

The Impact of Instagram Influencers' Characteristics on Generation Z's Clothing Purchase Intention: The Mediating Role of Followers' Emotional Attachment

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Abstract

This study investigates the influence of Instagram influencers' characteristics on Generation Z's clothing purchase intentions, focusing on the mediating role of followers' emotional attachment. This study framed as applied research and employing a descriptive-survey design, the study utilized a questionnaire adapted from established scales in prior literature. Content and face validity were verified through expert evaluation, and internal consistency was confirmed with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.931. The sample comprised 384 members of Generation Z who follow two prominent Iranian Instagram influencers, selected using convenience sampling. Data analysis was conducted using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) in AMOS. The findings reveal that influencers' expertise and trustworthiness have a direct and significant positive effect on purchase intention, while all three attributes-attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness-positively influence followers' emotional attachment. In turn, emotional attachment serves as a significant predictor of purchase intention. These results underscore the strategic importance of both influencer credibility and emotional engagement in shaping consumer behavior among Generation Z.

Keywords: Influencer marketing, Instagram influencer characteristics, Generation Z, purchase intention, emotional attachment

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Introduction

The rapid advancement of information technology-particularly within the sphere of social media-has ushered in a new paradigm in global commerce. Brands and businesses, as fundamental pillars of a nation's economy, are compelled to adapt to these transformations and evolving market dynamics in order to remain competitive in an increasingly complex digital environment (Ohara et al., 2024). Among the most significant developments in this space is the rise of influencer marketing, an innovative and rapidly expanding strategy. Central to this approach are social media influencers-individuals capable of shaping opinions, shaping trends, and influencing consumer behavior through their personal brand and online presence (Álvarez-Monzoncillo, 2022).

Given their notable influence on the lifestyles, decision-making processes, and purchasing intentions of Generation Z, influencer marketing campaigns have become widely adopted by companies as a potent mechanism for driving consumer behavior (Álvarez-Monzoncillo, 2022). For influencers, particularly on platforms such as Instagram, the ability to establish credibility with followers is crucial (Chen et al., 2022). This credibility is grounded in several attributes, with attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness identified as the core dimensions of the source credibility model (Nugroho et al., 2022).

Another factor of equal significance is the emotional attachment that followers develop toward influencers, which fosters a stronger inclination to sustain long-term engagement. Cultivating such attachment-a bond based on emotional connection-is inherently challenging, prompting influencers to continually invest in strategies that enhance intimacy and interaction with their audiences. This effort not only strengthens relationships but also amplifies the persuasiveness and impact of their messages (Rahayu et al., 2024).

In contemporary marketing environments, a social media presence has shifted from being an optional asset to a strategic necessity. In Iran, Instagram holds particular prominence, and Generation Z-both as a current consumer segment and as a key future market-represents a critical demographic brand targeting. Despite this, the role of emotional attachment in shaping the purchase intentions of Iranian Gen Z consumers has yet to be systematically examined.

This study addresses this gap by investigating the influence of the three principal attributes of influencers-attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness-on followers' emotional attachment and, subsequently, their purchase intentions for clothing. In light of the rapid expansion of influencer marketing and the substantial investments it attracts, identifying the underlying drivers of its effectiveness is both timely and essential. The insights derived from this research aim to assist brand managers and marketing practitioners in selecting influencers who can most effectively convey brand messages and in understanding the mechanisms that enhance the success of influencer campaigns. Accordingly, the guiding research question is:

How do Instagram influencers' characteristics influence Generation Z's clothing purchase intentions, considering the mediating role of followers' emotional attachment?

Literature Review

In contemporary marketing, social media has emerged as a central and transformative force, fundamentally reshaping the way brands engage with consumers (Abid et al., 2023). Social media influencers-leaders of virtual communities with audiences spanning diverse demographic and social groups-hold a distinctive ability to shape opinions and influence behaviors (Wibisono et al., 2023). Through the creation of compelling content, the sharing of curated lifestyles, and the expression of

personal viewpoints, these influencers cultivate sustained and close connections with their followers. Such relationships enable them to set trends, guide purchasing decisions, and influence consumer culture at scale (Berne-Manero & Marzo-Navarro, 2020). As prominent and trusted figures in the digital sphere, influencers simultaneously present aspects of their personal lives and maintain interactive, two-way relationships that shape their audiences' attitudes and actions (Nissen et al., 2023).

