



Exploring Emotional and Symbolic Experiences of Influencer Marketing in Brand Loyalty Among Generation Z

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ABSTRACT

Influencer marketing has emerged as a dominant force in digital communication, reshaping how consumers particularly Generation Z form emotional and symbolic connections with brands. Despite increasing attention, current research largely overlooks the subjective experiences and meaning-making processes that underlie consumer-influencer relationships. However, limited understanding exists regarding the internalization of these relationships by young consumers and the specific mechanisms through which such interactions foster brand loyalty in digitally mediated contexts. This study employs an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore how Generation Z experiences influencer marketing as part of integrated marketing communication (IMC) strategies. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight participants who actively follow social media influencers and have engaged with influencer-endorsed products. Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which revealed four central themes: emotional closeness, trust through relatable narratives, symbolic identity alignment, and unconscious brand loyalty. These findings indicate that participants develop brand loyalty not through rational decision-making but through emotional resonance and identity-based connection with influencers. This research contributes to the theoretical discourse by framing influencer marketing as an emotionally constructed and socially embedded phenomenon. It also offers practical insights for marketers aiming to build long-term brand engagement among digital natives. Furthermore, it encourages future studies to further investigate the experiential dimensions of digital branding and identity formation in diverse cultural and media environments.



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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary digital culture, the proliferation of social media has transformed the way individuals engage with brands, shifting the focus from traditional advertising to more personalized and emotionally resonant forms of communication. Among the most prominent developments in this landscape is the rise of influencer marketing, a strategy in which individuals with substantial online followings endorse products or services through their personal platforms. This evolution has not only changed marketing tactics but also redefined how younger consumers—particularly Generation Z—construct trust and perceive authenticity in brand relationships (De Veirman et al., 2017).

Generation Z, known for its digital nativity and demand for sincerity in communication, responds more strongly to influencers who present relatable narratives and exhibit transparent, consistent personas. Unlike conventional marketing, these interactions foster a sense of closeness and perceived reciprocity, often characterized as para-social relationships—a concept originally introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956) and further developed in the context of digital intimacy by authors such as Abidin (2015) and Schau & Gilly (2003). This generation values interactive and immersive experiences over passive consumption, seeking emotional connection and cultural alignment rather than mere product information (Lou & Yuan, 2019). In this context, influencers are not merely endorsers; they operate as symbolic agents who shape identity performance and social

meaning within the digital lives of their followers. Their content serves as a mirror for personal aspiration and self-definition.

The significance of this phenomenon extends beyond commercial outcomes to encompass the affective and symbolic dimensions of online sociality. Influencer marketing has evolved into a relational domain where digital intimacy, identification, and emotional investment are central. The experience of engaging with an influencer is often marked by subtle, subjective processes of trust formation and identity negotiation. However, these nuanced internal dynamics—though impactful—are seldom addressed in dominant quantitative marketing studies, which tend to prioritize behavioral indicators over experiential understanding. Given this complexity, there is a growing need to explore influencer marketing not merely as a marketing mechanism but as a social and emotional phenomenon experienced uniquely by individuals. This calls for an inquiry that centers on the subjective meaning embedded in such experiences—how individuals perceive, interpret, and internalize their interactions with influencers. A phenomenological approach, which prioritizes the exploration of lived experiences, is thus well-suited to illuminate the underlying meanings that structure this form of consumer-brand engagement.

Building on the recognition of influencer marketing as a socially embedded and emotionally resonant phenomenon, scholarly interest has increasingly turned toward understanding the subjective experiences of individuals within this digital landscape. Research that seeks to uncover how consumers, particularly Generation Z, internalize and respond to influencer-driven communication has become a critical domain of inquiry, especially as the marketing industry moves away from transactional paradigms toward relationship-based engagement models.

However, investigating such experiences poses significant methodological challenges. Much of the existing literature relies heavily on quantitative frameworks that prioritize measurable outcomes such as click-through rates, brand recall, or purchase intention over the lived realities of consumers. While these metrics offer insights into behavioral patterns, they fail to capture the nuanced emotional, relational, and symbolic dimensions that often define the consumer-influencer relationship (Lou & Yuan, 2019). As a result, the deeper psychological and experiential processes involved in influencer engagement remain largely underexplored.

