

Influencer Marketing Effectiveness Across Generations: Effects on Brand Trust and Customer Engagement in Thailand

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Abstract

Influencer marketing is now a dominant force in digital commerce. Yet how its effectiveness differs across generational cohorts in emerging markets remains poorly understood. This study builds on Parasocial Interaction Theory (PSI), Source Credibility Theory (SCT), and the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) to examine how influencer marketing effectiveness (IME) relates to brand trust (BT) and customer engagement (CE). It tests generational cohort (Gen Z, Millennials, and Gen X) and platform context (TikTok Shop versus Instagram Shop) as structural moderators of both pathways, using data from 450 Thai digital consumers collected via stratified purposive sampling and analyzed with covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM), including multi-group and platform-subgroup comparisons.

IME was positively associated with both BT and CE. CE emerged as the stronger proximal outcome. Both pathways were moderated by generational cohort: the association was strongest for Gen Z and weakest for Gen X. Platform context added a further layer of differentiation. TikTok Shop showed a stronger IME-to-CE link for Gen Z, and Instagram Shop showed a stronger IME-to-BT link for Millennials. Because the design was cross-sectional, these results should be read as associations, not causal effects. The findings extend PSI and SCT into cross-generational, platform-differentiated social-commerce settings, and point to practical ways of tailoring influencer selection and platform strategy by generational cohort in emerging markets.

Keywords: influencer marketing effectiveness; brand trust; customer engagement; generational cohort; platform context; parasocial interaction theory; source credibility theory

Introduction

Influencer marketing has become a central channel in digital commerce, as advertising budgets shift from television and print toward creator-led content and brand discovery increasingly occurs within social feeds. This shift has been especially pronounced in Thailand. Industry estimates put Thailand's influencer advertising market at approximately USD 94.13 million in

2025, projected to grow at a compound annual rate of 13.87% to USD 180.23 million by 2030 (Dataxet, 2026, reporting on 2025 market performance). Approximately 57.4 million Thais use social media, and 27% of social commerce purchases are attributed to an influencer or celebrity recommendation (Statista, 2024). In this context, consumer purchasing behavior in Thailand has been shaped by cultural beliefs in local products, trust in brand image, and product attributes such as quality and perceived authenticity — factors particularly salient in health and lifestyle product categories (Worapongpat, 2026). Thailand, Vietnam, and Malaysia lead Southeast Asia in TikTok Shop sales volume, with Gen Z and younger Millennials driving most purchases through short-form video and live-shopping formats (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024). By end-2025, Thailand's active influencer population is projected to reach 3 million, with micro- and nano-creators, estimated to command 71.5% of market share, outperforming macro-celebrities in commercial impact (Nation Thailand, 2025).

Academic research has not kept pace with this shift. Prior studies frequently rely on follower count or reach as a proxy for influencer marketing effectiveness (IME). That metric indicates exposure, not why some campaigns build lasting brand trust (BT) while others generate engagement without trust, or vice versa (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Research on social media authenticity further reveals that curated online content frequently diverges from real-life experience, creating a gap that can erode consumer trust and alter engagement behavior (Prohmvitak, 2025). Separately, studies on celebrity athlete endorsements demonstrate that followers' attitudes and purchase behaviors are significantly shaped by the credibility and platform presence of the endorser, underscoring the multidimensional nature of influencer effectiveness (Huang & Luo, 2024). Collapsing effectiveness into a single number obscures several distinct mechanisms (credibility, authenticity, domain knowledge, lifestyle fit, and decision impact) that plausibly drive BT and customer engagement (CE) through different pathways (Ohanian, 1990; Audrezet et al., 2020). A second gap concerns generational cohort. Engagement with influencer content differs markedly by age (Dabija et al., 2024), yet formal multi-group tests that estimate cohort-specific parameters for IME's effects on BT and CE remain rare. Marketers are left unsure whether a single campaign performs equivalently across Gen Z, Millennials, and Gen X. A third gap is platform-specific. TikTok Shop and Instagram Shop are often treated as equivalent social commerce channels, despite running on different commercial logics: one built around algorithmic discovery and live checkout, the other around curated follower relationships and considered purchase (Chen et al., 2021; Liang & Turban, 2011). No existing study integrates generational cohort and platform context as joint structural moderators of both the IME-to-BT and IME-to-CE pathways.

This study addresses these three gaps within a single framework. IME is operationalized across five dimensions (source credibility, content authenticity, domain expertise, lifestyle

congruence, and decision impact), grounded in Parasocial Interaction Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956), Source Credibility Theory (Hovland et al., 1953; Ohanian, 1990), and the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Brand trust and customer engagement are modeled as distinct outcomes, not interchangeable proxies for persuasion. Generational cohort (Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X) and platform context (TikTok Shop vs. Instagram Shop) are tested as structural moderators using multi-group covariance-based SEM with $N = 450$ Thai consumers, which speaks directly to the three gaps above.

Research Objectives

This study pursues three objectives:

- 1) To examine the direct effects of IME, decomposed into source credibility, content authenticity, domain expertise, lifestyle congruence, and decision impact, on brand trust and customer engagement among Thai social media consumers.
- 2) To test whether generational cohort (Gen Z, Millennials, and Gen X) moderates the relationships between IME and BT and between IME and CE, and to identify the cohort-specific dimensions carrying the greatest predictive weight.
- 3) To assess whether platform context (TikTok Shop compared to Instagram Shop) moderates the pathway from IME to CE, and how this moderation interacts with generational cohort membership.

Literature Review

Parasocial Interaction Theory (PSI) and Influencer Marketing

When audiences watch a television personality enough times, they start to feel they know that person, even though the relationship runs only one way. Horton and Wohl (1956) called this parasocial interaction (PSI), a concept that has held up well across six decades of media change. What has changed is the environment. On TikTok or Instagram, users can reply to a creator, appear in a live-stream comment, and get a direct-message reaction back. The architecture simulates reciprocity, and audiences respond to the simulation much as they respond to real friendship (Labrecque, 2014; Chung & Cho, 2017). However, this dynamic is complicated by the gap between curated social media self-presentation and authentic experience: when followers perceive a discrepancy between an influencer's online persona and real-life identity, the parasocial bond weakens and brand trust is undermined (Prohmvitak, 2025). Several mechanisms drive this response. Creators who share daily routines, unfiltered opinions, and behind-the-scenes moments lower the psychological distance between themselves and their followers. Familiarity replaces scrutiny, and product mentions pass with less resistance (Giles, 2002). Live-streaming pushes this further: a viewer who hears their own name read aloud during a haul video or cooking

demo experiences something close to co-presence, and that intensifies the bond (Xu et al., 2020). Most relevant to this study, followers whose own values, aesthetics, and aspirations map onto those the creator projects become more susceptible to endorsed products, because purchasing starts to feel like self-expression instead of persuasion (Kim & Song, 2016; Tran & Strutton, 2020). Age also shapes how quickly and how deeply these bonds form. Consumers who grew up scrolling before they could drive have absorbed parasocial relationships as a normal part of social life. Gen Z respondents in cross-national studies report following more creators, trusting their endorsements more readily, and drawing less of a line between online acquaintances and real-world friends than Millennials or Gen X do (Hartmann, 2016; Keib et al., 2018). That generational gradient sits at the center of this study.