The credibility of social media influencers is widely understood to rest upon three interrelated dimensions-attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness-as articulated in the source credibility model. Attractiveness encompasses visual appeal, charm, and a fashionable image; trustworthiness relates to perceived honesty, integrity, and authenticity; and expertise refers to the knowledge, skills, and experience that confer authority in the eyes of followers (Koay et al., 2021). The rapid proliferation of social media platforms has facilitated the rise of influencer marketing-a strategic form of brand communication wherein companies collaborate with influencers to promote products or services. Functionally, this approach mirrors electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), leveraging the trust consumers place in relatable and credible sources (Bijen, 2017). Its effectiveness has propelled influencer marketing into a position of strategic importance for advertisers worldwide, with the Association of National Advertisers (ANA) projecting in 2018 that global spending on influencer campaigns would approach \$101 billion by 2020 (Berne-Manero & Marzo-Navarro, 2020).

Emotional attachment is defined as a lasting affective bond that may develop between individuals or between a person and an entity, such as a brand. Such attachment arises when the object or person consistently fulfills an individual's needs, leading to its integration into the

individual's self-concept. This relationship fosters a sense of security, loyalty, and continued engagement (Yan et al., 2023). Within the social media context, emotional attachment may form between influencers and followers when repeated positive interactions satisfy followers' needs, producing a relationship characterized by affinity, loyalty, and a desire for continuity (Shah et al., 2023).

Generation Z-comprising nearly two billion individuals globally as of 2020-represents one of the largest and most economically significant consumer segments, wielding substantial influence over purchasing decisions both directly and indirectly. Born into a fully digital era, they are among the most active users of social media, making them highly responsive to influencer-driven campaigns (Nugroho et al., 2022). Their hallmark traits, including high daily internet usage and dependence on mobile devices for communication and information, render them particularly receptive to influencer content capable of shaping their consumer attitudes and behaviors (Erwin et al., 2023).

In the Iranian context, Instagram holds a dominant position among social media platforms. As of July 2024, Iran ranked eighth globally in Instagram usage, with approximately 44 million users (Donya-e-Eqtesad, 2024). The National Survey on the Culture of Social Media reports that 72% of Iranians identify Instagram as their preferred platform. Findings from a 2023 Nex Lux Agency study on Iranian Gen Z revealed that online media-and Instagram in particular-are the most frequently used and preferred channels for this demographic, which constitutes 19.6% of the national population. With an estimated annual direct economic turnover of 150 trillion tomans and an indirect impact exceeding 800 trillion tomans, Iranian Gen Z possesses significant purchasing power. Notably, 34.6% of respondents identified Instagram as their primary platform, devoting the majority of their online time to it.

Prior research underscores the variety of factors influencing consumer purchase intentions within influencer marketing. Purwanto and Prayuda (2024) identified brand image, brand experience, and influencer marketing as key determinants of purchase behavior. Nadanyiova and Sujanska (2023) argued that follower engagement and quality, rather than follower count, are more critical in determining an influencer's impact. Nugroho et al. (2022) further demonstrated that attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness each exert a positive influence on Gen Z consumers' purchase intentions.

Drawing upon these insights, the present study develops a conceptual framework adapted from Rui and Mohamad (2024), Shah et al. (2023), and Nugroho et al. (2022). In this model, influencers' attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness function as independent variables; followers' emotional attachment serves as a mediating variable; and Generation Z's clothing purchase intention is positioned as the dependent variable.

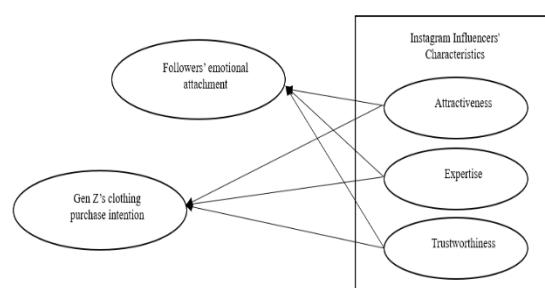


Figure 1. Conceptual Model
Source: Rui & Mohamad (2024); Shah et al. (2023); Nugroho et al. (2022)

Methodology

This research investigates the impact of Instagram influencers' characteristics on Generation Z's clothing purchase intentions, with particular attention to the mediating role of followers' emotional attachment. In terms of purpose, the study is classified as *applied research*. Given its

focus on analyzing existing conditions and exploring inter-variable relationships without experimental manipulation, it adopts a *descriptive-survey design* and employs a quantitative approach.

The theoretical framework was developed through an extensive review of relevant literature, including scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and prior empirical studies. The empirical phase utilized a structured questionnaire, adapted from established scales in earlier research, and synthesized items from three foundational studies forming the basis of the present work.