This methodological shortcoming has limited the capacity of prior research to grasp the essence of how individuals make sense of influencer marketing within the broader context of identity, trust, and belonging. Studies that adopt survey-based approaches or content analysis tend to reduce complex human experiences into static categories or statistical trends, overlooking the meaning-making processes that are central to understanding why and how emotional connections with influencers are formed and sustained.

In this light, the use of a phenomenological approach—particularly one that embraces interpretative analysis—becomes essential. Such a perspective allows for a more authentic engagement with the voices and narratives of individuals, enabling researchers to illuminate the depth, complexity, and individuality of experiences that are otherwise flattened by traditional methodologies. This is especially relevant when exploring how Generation Z constructs loyalty not merely through rational brand evaluation but through emotional resonance and symbolic affiliation with influencers.

While the growing reliance on influencer marketing within integrated marketing communication (IMC) strategies has prompted a surge in research, most existing studies continue to adopt practical, outcome-oriented approaches. These approaches typically focus on measurable impacts, such as consumer engagement rates, conversion metrics, or brand recognition, aiming to optimize marketing effectiveness within digital environments (De Veirman et al., 2017). Although such studies have provided valuable insights for marketing practitioners, they often fail to address the deeper, subjective dimensions of how consumers experience and interpret their relationships with influencers.

These limitations become particularly evident in the context of Generation Z, whose consumer behavior is often shaped by complex emotional and symbolic associations, rather than by transactional logic alone. Prevailing methods—primarily quantitative in nature—are inadequate for

capturing the rich, meaning-laden experiences that inform this generation's sense of trust, identification, and loyalty. As Lou and Yuan (2019) have argued, credibility and message value in influencer marketing cannot be fully understood without attending to the personal and emotional contexts in which these interactions occur.

Consequently, the current body of research offers only a partial understanding of the phenomenon. What remains insufficiently explored is how young consumers internalize and assign meaning to their engagement with influencers how they emotionally navigate the blurred boundaries between friendship and marketing, or how these relationships shape their personal identities and brand affiliations. These are experiences that cannot be adequately accessed through traditional marketing metrics or surface-level behavioral data.

In response to these limitations, there is a compelling need to adopt a phenomenological approach that privileges the first-person perspective and seeks to uncover the essence of lived experience. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), in particular, offers a framework for engaging deeply with the personal narratives of individuals, illuminating how meaning is constructed in context. This methodological shift enables a more holistic and nuanced understanding of influencer marketing as a social and emotional phenomenon one that is embedded within the everyday experiences of digital-native consumers.

Previous research on influencer marketing has largely focused on behavioral outcomes and campaign effectiveness. While some studies have explored consumer attitudes and trust, few have examined the subjective experience of consumers in engaging with influencers. Theories of parasocial interaction and digital intimacy have highlighted the emotional dimensions of these relationships, but the personal meaning-making processes remain underexplored. Studies using interpretative methods, such as those by Smith et al. (2021) and Anderson (2020), suggest that deeper insight emerges when participant experiences are viewed through a phenomenological lens. These works provide a basis for investigating the lived experience of Generation Z in a marketing context.

This study uses Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore how young consumers experience and interpret influencer marketing. IPA was selected because it enables the researcher to uncover how individuals assign meaning to personal and emotionally charged interactions. By engaging directly with participant narratives, the method reveals insights into identity, trust, and relational dynamics that cannot be captured by surveys or statistical models. In addressing the knowledge gap, the study focuses on how brand loyalty forms through emotional and symbolic connection, not merely consumer intention or behavior. This approach supports a deeper and more holistic understanding of digital engagement.

