excluded in the analyses.

Experiment Procedure

The procedure followed five steps:

1. **Introductory Blurb and Demographic Screener**

   All participants were first presented with a standardized paragraph explaining follower count ranges on TikTok and how these relate to influencer popularity. This established the operational cue for “status.”

   Participants then reported their gender (male, female, non-binary/prefer not to say), which was used in later subgroup analysis to assess whether gender influenced perceptions of credibility or purchase intent.

2. **Random Assignment to Condition**

   Each participant was randomly assigned to one of four conditions:

   - High-status / Promotional

- High-status / Organic
- Low-status / Promotional
- Low-status / Organic

3. **Scenario Presentation**

   Participants read a short narrative simulating a TikTok post. Scenarios described the influencer's follower count, content style, and messaging tone. For example:

   - Promotional content included discount codes, brand hashtags (#Ad, #Sponsored), and explicit purchase encouragement.
   - Organic content reflected casual, authentic storytelling with hashtags like #DayInMyLife and no mention of sponsorship.

4. **Survey Measures**

   Immediately after viewing the content, participants completed a survey assessing their impressions of the influencer and the post using the dependent variables and manipulation checks listed above.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were TikTok users aged 18–24 residing in the United States—representing the Gen-Z demographic. Inclusion criteria required that participants use TikTok for at least 5 hours per week, ensuring relevance and platform familiarity.

A minimum of 128 participants (32 per condition) was determined using a priori power analysis for a two-way ANOVA (Cohen's $f = 0.25$, $\alpha = 0.05$, power = 0.80). Stratified sampling was used to ensure representation across gender, ethnicity, and region.

To ensure clear status comparisons, only the extreme ends of the SMI scale (nanoinfluencer and megainfluencer) were used in the experiment. This decision strengthens internal validity by maximizing contrast between the two levels of the independent variable.

Results

The four hypotheses, as well as additional post-hoc comparisons and subgroups, were analyzed in R. The original dataset consisted of 199 Gen-Z TikTok users who indicated that they spend more than five hours per week on the app. However, after accounting for failed attention checks, the final clean dataset was N=141. 139 of the 141 respondents identified as male or female, and thus were included in gender-based subgroup analyses. Analyses included independent sample t-tests, one and two-way ANOVAs, linear regressions and post-hoc comparisons with Tukey adjustments and Pearson correlations. Detailed demographic characteristics of the survey respondents are found below in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Demographic Variable	n
Male	57
Female	82
Prior purchase (yes)	105
Prior purchase (no)	36

H1: Does SMI status affect purchase intention?

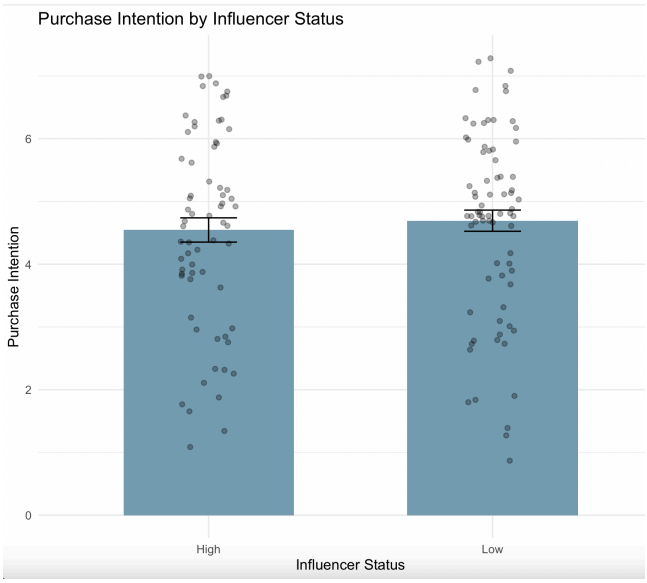
An independent samples t-test and one-way ANOVA were conducted to test whether SMI status affected purchase intention. These were to show whether the means of purchase intention were significantly different between the high and low-status SMIs. The t-test revealed no

significant difference in purchase intention between respondents exposed to a high-status SMI ($M = 4.55$, $\sigma = 1.57$) and those exposed to a low-status SMI ($M = 4.69$, $\sigma = 1.46$, $t(139) = -0.58$, $p = 0.564$.