The instrument consisted of two sections. The first captured demographic information-gender, age, education level, occupation, and duration of Instagram use. The second section consisted of 22 positively worded items, rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), distributed as follows:

1. Influencer attractiveness -items 1 to 5
2. Influencer expertise -items 6 to 10
3. Influencer trustworthiness - items 11 to 15
4. Followers' emotional attachment - items 16 to 19

5. Purchase intention -items 20 to 22

Measures for attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise were adapted from Kok Wei and Li (2013), as cited in Nugroho et al. (2022). Items assessing emotional attachment and purchase intention were drawn from Rui and Mohamad (2024) and Shah et al. (2023).

The study population comprised Generation Z followers of two prominent Iranian Instagram influencers: *Mina Mokhtari* (approximately 643,000 followers) and *Ravak Foroughi* (approximately 141,000 followers) in 2025. Based on Morgan's sampling table and considering the large population size, a sample of 384 respondents was deemed appropriate. A non-probability *convenience sampling* method was employed, and the questionnaire was distributed online to the followers of the selected influencers. Only

responses from individuals meeting the generational criteria for Generation Z were retained for analysis.

Although the questionnaire incorporated previously validated items, *content validity* was further established through expert review. Ten subject-matter specialists evaluated the instrument, and both the Content Validity Ratio (CVR) and Content Validity Index (CVI) were calculated to confirm item relevance and clarity. *Reliability* was assessed via a pilot test with 30 respondents. Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeded the minimum threshold of 0.70 for all constructs, and the overall reliability score was 0.931, indicating high internal consistency.

Data analysis was conducted in several stages. The *Kolmogorov-Smirnov test* was applied to assess the normality of data distributions, while *Bartlett's test of sphericity* evaluated the suitability of the data for factor analysis. Hypotheses were tested using *Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)* with the Maximum Likelihood Estimation (MLE) method. All statistical analyses were performed using *SPSS* and *AMOS* software.

Findings

Following the distribution of the questionnaire and completion of data collection, responses were subjected to a series of descriptive and inferential statistical analyses. As an initial step, descriptive statistics were generated for all variables using *SPSS*, providing an overview of the sample profile and respondents' perceptions.

Sample-profile

Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The sample comprised predominantly female participants (76.8%), with the majority aged between 25 and 28 years (52.3%). Most respondents held a bachelor's degree (59.2%) and were self-employed (49.5%). Notably, 68.8% reported more than five years of Instagram usage, reflecting a high

level of platform familiarity within the target group.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	89	23.2%
Female	295	76.8%
Age		
13–18 years	51	13.3%
19–24 years	132	34.4%
25–28 years	201	52.3%
Education		
Secondary school	40	10.4%
High school diploma	30	7.8%
Bachelor's degree	227	59.2%
Master's degree	87	22.6%
Occupation		
Student (school)	41	10.7%
University student	71	18.4%
Self-employed	190	49.5%
Employee	62	16.2%
Homemaker	20	5.2%
Instagram usage experience		
Less than 1 year	6	1.5%
1–3 years	30	7.8%
3–5 years	84	21.9%
5–8 years	264	68.8%

Descriptive Statistics

Among the influencer characteristics, *attractiveness* achieved the highest mean score, followed by *expertise* and *trustworthiness*, all with mean values exceeding 4.00-indicating an overall positive evaluation. In contrast, *emotional attachment* recorded the lowest mean, alongside the highest standard deviation and variance, suggesting greater divergence in participants' perceptions of this construct.

Normality Assessment

Item-level skewness and kurtosis statistics were examined to assess distributional characteristics. As shown in Table 2, all values fell within the recommended range of -2 to +2, suggesting no substantial departures from normality.

Table 2. Assessment of Normality for Research Items

Item	Mean	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis
ATT1	4.33	2	5	-0.747	0.187
ATT2	4.40	1	5	-1.030	1.035
ATT3	4.44	3	5	-0.708	-0.491
ATT4	4.44	2	5	-0.761	-0.122
ATT5	4.34	1	5	-0.989	0.841
EXP1	4.23	2	5	-0.680	-0.083
EXP2	4.28	2	5	-0.663	-0.263
EXP3	4.33	2	5	-0.761	-0.049
EXP4	4.27	2	5	-0.714	-0.212
EXP5	4.26	2	5	-0.631	-0.416
TRUST1	4.14	2	5	-0.471	0.888
TRUST2	4.16	1	5	-0.757	-0.112
TRUST3	4.29	2	5	-0.760	-0.331
TRUST4	4.19	1	5	-0.764	-0.146
TRUST5	4.20	1	5	-0.717	-0.370
EMO1	3.45	1	5	-0.197	-0.639
EMO2	3.55	1	5	-0.502	-0.547
EMO3	3.66	1	5	-0.695	-0.247
EMO4	3.86	1	5	-0.886	-0.077
BUY1	4.11	1	5	-0.940	-0.657
BUY2	4.18	1	5	-1.010	-0.741
BUY3	4.11	1	5	-0.776	-0.096