The article is structured as follows: The introduction presents the general and specific background of the phenomenon and identifies the knowledge gap. The methodology section outlines the phenomenological framework, including participant selection, data collection, and the use of IPA. The results section details the emergent themes derived from participant narratives. This is followed by a discussion of the findings in light of existing literature and theoretical frameworks. The article concludes with implications for marketing practice and future research directions.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the subjective experiences of Generation Z in interpreting influencer marketing within integrated marketing communication (IMC) strategies. The phenomenological design was selected due to its emphasis on capturing the lived experiences of individuals and uncovering the meaning structures underlying those experiences. Specifically, the interpretative strand of phenomenology, grounded in Heideggerian philosophy, was adopted to allow for a deeper understanding of how participants internalized and made sense of their interactions with digital influencers. This design facilitated a rich, contextual

interpretation of the emotional and symbolic dimensions embedded in the phenomenon of influencer marketing.

Participants

Participants consisted of individuals from Generation Z, aged between 18 and 25 years, who actively followed social media influencers and had engaged with products or services recommended by these influencers within the past six months. A purposive sampling technique was used to identify individuals with direct and relevant experience related to the phenomenon under investigation. Inclusion criteria required that participants had a history of following at least one influencer for over three months and had made purchasing decisions influenced by the influencer's content. Exclusion criteria included individuals employed in digital marketing or influencer industries to minimize potential bias. The final sample included eight participants (5 females, 3 males), with an average age of 21.6 years, representing diverse educational and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in private, distraction-free environments, either via secure video conferencing platforms or face-to-face sessions, depending on participants' preferences and availability. An interview guide was used to ensure consistency, while allowing flexibility to explore emergent themes. Each interview lasted between 45 and 70 minutes and was audio-recorded with prior consent. Questions focused on participants' emotional responses, perceptions of authenticity, and personal reflections regarding their engagement with influencer marketing. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. The data collection process prioritized participant comfort and psychological safety, ensuring that all sessions were conducted in a non-judgmental and confidential atmosphere.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which involves a systematic process of identifying patterns of meaning across participants' narratives. Transcripts were read multiple times to develop familiarity, followed by open coding to extract meaning units related to participants' experiences. Emergent themes were clustered based on conceptual similarity and refined into superordinate themes that captured the essence of the lived experiences. NVivo software was used to support the organization and visualization of data but did not influence the interpretive depth of the analysis. The final thematic structure was derived through iterative examination, ensuring alignment with the phenomenological commitment to uncovering how individuals ascribe meaning to their social realities.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate institutional research ethics committee prior to data collection. Written informed consent was secured from all participants, who were assured of the voluntary nature of their involvement and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained through the use of pseudonyms and secure storage of audio and textual data. All procedures adhered to international ethical standards for human subjects research, including those outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki.

RESULTS

This study explored how Generation Z participants subjectively experienced and internalized influencer marketing as part of integrated marketing communication (IMC) strategies. Through interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), four major themes emerged from the participants' narratives, reflecting the essence of their lived experiences in forming brand loyalty through digital influencer engagement.

Perceived Emotional Closeness with Influencers

A dominant experience expressed by participants was the emotional closeness they felt toward influencers. This closeness was not superficial, but rather experienced as an intimate, parasocial relationship that shaped how participants responded to brand messages.

“She [the influencer] feels like a friend. When she recommends something, I trust her like how I trust my sister. It's not about the product it's about how she makes me feel.” (Participant 3)

The emotional resonance participants felt toward influencers shaped their perception of authenticity and trust. Many shared that influencers' openness about their personal lives fostered a sense of connection that traditional advertisements failed to create.

“When he shares about his struggles or daily routines, I don't see him as a seller. I see him as someone who is like me. That's why I believe what he says.” (Participant 7)

This perception of closeness became a foundation for how participants interpreted branded content as relational rather than transactional.

Trust Through Relatable Narratives

Participants described developing trust in influencers not only through consistent exposure but also through the relatability of the influencers' personal narratives. Authenticity emerged as a key criterion for credibility.

“I don't care about the number of followers. I care about whether their story feels real to me. If their lifestyle looks too perfect, I stop believing.” (Participant 5)

The narrative form of communication storytelling about personal routines, challenges, and achievements was perceived as more trustworthy than polished advertising scripts. Participants internalized brand messages embedded within these stories as part of a shared identity.