Similarly, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to check whether the group means were significantly different, which also yielded non-significant results ($F(1, 139) = 0.34$, $p = 0.564$). The 95% confidence interval for the difference in means ranged from -0.65 to 0.36, indicating that the true difference could plausibly be zero or favor either group.

H1's results suggest that SMI status on its own is not a significant predictor of whether or not a Gen-Z consumer will purchase a product.

Figure 2: Bar Chart of Purchase Intention by Influencer Status

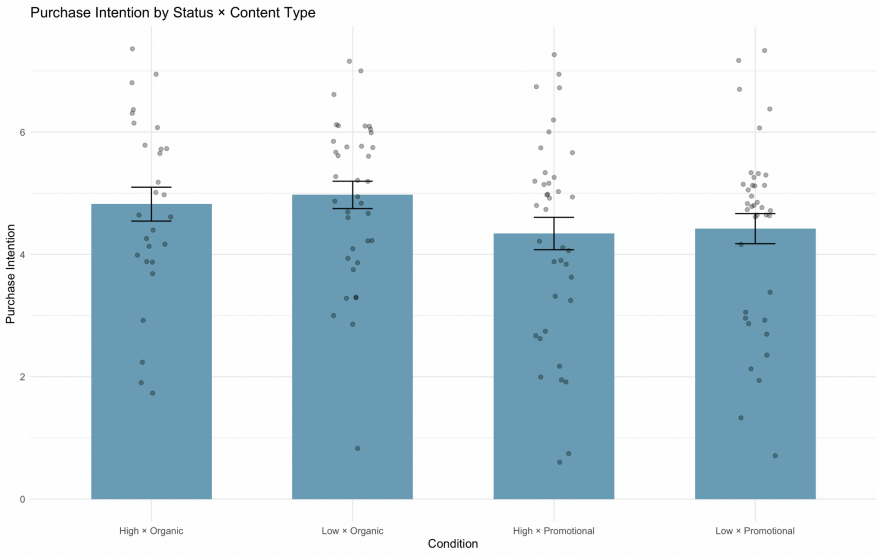


H2: Does the interaction between status and content type affect purchase intention?

A two-way ANOVA was conducted to test for interaction effects between SMI status and content type. The test revealed no significant interaction between SMI status and content type on purchase intention, $F(1, 137) = 0.02$, $p = 0.887$, consistent with the results of H1.

However, there was a significant main effect of content type, $F(1, 137) = 4.16$, $p = 0.43$. Participants exposed to organic content reported higher levels of purchase intention ($M = 4.89$) compared to those who were exposed to promotional content ($M = 4.38$), regardless of SMI status.

Figure 3: Purchase intention by influencer status and content type



Condition 4, Low/Organic, had the highest purchase intention ($M = 4.97$, $\sigma = 1.36$), along with Condition 2, High/Organic ($M = 4.82$, $\sigma = 1.47$). Conditions 1 and 3, High/Promotional and Low/Promotional, respectively, yielded lower purchase intentions ($M = 4.34$, $\sigma = 1.63$ and $M = 4.42$, $\sigma = 1.52$, respectively). Post-hoc pairwise comparisons that were Tukey-adjusted revealed none of the differences in conditions reached statistical significance (all ps > 0.26).

A regression model also supported the main effect of content type. In the main-effects model, content type here significantly predicted purchase intention ($\beta = -0.518$, $p = 0.043$), indicating that promotional content lowered purchase intention compared to organic content. SMI status was not a significant predictor ($\beta = 0.112$, $p = 0.659$). In the interaction model, none

of the predictors were statistically significant (β = -0.073, p = 0.887), suggesting that the effect of content type was consistent across low and high statuses.