To corroborate these findings, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was conducted for each construct (Table 3). Significance values for all variables exceeded 0.05, supporting the retention of the null

hypothesis and confirming the normality of the dataset.

Table 3. Kolmogorov–Smirnov Test Results

Variable	Statistic	Sig.	Conclusion
Attractiveness	0.209	0.060	Normal
Expertise	0.220	0.059	Normal
Trustworthiness	0.193	0.063	Normal
Emotional attachment	0.131	0.062	Normal
Purchase intention	0.231	0.058	Normal

Sampling Adequacy for Factor Analysis

Prior to the structural analysis, the dataset's suitability for factor analysis was evaluated. The *Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin* (KMO) measure yielded a value of 0.853, indicating excellent sampling adequacy. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 960.366$, $p < 0.001$),

rejecting the null hypothesis of an identity matrix and confirming the presence of sufficient correlations among items to justify factor analysis.

Table 4. Sampling Adequacy and Bartlett's Test Results

Test	Value
KMO	0.853
Bartlett's Test χ^2	960.366
df	10
Sig.	0.000

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

The first phase of the *Structural Equation Modeling* (SEM) procedure involved conducting a Confirmatory Factor Analysis to assess the measurement model and establish the construct validity of the survey instrument. CFA evaluates the extent to which observed indicators accurately represent their corresponding latent variables by estimating factor loadings. In this study, loadings below 0.40 were considered for exclusion, values between 0.40 and 0.60 were deemed acceptable, and

those above 0.60 were classified as desirable.

The CFA results, illustrated in Figure 2, depict the measurement model generated using *AMOS*. The model specifies the factor structure and reports standardized loadings for each observed variable, all of which exceeded the recommended threshold, thereby supporting the adequacy of the measurement model for subsequent structural analysis.

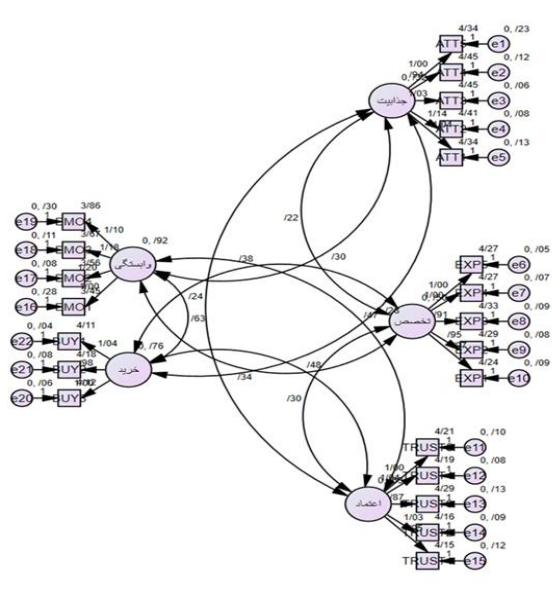


Figure 2. Measurement Model

Following the estimation of the measurement model, its overall adequacy was evaluated through

multiple goodness-of-fit indices (Table 5).

Table 5. Goodness-of-Fit Indices for the Measurement Model

Index	Model Estimate	Acceptable Threshold	Fit Result
χ^2/df	3.627	< 5	Good fit
RMSEA	0.04	< 0.05	Good fit
CFI	0.954	> 0.90	Good fit
NFI	0.937	> 0.90	Good fit
IFI	0.954	> 0.90	Good fit

The comparison of observed values with established benchmarks confirms that the measurement model demonstrate a robust and satisfactory fit, providing a solid foundation for further interpretation and hypothesis testing.

Factor Loadings

The standardized factor loadings for each construct are reported in Table 6.