“When she told us how that skincare helped her through her acne journey, it didn't feel like a pitch. I've been there too, so I know she's not faking it.” (Participant 2)

Trust thus was constructed through emotional and narrative alignment between the influencer and the follower, not merely through promotional consistency.

Symbolic Affiliation and Identity Extension

Influencer marketing was experienced as a form of symbolic affiliation, where following or endorsing certain influencers allowed participants to express or reinforce their own identities.

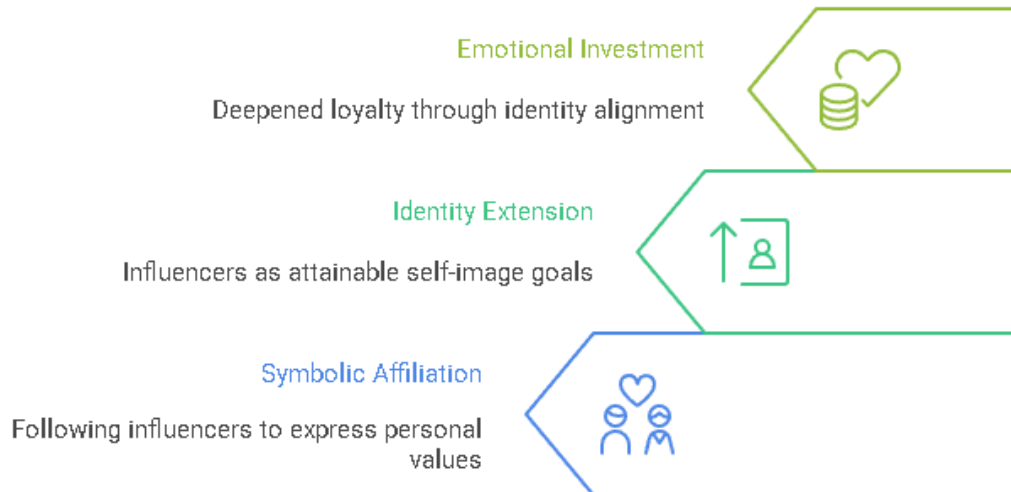
“Supporting her means supporting someone who shares my values. It's like... I belong to her community, and that makes me feel more confident in myself.” (Participant 1)

Participants expressed that influencers often embodied aspirational yet attainable personas. These personas became symbolic extensions of participants' self-image and identity goals.

“He's stylish, but not in a celebrity way. It's like I can be that too. When I wear something he suggests, it feels like a part of his confidence rubs off on me.” (Participant 8)

The alignment between personal identity and influencer branding deepened participants' emotional investment in the brands promoted, reinforcing loyalty through identification.

Influencer Identity Pyramid



Brand Loyalty as a Byproduct of Emotional Engagement

Rather than consciously deciding to be loyal to a brand, participants described brand loyalty as an emotional outcome of their attachment to influencers.

“Sometimes I don’t even realize I’ve bought from the same brand three times, just because she keeps using it and I want to follow her lifestyle.” (Participant 4)

This theme underscores the non-linear and often subconscious process of brand loyalty formation in digital spaces. Emotional engagement with influencers preceded any brand evaluation, bypassing rational deliberation.

“I don’t compare brands. I just want what he uses. I trust his choices, so I don’t need to look elsewhere.” (Participant 6)

The findings suggest that IMC strategies leveraging emotional influencer-consumer relationships can cultivate enduring brand attachment without traditional persuasion mechanisms.

The lived experiences of Generation Z participants reveal that influencer marketing, when perceived as authentic and emotionally engaging, functions as more than a promotional tool it becomes a relational mechanism that shapes trust, identity, and ultimately, brand loyalty. This loyalty emerges organically from emotional bonds and narrative resonance, rather than from explicit persuasion or brand-centric messaging.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that Generation Z participants experience influencer marketing as a deeply emotional and symbolic process. Their engagement is not merely transactional but rooted in perceived authenticity, emotional resonance, and identity alignment with the influencers they follow answering the core research question regarding how subjective experience shapes brand loyalty in digital IMC contexts.