Table 2: H2 regression results for purchase intention

Term	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	p value	Model
Baseline: Low/Organic	4.84	0.235	20.60	< 0.001	PI: Main Effects
SMI Status (High)	0.112	0.253	0.443	0.659	PI: Main Effects
Content Type (Promotional)	-0.518	0.253	-2.05	**0.043**	PI: Main Effects
Baseline: Low/Organic	4.82	0.284	17	< 0.001	PI: Interaction
SMI Status (High)	0.152	0.376	0.403	0.688	PI: Interaction
Content Type (Promotional)	-0.479	0.374	-1.28	0.202	PI: Interaction
Status x Content Interaction	-0.073	0.510	-0.142	0.887	PI: Interaction

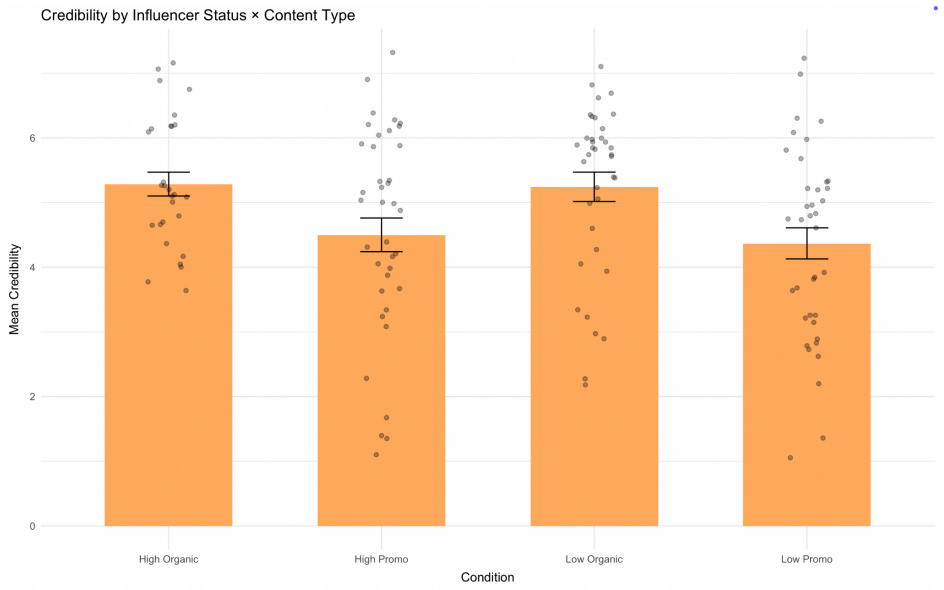
These results partially support H2. The main effect of content type suggests that organic content was more effective at driving purchase intention than promotional content. No significant interaction with content and status.

H3: Does the interaction between status and content type affect perceived credibility?

To test whether SMI status and content type affect perceived credibility, a two-way ANOVA was conducted. While there was no significant interaction between status and content type, $F(1, 137) = 0.035$, $p = 0.852$, there was a significant main effect of content type on

perceived credibility: $F(1, 137) = 12.26$, $p < 0.001$. Survey respondents rated SMIs as more credible when they shared organic content (M = 5.27) versus those who shared promotional content (M = 4.44).

Figure 4: Credibility by Influencer Status × Content Type



Post-hoc analyses showed that Low Organic was rated significantly more credible than Low Promotional, $p = 0.039$, while High Organic was rated marginally more credible than Low Promotional, $p = 0.048$. Regression results further supported these post-hoc comparisons. In the main effects model, content type significantly predicted perceived credibility ($\beta = -0.834$, $p < 0.001$), while SMI status was not significant ($\beta = -0.091$, $p = 0.702$). In the interaction model, content type was still a significant predictor ($\beta = -0.786$, $p = 0.027$), but the interaction term was not significant ($\beta = -0.089$, $p = 0.852$), suggesting that the effect of content type on credibility was consistent across both high and low status.

Table 2: H3 Regression Results – Credibility

Term	Estimate	Std. Error	*t* value	*p* value	Model
Baseline: Low/Organic	5.31	0.220	24.10	< 0.001	Credibility: Main Effects
SMI Status (High)	-0.091	0.237	-0.384	0.702	Credibility: Main Effects
Content Type (Promotional)	-0.834	0.237	-3.51	**< 0.001**	Credibility: Main Effects
Baseline: Low/Organic	5.29	0.266	19.90	< 0.001	Credibility: Interaction
SMI Status (High)	-0.043	0.352	-0.121	0.904	Credibility: Interaction
Content Type (Promotional)	-0.786	0.350	-2.24	**0.027**	Credibility: Interaction
Status x Content Interaction	-0.089	0.478	-0.187	0.852	Credibility: Interaction

These results highlight the importance of content authenticity as a driving factor of perceived credibility, partially supporting H3.