Source Credibility Theory (SCT)

Whether we trust a message depends heavily on who delivers it. Hovland et al. (1953) established this empirically in wartime persuasion research, and Ohanian (1990) formalized it into a three-factor model of expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness that remains the dominant framework for evaluating endorser effectiveness. In social commerce settings, the third factor matters less than the first two, and a fourth has emerged as arguably the most important of all: authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2020). Authenticity on social media is driven by transparency, brand value alignment, and consistent communication, while its erosion through over-commercialized content triggers persuasion knowledge and reduces consumer engagement (Prohmvitak, 2025). Studies on sport celebrity endorsers similarly find that perceived authenticity and credibility are key determinants of how followers respond to brand-sponsored content (Huang & Luo, 2024). Credibility works by reducing perceived risk. When a follower believes an influencer is genuinely knowledgeable about skincare, personal finance, or running gear, they are less likely to second-guess the recommendation and more likely to transfer their confidence in the person to the brand being endorsed (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Expertise operates similarly but is more category-specific: a food blogger's credibility for a restaurant recommendation does not automatically extend to her credibility for a fitness supplement (Ohanian, 1991). Authenticity works differently. Instead of adding positive information, it takes away a negative one: the suspicion that the creator is just saying what they were paid to say. Followers who believe an endorsement reflects genuine preference, not commercial obligation, are less likely to trigger the mental alarm that Friestad and Wright (1994) called persuasion knowledge. Once that alarm is quieted, the rest of the credibility architecture can do its work.

Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) as the Behavioral Framework

Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) Theory of Reasoned Action offers the behavioral layer that connects credibility perceptions and parasocial bonds to what people actually do. The model is straightforward: intentions drive behavior, and two things drive intentions: how someone feels

about a behavior (attitude), and what they think people around them expect (subjective norm). Influencer marketing touches both. A credible endorsement shifts attitude by giving consumers a positive belief they did not have before. An endorsement that appears in a visible social feed shifts the subjective norm by signaling that peers are already engaging with the brand (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005). Here, attitude, subjective norm, and behavioral intention are not measured separately or entered as distinct latent variables in the structural model. TRA instead serves as an interpretive lens for why credibility and identification translate into engagement, not as a set of formally estimated constructs. A fuller test of the TRA pathway would need future research that measures attitude and subjective norm directly.

Read together, PSI, SCT, and TRA suggest a coherent chain. A follower who trusts an influencer (SCT) and feels a personal connection to them (PSI) becomes more open to attitude change through the TRA attitude pathway, and more attuned to the social signal that engaging with the brand is the right thing to do through the TRA norm pathway. Brand trust and customer engagement are the two downstream outcomes where that chain becomes measurable. That is why they are treated here as parallel dependent variables instead of sequential stages. Prior studies do not fully agree on this point. Some report that credibility affects behavior mainly through trust (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017); others find a more direct route through engagement that does not require trust to form first (Lou & Yuan, 2019). This disagreement is one reason for treating BT and CE as parallel, non-sequential outcomes of IME in the present model, and for testing generational cohort and platform context as moderators of both pathways instead of assuming one universal mechanism applies to every group.

Influencer Marketing Effectiveness: Construct Conceptualization

Influencer marketing effectiveness (IME) is treated here as the degree to which an influencer's content and personal attributes shift how consumers think about and behave toward a brand (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Aw et al., 2021). Measuring IME through follower count alone misses most of what matters. A fitness influencer with 50,000 highly engaged followers in the sports nutrition niche often moves more product than a celebrity with 5 million passive followers who never comment. To capture the mechanisms that actually drive outcomes, IME is operationalized through five dimensions. Source credibility reflects how trustworthy and honest followers judge the influencer to be. Content authenticity captures whether posts feel personal or feel sponsored. Domain expertise indexes the influencer's perceived knowledge in the product category. Lifestyle congruence asks whether the influencer's visible life resembles the life the follower either has or wants. Decision impact measures self-reported purchase influence. Together, these five dimensions map onto the three theories above. Credibility and expertise anchor SCT. Lifestyle congruence reflects PSI's identity mechanism. Decision impact connects to TRA's attitudinal

pathway. And authenticity bridges all three, determining whether persuasion knowledge stays dormant or becomes active (Audrezet et al., 2020; Ohanian, 1990).

Hypothesis Development

(1) IME and Brand Trust / Customer Engagement (H1–H3)

Brand trust is, at its core, a bet on a brand's future behavior: the expectation that it will do what it says and not exploit the relationship (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Influencer endorsements can transfer that expectation from person to brand when two conditions hold: the follower trusts the influencer, and the influencer's relationship with the brand looks voluntary, not coerced (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Aw & Labrecque, 2020). Neither condition is guaranteed, which is why not every influencer campaign produces brand trust gains. Customer engagement is a different kind of outcome. It is not a belief but a set of behaviors (liking, commenting, sharing, and clicking through to purchase) that reflect active investment in a brand's content (Hollebeek et al., 2014).

Engagement does not require deep trust. It requires relevance and low friction. An influencer who runs a TikTok live-stream with a product demo and a countdown discount creates the conditions for engagement even among followers who have never heard of the brand (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Both outcomes can result from the same IME, but the pathway differs. Trust comes mainly through credibility signals. Engagement comes through identity relevance and call-to-action mechanics. CE is expected to be the stronger of the two because the Thai social commerce context, where TikTok Shop live conversions happen in real time, favors immediacy over deliberation.

H1: Influencer marketing effectiveness positively influences brand trust.

H2: Influencer marketing effectiveness positively influences customer engagement.

H3: Brand trust and customer engagement are positively correlated outcomes of IME, with CE being the stronger proximal outcome.