Table 6. Standardized Factor Loadings

Variable	Dimension	Item Code	Factor Loading	Result
Influencer Characteristics	Attractiveness	ATT1	0.855	Acceptable
		ATT2	0.919	Acceptable
		ATT3	0.921	Acceptable
		ATT4	0.840	Acceptable
		ATT5	0.759	Acceptable
	Expertise	EXP1	0.916	Acceptable
		EXP2	0.922	Acceptable
		EXP3	0.902	Acceptable
		EXP4	0.937	Acceptable
		EXP5	0.954	Acceptable
	Trustworthiness	TRUST1	0.909	Acceptable
		TRUST2	0.940	Acceptable
		TRUST3	0.886	Acceptable
		TRUST4	0.945	Acceptable
		TRUST5	0.927	Acceptable
Emotional Attachment	—	EMO1	0.875	Acceptable
		EMO2	0.971	Acceptable
		EMO3	0.959	Acceptable
		EMO4	0.887	Acceptable
Purchase Intention	—	BUY1	0.978	Acceptable
		BUY2	0.948	Acceptable
		BUY3	0.961	Acceptable

All factor loadings exceed the recommended minimum of 0.70, demonstrating strong convergent validity and justifying the retention of all items for the subsequent structural analysis.

Discriminant Validity

To verify that the constructs were empirically distinct, Composite Reliability (CR), Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and the Heterotrait -Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) were calculated (Table 7).

Table 7. Discriminant Validity Assessment

Variable	CR	AVE	HTMT	Criteria	Result
Attractiveness	0.93	0.733	0.865	CR > 0.70, AVE > 0.50, HTMT < 0.90	Acceptable
Expertise	0.96	0.850	0.806	Met	Acceptable
Trustworthiness	0.96	0.840	0.813	Met	Acceptable
Emotional Attachment	0.95	0.844	0.863	Met	Acceptable
Purchase Intention	0.97	0.845	0.871	Met	Acceptable

With all CR values exceeding 0.70, all AVE values surpassing 0.50, and HTMT values below 0.90, the satisfy the established criteria for discriminant validity.

Structural constructs Model Assessment

Upon confirming the reliability and validity of the measurement model, the structural model was estimated to test the hypothesized relationships among constructs. The structural model

incorporates both latent variables (which are not directly observable) and their associated observed indicators. This stage enables the evaluation of direct, indirect, and mediating effects between variables.

Figure 3 illustrates the structural model applied in this study for hypothesis testing.

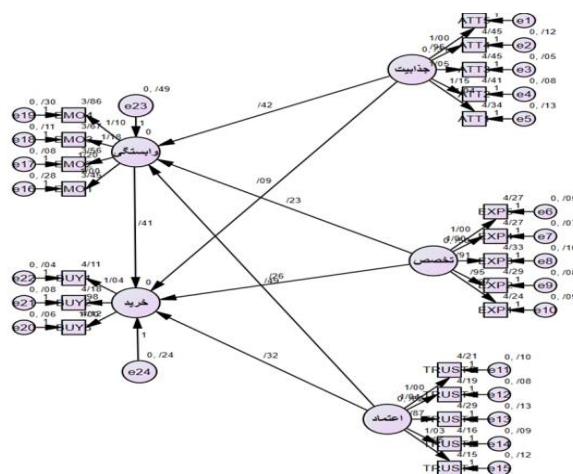


Figure 3. Structural Model

Structural Model Evaluation

Upon estimating the structural model, its overall fit was examined using multiple indices. As presented in Table 8, all values meet or

exceed the recommended thresholds, confirming that the model exhibits a satisfactory level of fit to the data.

Table 8. Goodness-of-Fit Indices for the Structural Model

Fit Index	Model Estimate	Acceptable Threshold	Fit Result
χ^2/df	4.97	< 5	Good fit
RMSEA	0.04	< 0.05	Good fit
CFI	0.92	> 0.90	Good fit
NFI	0.91	> 0.90	Good fit
IFI	0.92	> 0.90	Good fit

The convergence of these indices with established benchmarks indicates that the structural model is both statistically and theoretically sound, enabling robust hypothesis testing.

Hypothesis Testing

The proposed hypotheses were evaluated using path coefficients, t-statistics, and significance levels. A p-value below 0.05

was considered evidence in support of a hypothesis. The magnitude and sign of each path coefficient indicate the strength and direction of the relationship-where positive coefficients represent direct positive associations, and negative coefficients denote inverse effects.