Is credibility correlated with engagement? + Authenticity, Trustworthiness, Knowledgeability

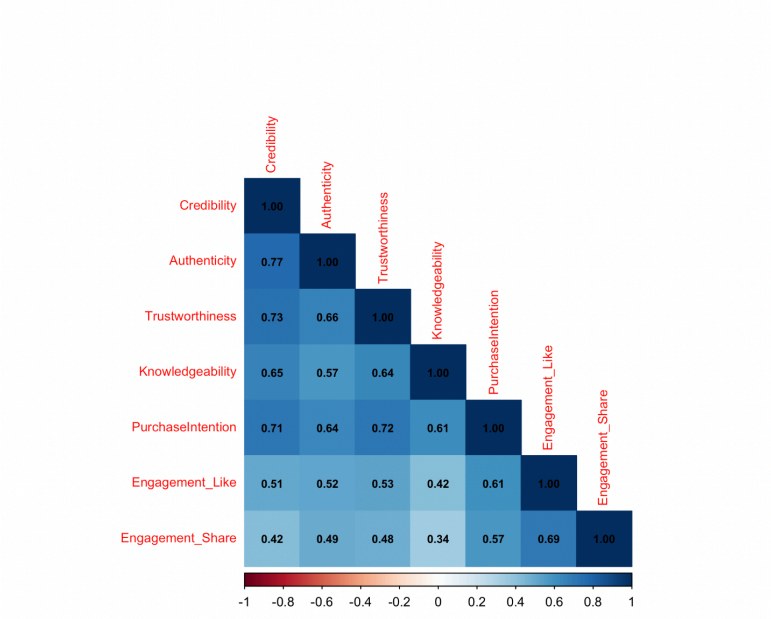
Pearson correlations revealed that survey respondents' perceptions of an SMI's credibility, trustworthiness, authenticity and knowledgeability were significantly and positively associated with both engagement and purchase intention.

In regards to a respondent liking or bookmarking a post, correlations ranged from r = 0.42 to 0.53 ($p > 0.001$), with trustworthiness ($r = 0.53$) and authenticity ($r = 0.52$) showing the

strongest associations. In regards to sharing a post, all correlations were significant ($p < 0.001$), ranging from $r = 0.34$ (knowledgeability) to $r = 0.50$ (authenticity).

Optional analyses also showed that purchase intention was even more strongly correlated to SMI perceptions. Credibility overall was $r = 0.71$, with specifics like trustworthiness ($r = 0.72$) and authenticity ($r = 0.64$) showing high linkages beyond just engagement.

Figure 5: Correlation matrix



This shows that as perceived credibility increases, Gen-Z consumers are more likely to engage with the SMI's content, especially via likes or bookmarks. This highlights that H4 was fully supported.

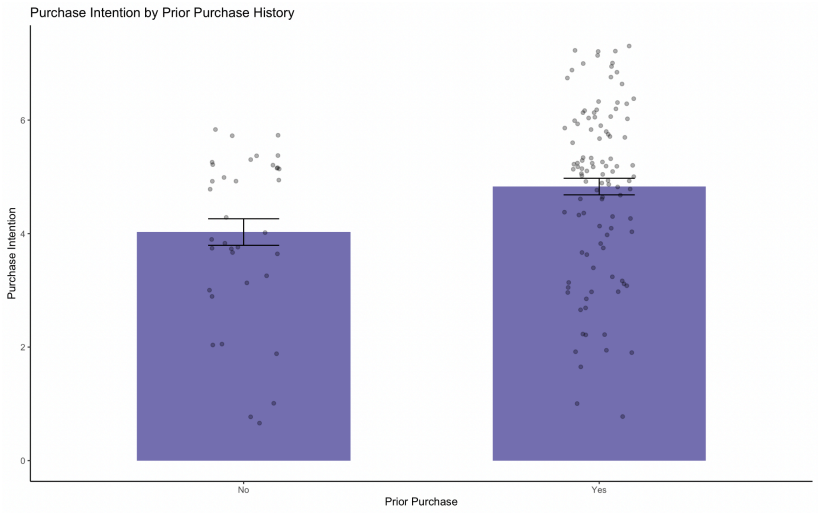
Other post-hoc analyses to see when status might matter

Additional subgroup analyses were conducted to investigate if SMI status and personal characteristics impact purchase intention, as well as previous purchase behavior.