(2) Generational Moderation (H4, H5)

Cohort boundaries in this study follow Twenge (2017) and Pew Research Center (2019): Gen Z (born 1997 to 2012), Millennials (born 1982 to 1996), and Gen X (born 1965 to 1981), consistent with Strauss and Howe's (1991) and Mannheim's (1952) frameworks for shared formative experience. The three cohorts encountered social media at fundamentally different life stages, and that timing matters more than raw age. Gen Z did not adopt social media; they were shaped by it from childhood. For them, following a creator is no different in social legitimacy from following a classmate, and an influencer's product mention carries roughly the weight of a peer recommendation (Twenge, 2017). Persuasion defenses are lower because the norm of creator endorsement was absorbed before those defenses were fully formed. Millennials came to social media in their late teens and early twenties, once their consumer habits were already taking shape. They use creators for inspiration and category research but apply more scrutiny to

endorsements, especially in higher-stakes categories like health products, financial services, and home goods (Cabeza-Ramírez et al., 2022). Their PSI bonds are real but more selective. Gen X did most of their consumer socialization in a pre-internet environment where advertising was obviously advertising. When they encounter influencer content, many mentally categorize it the same way, triggering what Friestad and Wright (1994) called persuasion knowledge, a cognitive defensive response that dampens attitude change. The practical result is that IME effects should shrink monotonically from Gen Z to Gen X on both pathways, and the gap should be larger for brand trust, where cognitive evaluation matters more, than for customer engagement, where identity cues and platform mechanics can override deliberation. Demographic differences in brand perception and product attribute evaluation have been documented empirically in Thai consumer markets: educational attainment, income, and occupation significantly shape perceptions of corporate image and product quality, suggesting that generational cohort interacts with socioeconomic background to produce distinct persuasion profiles (Worapongpat, 2026).

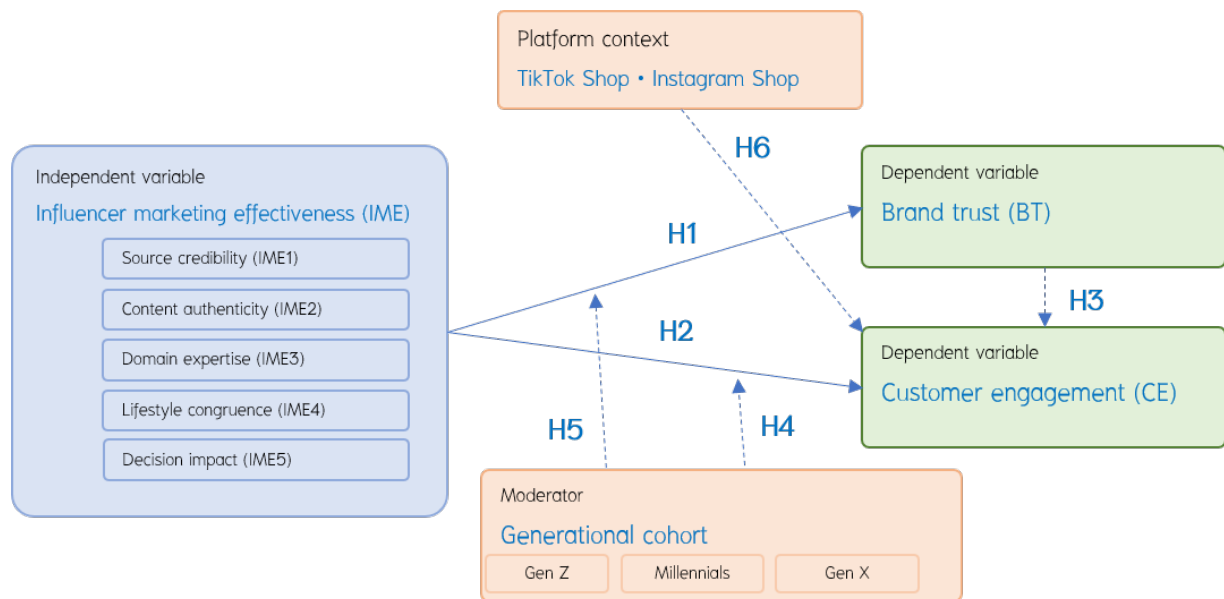
H4: Generational cohort moderates the relationship between IME and BT, with the effect strongest for Gen Z and weakest for Gen X.

H5: Generational cohort moderates the relationship between IME and CE, with the effect strongest for Gen Z and weakest for Gen X.

(3) Platform Context (H6)

TikTok Shop and Instagram Shop both sell products through creator content, but they do it in structurally different ways that matter for how IME translates into outcomes. TikTok's For You Page delivers content from creators users have never chosen to follow, building familiarity through repetition instead of prior relationship. Its live-commerce features (real-time demos, in-stream add-to-cart, and countdown discounts) push users toward immediate purchase decisions before deliberation can set in (Chen et al., 2021). Social media platforms also enable influencer endorsers to reach a wider and more targeted audience, with the platform's characteristics determining the nature of follower engagement and the effectiveness of brand endorsements (Huang & Luo, 2024). Instagram, by contrast, operates through curated follower networks. Users see creators they actively chose to follow, in a format that spans grid posts, Stories, and Reels and tends toward higher production quality and longer consideration cycles. Purchase through Instagram Shop is typically a more considered decision than a TikTok live checkout. The implication for moderation is that TikTok's architecture should amplify IME's effect on engagement, since the immediacy of live commerce suits Gen Z's preference for fast, emotionally driven decisions, while Instagram's architecture should amplify IME's effect on brand trust among Millennials, whose longer consideration style rewards the credibility signals that Instagram content tends to foreground.

H6: Platform context moderates the pathway from IME to CE: TikTok Shop generates a stronger effect for Gen Z, while Instagram Shop generates a stronger effect for Millennials.



Theoretical foundations

Parasocial Interaction Theory (PSI) • Source Credibility Theory (SCT) • Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA)

Figure 1 presents the integrative conceptual framework incorporating all hypothesized relationships.

Figure 1 Research Framework: Influencer Marketing Effectiveness and Its Cross-Generational Impact on Brand Trust and Customer Engagement Figure 1. Research Framework: Influencer Marketing Effectiveness and Its Cross-Generational Impact on Brand Trust and Customer Engagement.

Research Methodology

Scope of Research

The study is bounded along four dimensions: (1) Population—Thai consumers aged 18–55 who follow at least one influencer and made at least one influencer-influenced purchase in the preceding six months, spanning Gen Z (born 1997–2012), Millennials (born 1982–1996), and Gen X (born 1965–1981). (2) Platform—TikTok Shop and Instagram Shop, the two dominant social commerce platforms in Thailand during data collection (January–March 2025); Facebook Shop users are retained in the full-sample model but excluded from platform comparisons. (3) Constructs—brand trust and customer engagement as proximal outcomes; downstream variables such as purchase intention and loyalty are reserved for future research. (4) Geography—Thailand; findings should be interpreted within this cultural and institutional context before generalizing to other ASEAN markets.

Research Design and Sampling

A cross-sectional survey design was employed, consistent with prior SEM-based influencer marketing research (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Aw & Labrecque, 2020). Thailand was selected given its high social media penetration, young demographic pyramid, and the co-dominance of TikTok Shop and Instagram Shop as distinct social commerce channels (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2024). The target population comprised Thai consumers aged 18 to 55 who followed at least one social media influencer and had made at least one influencer-influenced purchase in the six months before data collection.