These results contribute significantly to the understanding of how brand loyalty develops not through rational persuasion or functional product assessment, but through affective and narrative-driven relationships between influencers and their followers. The themes of emotional closeness, trust through relatable narratives, symbolic identity affiliation, and unconscious brand loyalty illustrate how participants internalize influencer messages within their personal value systems. By articulating these lived experiences, the study offers a nuanced answer to the guiding inquiry: how does Generation Z make meaning of influencer relationships in ways that foster loyalty? This contribution underscores the importance of treating influencer marketing as a phenomenon of social experience and identity construction rather than mere media strategy.

When positioned alongside existing literature, these findings align with and extend current theoretical frameworks. For instance, the emotional closeness described by participants supports the notion of para-social interaction as articulated by Horton and Wohl (1956), while the identity-based engagement reflects aspects of symbolic interactionism in consumer behavior (Solomon, 1983). Furthermore, the study affirms earlier insights by Smith et al. (2021) and Rahmawati & Yusuf (2023), who also noted the importance of emotional and narrative authenticity in shaping digital consumer trust. However, this study moves beyond surface-level trust by uncovering how personal narratives and perceived companionship actively shape long-term brand attachment. In doing so, it refines our understanding of influencer marketing as a socially embedded, emotionally navigated, and experientially meaningful phenomenon, especially for digital-native consumers.

The implications of this study extend beyond marketing practice into broader social and cultural domains. The findings suggest that influencer marketing functions as a form of digital intimacy, where consumers engage in emotionally meaningful exchanges that influence their identities and choices. For marketers, this underscores the importance of cultivating authentic relationships over persuasive messaging. On a societal level, the study reveals how young people negotiate trust and belonging in a media environment where personal identity and commercial content are intertwined. These insights are especially relevant for practitioners and scholars seeking to understand consumer behavior within digitally mediated, emotionally charged spaces, such as those inhabited by Generation Z.

Despite the depth of insight offered, the study is not without limitations. The use of a small, purposive sample typical of phenomenological research limits the transferability of findings to broader populations. Participants were also drawn from specific digital and cultural contexts, which may not represent the full diversity of Generation Z across regions or platforms. Additionally, the interpretative nature of IPA requires acknowledgment of the researcher's interpretive lens, which may have shaped the thematic construction. These constraints do not undermine the value of the findings but highlight the importance of contextual sensitivity and invite further validation across varied populations and influencer ecosystems.

Looking forward, this research opens several avenues for future inquiry. Studies could explore how influencer-consumer dynamics evolve over time, particularly in response to shifts in media authenticity, digital ethics, or platform algorithms. Comparative research across different cultural or subcultural groups within Generation Z may also uncover varied experiential frameworks tied to influencer engagement. Moreover, integrating phenomenological insights with longitudinal or ethnographic methods could offer even richer understandings of how digital relationships affect identity development and brand loyalty in the long term. Such explorations would advance both marketing theory and the study of digital experience more broadly.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how Generation Z consumers experience and internalize influencer marketing as part of integrated marketing communication (IMC) strategies. Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, the research uncovered how emotional closeness, perceived authenticity, and identity alignment with influencers foster brand loyalty in a deeply personal way. The findings suggest that influencer engagement among digital natives is not merely behavioral, but embedded in symbolic meaning and relational dynamics. However, as a qualitative and exploratory study with a limited participant pool, these insights should be interpreted with caution and not generalized across broader populations.

Rather than claiming universal patterns, this research aims to illuminate individual meaning-making processes that are often overlooked in quantitatively driven marketing literature. By foregrounding the lived experiences of a small sample of digitally immersed consumers, the study provides a nuanced lens into how trust and loyalty are formed through emotionally resonant narratives and symbolic affiliations. These insights offer a preliminary yet valuable contribution to marketing theory and practice by emphasizing the narrative-driven and socially constructed nature of consumer-brand relationships in the digital era. Future research should extend this work by conducting cross-

cultural comparative studies to assess how influencer-consumer dynamics vary across sociocultural contexts. In addition, longitudinal designs could explore how these relationships and their impact on brand loyalty evolve over time, particularly in response to shifts in influencer credibility, platform algorithms, or consumer life stages.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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