A Welch's independent samples t-test revealed no significant gender-based differences regarding purchase intention: $t(103.86) = 0.47$, $p = 0.642$. The data suggest similar levels of receptivity between male ($M = 4.54$) and female ($M = 4.67$) respondents. A factorial ANOVA revealed no significant main or interaction effects between gender and SMI status on purchase intention. Gender ($F(2, 135) = 0.18$, $p = 0.836$), SMI status ($F(1, 135) = 0.40$, $p = 0.527$), and the interaction between gender and status ($F(2, 135) = 1.13$, $p = 0.327$) were all non-significant.

However, another Welch's t-test did reveal a significant difference between prior purchase history and purchase intention. Survey respondents who had previously purchased from influencers reported a significantly higher purchase intention ($M = 4.83$) than those who had not previously purchased from a SMI ($M = 4.03$), $t(64.30) = -2.90$, $p = 0.005$. A factorial ANOVA revealed similar findings, with a significant main effect of prior purchase ($F(3, 133) = 4.24$, $p = 0.007$) being observed with status ($F(1, 133) = 0.26$, $p = 0.608$) and the interaction ($F(3, 133) = 1.28$, $p = 0.284$).

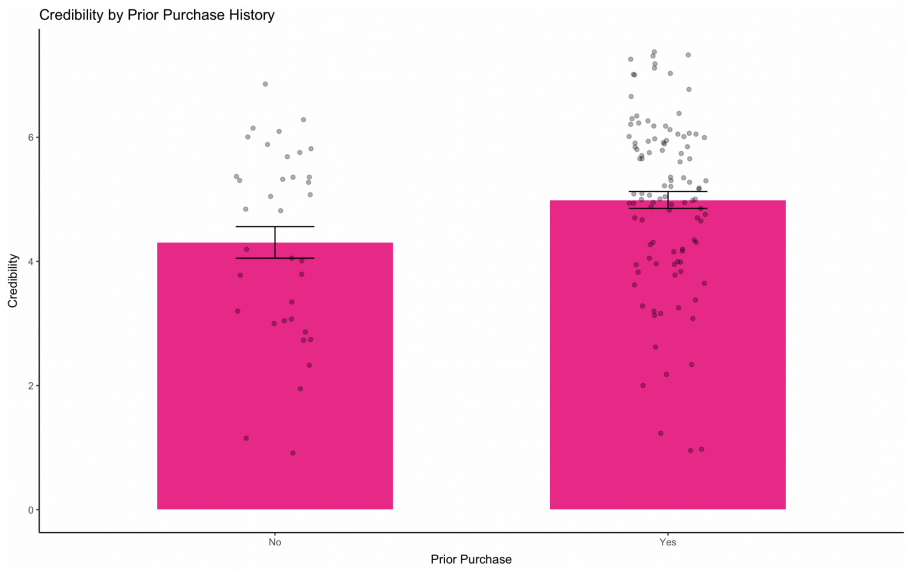
Figure 6: *purchase intention by prior purchase history*



Next, the same tests were run to determine if *credibility* was impacted by SMI status and personal characteristics. Gender revealed no significant impact on credibility rankings: $t(1, 116.45) = -0.03$, $p = 0.977$ with almost identical means ($M = 4.82$). A two-way ANOVA also suggested no gender-related variation in how SMI status shapes perceived credibility: $F(2, 135) = 0.05$, $p = 0.953$ for the main effect of gender and $F(2, 135) = 1.80$, $p = 0.170$ for the interaction.

Again, a Welch's t-test revealed a significant difference between those who had previously purchased from an influencer ($M = 4.99$) than those who did not ($M = 4.31$), $t(56.18) = -2.37$, $p = 0.021$. A follow-up two-way ANOVA did reveal a marginally significant main effect of prior purchase ($F(3, 133) = 2.25$, $p = 0.085$) and a marginal interaction effect between prior purchase and SMI status ($F(3, 133) = 2.22$, $p = 0.089$).