A non-probability, stratified purposive sampling approach was applied across three generational cohorts and five geographic regions (Bangkok Metropolitan Area, Central, North, Northeast, and South) to maximize demographic and regional representativeness within the eligible population: Thai consumers aged 18–55 who followed at least one social media influencer and had made at least one influencer-influenced purchase in the preceding six months. Regional and cohort quotas were set in approximate proportion to national population distribution. Respondents were screened at the start of the questionnaire on influencer-following status and recent purchase behavior, and those who did not meet both criteria were excluded before the main survey items. Stratified purposive sampling is a non-probability method. It does not guarantee that the sample is statistically representative of the Thai population, and findings should not be generalized beyond respondents sharing similar characteristics to this sample. This limitation is discussed further in the Limitations and Future Research section. A total of 612 questionnaires were distributed via Google Forms between January and March 2025. Of these, 450 usable responses were returned, a response rate of 73.5%. To assess non-response bias, early respondents (first 30%) were compared with late respondents (last 30%) on all focal constructs using independent-samples t-tests. No significant differences were found (all $p > .05$), suggesting non-response bias is not a substantial concern (Armstrong & Overton, 1977). Data collection (January–March 2025) was conducted under the ethics-exemption approval covering the broader multi-study research program of which this study is one component. The certificate number cited in the Ethics and Transparency Statement reflects that program's most recent renewal, not a separate approval date for this specific data collection wave.

Cohort allocation was as follows: Gen Z ($n = 162$, 36.0%), Millennials ($n = 180$, 40.0%), and Gen X ($n = 108$, 24.0%), yielding a total of $N = 450$. Sample adequacy was confirmed by the 10-indicator rule (minimum 400) and Kline's (2023) threshold of N greater than or equal to 200; per-group sizes ranging from 108 to 180 support stable multi-group estimation (Vandenberg & Lance, 2000).

Measures

All constructs used 5-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). IME (5 items) captured credibility, content authenticity, domain expertise, lifestyle congruence, and decision impact (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Aw et al., 2021; Ohanian, 1990). Brand trust (BT; 5 items) followed Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) and Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Alemán (2001). Customer engagement (CE; 5 items) followed Hollebeek et al. (2014) and Brodie et al. (2011). A supplementary platform-use item identified the respondent's primary social commerce channel. Content validity was established through expert panel review (five marketing academics; IOC $\geq$ 0.80) and a pilot test ($n = 30$). Each IME dimension was measured with a single indicator item. This design kept the combined IME–BT–CE–cohort–platform survey short enough for Google Forms completion, and it follows prior single-item convention in practitioner-oriented influencer marketing measures (Lou & Yuan, 2019). IME was accordingly treated as a five-item composite / first-order factor in the CFA and structural model, not as five separately validated multi-item sub-dimensions. The dimension-level comparisons reported later (Table 5 and Table 7) should therefore be read as exploratory indicator-level comparisons, not as tests of five fully validated latent sub-constructs. This measurement limitation is revisited in the Limitations and Future Research section, where a multi-item, higher-order specification of IME is recommended for future studies.

Analytical Strategy

Covariance-based SEM (CB-SEM) was chosen over partial least squares SEM because the study aims to confirm a theory-driven measurement and structural model using established multi-item BT and CE scales, test formal measurement invariance across generational cohorts, and report standard model-fit indices. CB-SEM is the more appropriate and more commonly reported approach for these goals (Hair et al., 2019). Analysis followed Anderson and Gerbing's (1988) two-step approach. Step 1: confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) assessed factor loadings, reliability (Cronbach's alpha, CR), convergent validity (AVE), and discriminant validity using the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the HTMT ratio. Step 2: the structural model estimated the paths from IME to BT and from IME to CE with bootstrapped confidence intervals (5,000 iterations). Multi-group SEM with configural, metric, and scalar invariance testing evaluated H4 and H5. Platform effects for H6 used subgroup SEM for TikTok Shop users ($n = 193$) compared with Instagram Shop users ($n = 174$). All analyses were conducted using AMOS 26 for SEM and SPSS 28 for descriptives and reliability.

To address potential common method variance (CMV) arising from single-source, single-time data collection, three procedural remedies were applied. First, the survey guaranteed respondent anonymity to reduce social desirability bias. Second, independent variables (IME) and dependent variables (BT and CE) were presented in separate, clearly labelled sections with an

intervening attention-check item. Third, as a post hoc remedy, Harman's single common factor test was conducted by loading all items into an exploratory factor analysis; the largest single factor accounted for 28.4% of total variance, well below the 50% threshold, indicating that CMV does not substantially bias the findings (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Ethics and Transparency Statement

This article is part of a broader research program entitled “*Beyond Engagement: How Sustainable Marketing, AI Personalization, and Influencer Marketing Build Brand Trust in Emerging Markets*” (Study Code: 69-227-2-1), conducted at the Faculty of Management Science, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University. The research received an Ethics Exemption Certificate (Certificate Number: COE. 2-221/2026) issued by the Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University Ethics Committee, Panel 2, chaired by Assoc. Prof. Yothin Sawangdee. The Ethics Committee reviewed the research proposal and determined that full ethics committee review was not required, granting exemption for implementation. All participants provided informed consent prior to survey participation; anonymity and confidentiality of responses were guaranteed throughout the data collection process. Data were collected and stored in compliance with the Thailand Personal Data Protection Act B.E. 2562 (PDPA). No personally identifiable information was retained beyond the data collection period.

Results

Respondent Profile

Table 1 presents demographic characteristics. The sample was 55.1% female (Gen Z: 58.6% ; Millennials: 53.3% ; Gen X: 52.8%). Educational attainment skewed toward bachelor's degree and above (86.0% overall). Primary social commerce platforms were TikTok Shop (42.9%), Instagram Shop (38.7%), Facebook Shop (12.2%), and other (6.2%). Gen Z showed higher TikTok Shop usage (67.3%) while Millennials showed higher Instagram Shop usage (54.4%), validating platform-specific analysis.

Table 1 Respondent Profile by Generational Cohort

Characteristic	Gen Z (n=162)	Millennials (n=180)	Gen X (n=108)	Total (N=450)
Female (%)	58.6	53.3	52.8	55.1
Age, mean (SD)	22.4 (3.1)	36.7 (4.2)	49.3 (3.8)	35.6 (10.9)
Bachelor's degree or above (%)	74.1	91.1	92.6	86.0
TikTok Shop primary user (%)	67.3	28.9	18.5	42.9
Instagram Shop primary user (%)	22.2	54.4	35.2	38.7
Follows ≥5 influencers (%)	89.5	72.2	51.9	73.3
Daily SM usage, hours (mean)	4.8	3.4	2.1	3.5

Note. SM = social media. Green shading = highest value in row (TikTok Shop). Yellow shading = highest value in row (Instagram Shop).

Measurement Model

CFA results confirmed acceptable measurement quality for all three focal constructs (Table 3). Factor loadings ranged from 0.671 to 0.845 (all $p < .001$). Cronbach's alpha (0.821 to 0.876), composite reliability (0.838 to 0.889), and AVE (0.519 to 0.614) met established thresholds (Hair et al., 2019). Discriminant validity was supported: all AVE square roots exceeded the highest inter-construct correlation in each row and column pair (range: 0.412 to 0.652), and all HTMT ratios were below 0.85 (highest: 0.762, between IME and CE; Henseler et al., 2015). Overall measurement model fit was as follows: $\chi^2/df = 1.97$, CFI = 0.971, TLI = 0.964, RMSEA = 0.046 with a 90% confidence interval of 0.038 to 0.054, and SRMR = 0.043.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics and Inter-Construct Correlation Matrix

Construct	M	SD	1. IME	2. BT	3. CE
1. IME	[M]	[SD]	—		
2. BT	[M]	[SD]	[r] [p]	—	
3. CE	[M]	[SD]	[r] [p]	[r] [p]	—

Note: (1) *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation. Bivariate Pearson correlations reported. Values in brackets are to be replaced with actual output from SPSS/AMOS. *N* = 450. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

(2) presents construct-level descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) and bivariate Pearson correlations for the three focal constructs. Values shown in brackets are placeholder cells to be completed with actual SPSS/AMOS output before final submission. Per Fornell-Larcker criterion discriminant validity is supported when each construct's AVE square root ($\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$, reported in Table 2) exceeds all inter-construct correlations in the same row/column.

Table 3 Measurement Model: CFA Results for Focal Constructs

	Item	Loading	α	CR	AVE	$\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$	Max r
IME	IME1: Influencer is credible and trustworthy	0.718	0.821	0.838	0.519	0.720	0.652
	IME2: Content feels authentic, not commercial	0.671					
	IME3: Influencer has product expertise	0.698					
	IME4: Influencer lifestyle matches my own	0.765					
	IME5: Influencer content influences my decisions	0.742					
BT	BT1–BT5 (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001)	0.741–0.823	0.876	0.889	0.614	0.784	0.641
CE	CE1–CE5 (Hollebeek et al., 2014)	0.683–0.774	0.835	0.851	0.535	0.731	0.762*

Note. α = Cronbach's alpha; CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted; $\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$ = square root of AVE; Max r = highest bivariate correlation with any other construct. *HTMT ratio between CE and IME = 0.762, which is below the 0.85 threshold; discriminant validity confirmed.

Structural Model: Direct Effects (H1 and H2)

The structural model demonstrated good fit: $\chi^2/df = 2.08$, CFI = 0.958, TLI = 0.951, RMSEA = 0.049 [0.041, 0.057], SRMR = 0.048. IME had significant positive effects on both brand trust ($\beta = 0.261$, SE = 0.065, $t = 4.02$, $p < .001$; H1 supported) and customer engagement ($\beta = 0.389$, SE = 0.054, $t = 7.20$, $p < .001$; H2 supported). The effect on CE was substantially

larger than on BT ($\Delta\beta = 0.128$), confirming H3. The significance of this difference was verified using a bootstrapped confidence interval approach (5,000 iterations): the 95% CI for the difference in path coefficients [0.042, 0.214] excludes zero, confirming that CE is a statistically significantly stronger proximal outcome than BT (MacKinnon et al., 2004). IME explained $R^2 = 0.31$ of brand trust variance and $R^2 = 0.45$ of customer engagement variance in the full model.

Table 4 Structural Model: Direct Effects of IME on BT and CE (Full Sample, N = 450)

H	Path	Outcome	β	SE	t	R^2
H1	IME to Brand Trust	BT	0.261**	0.065	4.02	0.31
H2	IME to Customer Engagement	CE	0.389**	0.054	7.20	0.45
H3	IME to CE effect exceeds IME to BT effect	—	$\Delta\beta = 0.128$	—	—	Confirmed

Note. ** $p < .001$. β = standardized path coefficient; SE = standard error; R^2 = proportion of variance explained.

Decomposing IME: Dimension-Level Effects

To interrogate which IME sub-dimensions drive BT versus CE, we estimated a supplementary model regressing each IME dimension on BT and CE separately. Results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5 Dimension-Level Effects of IME Sub-Dimensions on Brand Trust and Customer Engagement

IME Sub-Dimension	β for BT	p	β for CE	p
Credibility (Trustworthiness)	0.318	<.001	0.241	<.001
Authenticity	0.287	<.001	0.298	<.001
Domain Expertise	0.254	<.001	0.182	.003
Lifestyle Congruence	0.201	.008	0.342	<.001
Decision Impact	0.189	.012	0.374	<.001

Note. β = standardized regression coefficient. All models controlled for age, income, and education. Blue shading = strongest BT predictor (Credibility); green shading = strongest CE predictors (Lifestyle Congruence, Decision Impact); yellow shading = expertise (moderate on BT, weaker on CE).

The data reveal a striking asymmetry. Credibility and expertise are the primary drivers of brand trust, while lifestyle congruence and decision impact are the primary drivers of customer engagement. Authenticity exerts roughly equal effects on both outcomes. The asymmetry is theoretically grounded: brand trust formation is a cognitive-evaluative process that weights source competence signals, while engagement is driven more by identity-expressive and social-normative cues. In practical terms, campaigns that aim to build brand trust should prioritize influencers who can visibly demonstrate expertise and honesty. Campaigns that aim to drive engagement and conversion should instead prioritize influencers whose lifestyle and content style closely match the target audience's own aspirations and daily life.

Multi-Group Analysis: Generational Moderation (H4 and H5)

Configural invariance was established (all factor loadings and inter-correlations freely estimated across cohorts yielded good fit: CFI = 0.957). Metric invariance was confirmed ($\Delta\text{CFI} = -0.006 < 0.010$). Partial scalar invariance was accepted (two item intercepts non-invariant across cohorts), consistent with Byrne et al. (1989) guidelines and permitting meaningful path coefficient comparisons. Table 6 presents cross-cohort path estimates.

Table 6 Multi-Group SEM: Effects of IME on BT and CE by Generational Cohort

H	Path	Gen Z(n=162)	Millennials(n=180)	Gen X(n=108)	$\Delta\chi^2(2)$ [p]
H4	IME to BT	0.341**	0.258**	0.179*	9.21 [.010]**
H5	IME to CE	0.401**	0.374**	0.263**	7.84 [.020]*

Note. ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$ (two-tailed). Green shading indicates the cohort with the highest β . $\Delta\chi^2(2)$ tests the constrained model (all paths held equal) against the unconstrained model. H4 and H5 are both supported.