Figure 7: *credibility by prior purchase history*



Discussion

This study investigated how SMI status (high vs. low) and content type (organic vs. promotional) affect Gen-Z consumers' purchase intentions and perceptions of credibility on TikTok. Across four hypotheses and multiple post-hoc analyses, key patterns emerged: while SMI status alone did not significantly affect purchase intention or credibility, content type - specifically the distinction between organic and promotional content - consistently influenced both. Furthermore, credibility was strongly correlated with engagement and purchase intention, affirming the importance of perceived authenticity and trustworthiness in digital influencer marketing.

Contrary to initial expectations and some of the literature on status-based persuasion (Jensen et al., 2011; Ohanian, 1990), SMI status had no significant effect on either purchase intention or perceived credibility. Gen-Z survey respondents did not perceive high-status SMIs to be more persuasive or trustworthy than the low-status SMIs. What does this mean for Gen-Z? Status might not be a strong cue for a more skeptical generation (Singer et al., 2023), who value transparency and authenticity.

Instead of status, the type of content SMIs post was found to be the most consistent and significant predictor of purchase intention and perceived credibility. Organic content was rated by respondents to be more credible and persuasive than promotional content. This correlates with Kim et al. (2022)'s findings - ordinary (in this case, low-status) SMIs can still be persuasive.

The survey results also offer evidence that credibility is significantly impacted by content type. Although the interaction between status and content type was not statistically significant, exploratory patterns suggest that low-status SMIs may have experienced a sharper drop in perceived credibility when posting promotional content. The survey respondents may have

attributed promotional posts to external motives, lowering their perceived authenticity of both high and low-status SMIs.

The results also highlight credibility's close ties to engagement behaviors, particularly with liking or bookmarking posts. This supports the work of Vrontis et al. (2021) and Haelein et al. (2020), who argue that credibility is foundational to user interaction in digital spaces. When Gen-Z consumers perceive a SMI as credible, they are more likely to engage with that SMI's content, even if there isn't a strong intent to purchase the recommended product.

While post-hoc analyses did not reveal any significant interactions between status and content type, there were some interesting results. For example, while low-status SMIs saw larger drops in perceived credibility when posting promotional content, high-status SMIs kept stable credibility ratings across content types. This suggests that low-status SMIs experience more fragile authenticity, possible because Gen-Z might attribute their motivations to be more easily swayed by financial incentives (Graham & Folkes 1990; Thomas et al., 2023).

Managerial Implications

One of the most stressing implications of this study suggests that traditional vanity metrics, such as follower count, may be outdated. Brands should prioritize a SMI's authenticity over their status when crafting marketing campaigns and strategies. Brands who are able to partner with SMIs that focus on organic content, regardless of their status, can connect more closely with Gen-Z TikTok users in terms of intention and engagement. While SMI status has shown to affect perception in other contexts, it does not appear to drive purchase intentions in at least this study. Brands should try and maximize perceived authenticity and trustworthiness with their marketing campaigns to effectively walk a Gen-Z consumer through the AIDA model.

Limitations

There are some limitations associated with this study. First, survey respondents were given a simulated TikTok-style written prompt to read over, instead of watching a real TikTok from an actual SMI, which may have limited external validity. Second, survey respondents were only given one of four random scenarios and were not exposed to the opposite status/content type, which might not perfectly reflect the dynamic TikTok environment. Lastly, in regards to the operationalization of status, it might not have captured all relevant dimensions of "status" (ie. follower count alone versus category).

Future Research

With these results and limitations in mind, future studies have a few points to consider. First, it would be interesting to see a cross-platform comparison. TikTok videos versus Instagram Reels or feed posts could be compared to see if/how platform architecture moderates the relationship between status, content and credibility. Second, a longer study duration could potentially show how credibility and engagement evolves over time with repeated exposure to the same high or low-status SMI. More nuanced research could provide details into how identity factors, such as race, gender, sexual orientation or niche category expertise, intersect with status and content type in shaping audience perceptions.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on influencer marketing, highlighting the primacy of content authenticity over social status in influencing Gen-Z consumer perceptions and behavior on TikTok. While status still remains a relevant signal, its persuasive power is heavily dependent on context, particularly content type. For brands wishing to optimize SMI partnerships, understanding and leveraging the nuances of content and

perceived credibility will be essential in navigating an increasingly skeptical, authenticity-driven generation of customers.

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