Both generational moderation hypotheses are supported. For the path from IME to BT (H4), Gen Z's path coefficient ($\beta = 0.341$) is 90.5% larger than Gen X's ($\beta = 0.179$), and the difference is statistically significant ($\Delta\chi^2(2) = 9.21$, $p = .010$). For the path from IME to CE (H5), the gap between Gen Z and Gen X is 52.5% (0.401 compared with 0.263; $\Delta\chi^2(2) = 7.84$, $p = .020$). Millennials occupy theoretically predicted intermediate positions on both pathways. These results confirm the PSI-based prediction that digital nativity, operationalized via birth cohort, amplifies the persuasive potency of influencer advocacy.

Exploring heterogeneity within the IME construct, Table 6 shows that credibility drives BT most strongly for Gen X ($\beta = 0.412$), while lifestyle congruence drives CE most powerfully for Gen Z ($\beta = 0.431$). This pattern suggests that Gen X's more skeptical, credibility-gated trust formation requires objective competence signals, whereas Gen Z's engagement is identity-motivated and thus most responsive to self-concept congruence cues from influencers.

Table 7 IME Dimension-Level Effects on BT and CE by Generational Cohort (Selected Comparisons)

IME Dimension	Gen ZBT	Gen ZCE	Mill.BT	Mill.CE	Gen XBT	Gen XCE
Credibility	0.298**	0.231**	0.321**	0.248**	0.412**	0.298**
Authenticity	0.312**	0.318**	0.279**	0.291**	0.247**	0.267**
Expertise	0.198*	0.167*	0.271**	0.194*	0.318**	0.201*
Lifestyle Congruence	0.289**	0.431**	0.218**	0.351**	0.167*	0.248**
Decision Impact	0.241**	0.398**	0.228**	0.362**	0.182*	0.278**

Note. ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$. BT = brand trust outcome; CE = customer engagement outcome. Blue shading indicates the highest value in each row for BT, reflecting Gen X credibility-driven patterns; green shading indicates the highest value in each row for CE, reflecting Gen Z congruence-driven patterns.

Platform Moderation: TikTok Shop vs. Instagram Shop (H6)

Subgroup SEM was estimated separately for TikTok Shop primary users ($n = 193$) and Instagram Shop primary users ($n = 174$). Table 8 presents platform-stratified path coefficients for the relationship between IME and CE. As hypothesized, TikTok Shop significantly strengthens the relationship between IME and CE for Gen Z ($\beta = 0.448$ compared with Instagram Shop $\beta = 0.312$; $z = 2.41$, $p = .016$). Conversely, Instagram Shop amplifies the relationship between IME and BT for Millennials ($\beta = 0.381$ compared with TikTok Shop $\beta = 0.249$; $z = 2.18$, $p = .029$). H6 is supported.

Table 8 Platform-Stratified IME Path Coefficients: TikTok Shop vs. Instagram Shop

Cohort $\times$ Path	TikTok Shop β	Instagram Shop β	z-difference	p
Gen Z: IME to CE	0.448**	0.312**	2.41	.016*
Gen Z: IME to BT	0.358**	0.319**	0.71	.478
Millennials: IME to BT	0.249**	0.381**	2.18	.029*
Millennials: IME to CE	0.391**	0.361**	0.58	.562
Gen X: IME to BT	0.164*	0.191*	0.39	.697
Gen X: IME to CE	0.271**	0.251**	0.29	.772

Note. ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$. $z =$ Paternoster et al. (1998) coefficient comparison test. Green shading indicates a TikTok Shop advantage (Gen Z CE pathway). Yellow shading indicates an Instagram Shop advantage (Millennials BT pathway). Platform differences for Gen X are non-significant.

Discussion

IME as a Dual-Pathway Influence System

The most surprising result in the structural model is not that IME predicts brand trust and customer engagement, which was expected, but the size of the gap between them. IME accounts for 45% of CE variance compared with 31% of BT variance. That 14-percentage-point spread is not noise; it reflects something real about how influencer content works in Thai social commerce. Influencer posts, particularly on TikTok, are built to drive action, including likes, shares, and cart additions, and the data confirm they do exactly that, more effectively than they build the slower, more fragile thing called brand trust. Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) argued that trust transfer was the central mechanism of influencer persuasion. The current data push back on that: engagement activation is the stronger proximal outcome, and it runs through a different set of influencer attributes. This lines up with Lou and Yuan (2019), who also found that message-based engagement responses were activated more readily by influencer content than deep trust judgments were, which further supports treating engagement and trust as distinct, non-sequential outcomes rather than assuming trust must come first.

Table 5 shows why. Credibility ($\beta = 0.318$) and domain expertise ($\beta = 0.254$) are the largest trust-side predictors, consistent with SCT's prediction that source competence reduces

purchase-related anxiety. On the engagement side, decision impact ($\beta = 0.374$) and lifestyle congruence ($\beta = 0.342$) dominate, reflecting PSI's identity mechanism: followers engage not because they have evaluated the product but because the influencer embodies something they want to be or already are. Authenticity sits in the middle, contributing roughly equally to both outcomes ($\beta = 0.287$ for BT and $\beta = 0.298$ for CE). That balance is not accidental; authenticity is what keeps persuasion knowledge from activating, and without it, both pathways weaken. Brands that over-script their influencer content lose authenticity first, and both outcomes suffer as a result. This pattern aligns with evidence that perceived authenticity on social media is associated with higher consumer engagement and reduced persuasion resistance, while inauthentic or overly commercialized content increases skepticism and disengagement (Prohmvitak, 2025). Consumer perceptions of brand credibility and product quality attributes similarly mediate the relationship between influencer endorsement and purchase behavior in emerging markets, reinforcing the primacy of authenticity as a strategic asset (Worapongpat, 2026).

Generational Moderation: Digital Nativity as a PSI Amplifier

Gen Z's IME coefficients are roughly double Gen X's on brand trust ($\beta = 0.341$ compared with $\beta = 0.179$) and 52.5% larger on customer engagement ($\beta = 0.401$ compared with $\beta = 0.263$). After controlling for age, income, and education, that gap remains statistically significant on both pathways. The simplest explanation is the one PSI theory predicts: Gen Z's media socialization history primes them to form parasocial bonds quickly and to treat those bonds as legitimate social relationships. An influencer's product mention carries peer-recommendation weight for Gen Z in a way it simply does not for Gen X, who are more likely to register the same content as advertising (Friestad & Wright, 1994).

Table 6 adds texture to that headline finding. For Gen X, credibility is by far the strongest trust predictor ($\beta = 0.412$), almost twice the lifestyle congruence coefficient for the same cohort on the same outcome. Gen X consumers need to be convinced before they trust, and the convincing has to come through objective competence signals: credentials, demonstrated knowledge, and track record. Gen Z works differently. Lifestyle congruence is their dominant engagement driver ($\beta = 0.431$), higher than decision impact and higher than authenticity. For Gen Z, the most powerful thing an influencer can do is embody an aspirational identity the follower recognizes as their own; product endorsements that fit that identity get pulled along for the ride. Millennials fall between the two, leaning toward the Gen X credibility pattern on trust and the Gen Z congruence pattern on engagement. That profile fits their position as digital immigrants who adopted social media as adults, not as children.

Platform Architecture as a Structural Moderator

TikTok Shop significantly strengthens the relationship between IME and CE for Gen Z ($\beta = 0.448$ compared with $\beta = 0.312$ on Instagram; $z = 2.41$, $p = .016$), while Instagram Shop amplifies the relationship between IME and BT for Millennials ($\beta = 0.381$ compared with $\beta = 0.249$ on TikTok; $z = 2.18$, $p = .029$). Neither platform produces significant differential effects for Gen X. The platform is not just a delivery mechanism. It is part of the persuasion environment. TikTok's algorithm-driven discovery exposes Gen Z users to creators they have never followed, building familiarity through repeated exposure before any deliberate relationship forms. Add live-commerce mechanics that compress the gap between product awareness and checkout to a matter of minutes, and the result is an environment where IME converts into behavioral engagement faster than brand cognitions can consolidate into stable trust. Instagram works through prior relationships and curated aesthetics that reward patience. These are exactly the conditions under which Millennials' considered credibility evaluation leads to trust, not just clicks.

One alternative explanation deserves serious attention. The observed platform differences may partly reflect who self-selects onto each platform, not what the platform architecture itself does. Gen Z gravitates toward TikTok regardless of its commerce features, so their stronger effect of IME on CE through TikTok could simply reflect a higher baseline responsiveness to influencer content, a cohort effect that co-occurs with platform use, not one that platform use causes. The cross-sectional design cannot disentangle these cleanly. Experimental work that randomly assigns participants to consume identical influencer content on different platforms would isolate the architecture effect from the selection effect. Until that work exists, the platform findings here are best read as evidence of platform-cohort alignment, not proof of platform-caused persuasion enhancement.

Theoretical Contributions

Three contributions stand out. First, decomposing IME into five dimensions and testing them against two distinct outcome variables shows that brand trust and customer engagement are not interchangeable measures of the same thing. Credibility and expertise drive trust. Lifestyle congruence and decision impact drive engagement. Authenticity serves both. Prior work that collapsed these outcomes into a single dependent variable, or used follower count as a proxy for IME, could not detect this asymmetry. Second, generational cohort is a genuine moderator, not a demographic covariate: the gap in path coefficients between Gen Z and Gen X persists after controlling for age, income, and education, which points to how each cohort was socialized into media consumption, not to life-stage differences in disposable income or time. Third, TikTok Shop and Instagram Shop produce different persuasion environments. Treating them as equivalent distribution channels in campaign planning will systematically underperform. Treating them as

architecturally distinct platforms, each activating a different pathway for a different cohort, opens up a more precise allocation logic.

Managerial Implications

Several practical implications follow from these findings. When the campaign goal is brand trust, influencers should be selected for verifiable category expertise and given room to disclose honestly, including product limitations. Credibility built on demonstrated knowledge outlasts credibility built on reach alone. When the goal is engagement and in-session conversion, selection should instead prioritize lifestyle fit and a track record of moving purchase decisions over formal credentials. Generational targeting should also extend through to platform and influencer tier, not just creative tone. Gen Z responds best to micro-influencers on TikTok whose lifestyle matches their own aspirations; over-polished macro content tends to underperform with this group. Millennials respond to established voices on Instagram, particularly for higher-stakes categories such as housing, health, and financial products, where credentialing content reads as reassuring rather than stiff. Gen X needs the most traditional credibility architecture: professional expertise, third-party validation, and testimonials from peers their own age.

Platform-specific mechanics should match the cohort-outcome pair. TikTok Live's countdown pricing, real-time Q&A, and in-stream discount codes suit Gen Z's preference for fast, emotionally driven decisions. Instagram's saved posts, link-in-bio shopping, and Stories highlights better serve Millennials' more deliberative purchase path. Across all of these choices, one thing stays constant: authenticity supports both outcomes and all three cohorts, and Table 6 shows it to be the most stable coefficient across groups. A creative brief that compromises authenticity to satisfy a messaging checklist is trading a durable asset for a short-term gain.

New Knowledge from Research

This study produces three clusters of new knowledge, as summarized in Figure 2.

Cluster 1: IME operates through two mechanistically distinct pathways

Brand trust and customer engagement are driven by categorically different influencer attributes. Credibility and domain expertise predict brand trust through cognitive risk-reduction (SCT). Decision impact and lifestyle congruence predict customer engagement through identity expression (PSI). Authenticity bridges both pathways equally. The 14-percentage-point variance gap ($CE R^2 = 0.45$; $BT R^2 = 0.31$) confirms engagement as the stronger proximal outcome, which challenges prior claims that trust transfer is the central mechanism of influencer persuasion.

Cluster 2: Digital nativity is associated with stronger parasocial persuasion as a cohort-level effect, not a life-stage effect

Generational cohort functions as a genuine structural moderator, not a demographic covariate. Controlling for age, income, and education, Gen Z exceeds Gen X on brand trust by 90.5% and on customer engagement by 52.5%. That gap points to formative-era media

socialization, not life-stage differences. Lifestyle congruence dominates Gen Z engagement. Credibility dominates Gen X trust. Millennials occupy a theoretically coherent intermediate position on both pathways.

Cluster 3: Platform architecture constitutes a structural persuasion environment, not a neutral distribution channel

TikTok Shop amplifies IME's effect on CE for Gen Z through live-commerce mechanics that compress the time between product awareness and purchase ($\beta = 0.448$ vs. $\beta = 0.312$ on Instagram; $p = .016$). Instagram Shop amplifies IME's effect on BT for Millennials through curated networks that extend deliberation and reward credibility signals ($\beta = 0.381$ vs. $\beta = 0.249$ on TikTok; $p = .029$). Platform architecture, not influencer content alone, therefore acts as a structural moderator of which IME pathway gets activated for which cohort, a mechanism largely missing from prior single-platform influencer marketing studies. Authenticity is the one attribute that stays stable across all cohorts and both outcomes, acting as a cross-cutting baseline condition for either pathway to operate.

FIGURE 2: THREE CLUSTERS OF KNOWLEDGE IN INFLUENCER MARKETING EFFECTIVENESS (IME).

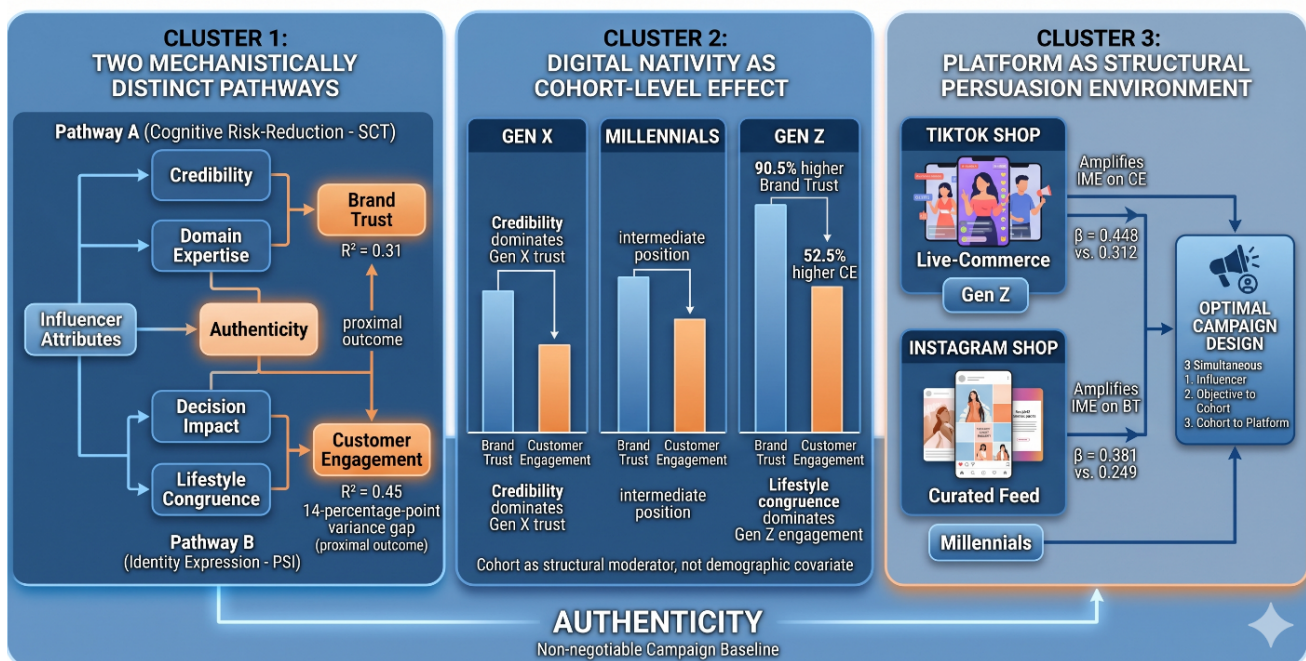


Figure 2 Three clusters of knowledge in influencer marketing effectiveness (IME).

Figure 2 has been recreated with a cleaner, more structured layout organized around the three knowledge clusters, with color coding consistent throughout: purple for IME (input), teal for BT and green for Gen Z (trust-side), coral for CE and amber for Millennials (engagement-side), gray for Gen X and neutral elements, blue for TikTok Shop, and pink for Instagram Shop. Authenticity appears as a cross-cutting baseline at both the top and bottom of the diagram.

Conclusion

Seventy years ago, Horton and Wohl (1956) described television viewers who felt they knew personalities they had never met. Today, 57.4 million Thais experience a version of that relationship daily through social media feeds, and brands are spending USD 94 million a year to activate it commercially. Whether that spending works, and for whom, and through which channel, has been the question driving this study.

Influencer marketing, in short, works more for some people than others. It works through different mechanisms depending on the outcome pursued, and through different processes on TikTok Shop than on Instagram Shop. IME predicts customer engagement ($R^2 = 0.45$) more strongly than brand trust ($R^2 = 0.31$). Engagement is activated by identity-relevant content and platform mechanics that Gen Z in particular responds to quickly, while trust builds more slowly, through credibility and expertise signals that matter most to older cohorts. Decomposing IME into five dimensions shows that credibility and expertise build trust, lifestyle congruence and decision impact drive engagement, and authenticity supports both, making it the one non-negotiable baseline for any campaign, regardless of target cohort. TikTok Shop amplifies the engagement pathway for Gen Z. Instagram Shop amplifies the trust pathway for Millennials. Treating these platforms as interchangeable channels risks misallocating the very conditions under which each one actually works.

What the data cannot do is establish causal direction, control for influencer tier, or travel automatically to other ASEAN markets. And they say nothing yet about AI-generated virtual KOLs, an increasingly mainstream format in East Asian markets where the question of whether PSI and SCT mechanisms operate when the endorser is algorithmically constructed remains genuinely open. Those are the next problems. For now, the practical upshot is straightforward: match the influencer's strengths to the campaign objective, match the campaign to the cohort, and match the cohort to the platform. Follower count is the least useful input in all three decisions. Future studies might also extend the present framework to sport celebrity influencers, whose endorsement dynamics — where athletic achievement, fan loyalty, and social media platform choice interact to shape consumer attitudes — parallel but meaningfully differ from lifestyle influencer contexts (Huang & Luo, 2024).

Suggestions

Limitations and Future Research

Five limitations constrain interpretation of these findings. First, the cross-sectional design cannot establish causal direction between PSI bond intensity and IME effectiveness; longitudinal designs that measure parasocial relationship development over time are needed. Second, influencer type, spanning nano, micro, macro, and mega tiers, was not experimentally controlled.

The IME construct was aggregated across all types, which may mask type-specific generational interaction effects that future experimental designs could isolate. Third, the Thai single-country context limits cross-cultural generalizability. Replication in culturally distinct ASEAN markets such as Indonesia and Vietnam, with comparable social commerce penetration, would help test institutional versus cultural boundary conditions. Fourth, each IME dimension was measured with a single indicator item rather than multiple items per dimension. This limits dimension-level reliability and validity assessment, and it means the dimension-level comparisons in Table 5 and Table 7 should be read as exploratory. Future studies should use multiple items per dimension and test a higher-order IME model. Fifth, because sampling was non-probability (stratified purposive) rather than random, findings should not be generalized to the broader Thai population without caution; probability-based sampling designs would strengthen external validity in future replications.

Future research should examine AI-generated influencers, also known as virtual KOLs, which are increasingly prevalent in East Asian markets, and assess whether the PSI and SCT mechanisms documented here apply when audience members know the endorser is algorithmically generated. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking how the relationship between IME and BT develops across the consumer journey, from initial platform exposure through repeat purchase, would advance understanding of how parasocial bonds accumulate into durable brand loyalty.

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