Table 9. Hypothesis Testing Results

Independent Variable	Mediating Variable	Dependent Variable	Coefficient	t-value	Sig.	Result
Instagram influencers' attributes	Followers' emotional attachment	Gen Z's purchase intention for clothing	0.378	4.467	0.000	Supported
Attractiveness of Instagram influencers	-	Gen Z's purchase intention for clothing	0.064	1.677	0.090	Not supported
Expertise of Instagram influencers	-	Gen Z's purchase intention for clothing	0.242	6.599	0.000	Supported
Trustworthiness of Instagram influencers	-	Gen Z's purchase intention for clothing	0.333	7.985	0.000	Supported
Attractiveness of Instagram influencers	-	Followers' emotional attachment	0.276	5.845	0.000	Supported
Expertise of Instagram influencers	-	Followers' emotional attachment	0.195	4.376	0.000	Supported
Trustworthiness of Instagram influencers	-	Followers' emotional attachment	0.457	9.672	0.000	Supported
Followers' emotional attachment	-	Gen Z's purchase intention for clothing	0.458	9.849	0.000	Supported

Interpretation of Results

The analysis reveals that expertise and trustworthiness exert a direct and statistically significant positive influence on Generation Z's clothing purchase intentions. By contrast, attractiveness does not directly shape purchase intentions but contributes indirectly through its positive effect on followers' emotional attachment.

Importantly, all three influencer attributes-attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness-are significant predictors of emotional attachment,

which, in turn, strongly and positively predicts purchase intention. This underscores the central role of emotional bonds in consumer decision-making. In practical terms, influencers who cultivate trust, demonstrate domain expertise, and establish genuine emotional connections with their audiences are more likely to influence purchase behaviors among Generation Z consumers.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the extent to which Instagram influencers' attributes-attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness shape Generation Z's clothing purchase intentions, with a particular focus on the mediating role of followers' emotional attachment. The results demonstrate that among these attributes, expertise and trustworthiness exert a direct and significant positive influence on purchase intention. These findings corroborate earlier studies by Nugroho et al. (2022), Pérez-Cabañero et al. (2023), and Ao et al. (2023), reinforcing the importance of credibility-based attributes in influencer marketing.

Conversely, attractiveness was not found to have a direct effect on purchase intention within the Iranian Gen Z sample. This outcome suggests that, in the Iranian cultural and market context, young consumers prioritize intrinsic qualities such as content quality, professional competence, and perceived honesty over physical appearance when evaluating influencers. This contrasts with the findings of Nugroho et al. (2022) in Indonesia, where attractiveness significantly influenced purchase intention, indicating that cultural norms and contextual differences may shape the weight assigned to visual appeal in influencer effectiveness.

Importantly, the analysis also reveals that all three attributes-attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness-significantly enhance followers' emotional attachment, which in turn has a strong positive effect on purchase intention. This mediating role of emotional attachment supports parasocial relationship theory, which posits that perceived closeness and interpersonal bonds between media figures and their audiences can meaningfully influence attitudes and behaviors. These results align with prior

research by Rahayu et al. (2024), Zhang and Choi (2022), Chiu and Ho (2023), Bagus et al. (2024), Zhou and Baskaran (2025), and Duffett and Mxunyelwa (2025), all of which emphasize emotional engagement as a key driver of consumer motivation in influencer marketing contexts.

Managerial Implications

For practitioners, the findings suggest that brands should prioritize expertise and trustworthiness when selecting influencers, as these qualities are more likely to yield direct improvements in purchase intention. At the same time, strategic efforts should be made to cultivate long-term emotional bonds between influencers and their audiences. This can be achieved through consistent, value-driven content, authentic interactions, and personalized communication. Notably, emotional attachment itself emerged as a significant predictor of purchase intention, independent of the influencers' attributes, echoing the conclusions of Zaman et al. (2024), Chen and Yang (2023), and Faisal et al. (2023).

Theoretical Contributions

This study extends the influencer marketing literature by integrating three core influencer attributes with the mediating role of emotional attachment in a single conceptual framework, applied specifically to Generation Z in Iran. To the best of our knowledge, this combination has not been previously examined in the Iranian context. By addressing this gap, the study not only offers a more nuanced understanding of influencer-follower dynamics but also provides a foundation for cross-cultural comparisons in future research.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the evidence indicates that expertise and trustworthiness

directly enhance Generation Z's purchase intentions for clothing, whereas attractiveness exerts its influence indirectly via emotional attachment. For marketing managers in the clothing sector, this underscores the importance of engaging influencers who are perceived as knowledgeable, competent, and credible, while also investing in strategies that foster emotional loyalty among followers. Incorporating emotional engagement metrics into influencer selection and campaign evaluation may therefore be critical for optimizing the long-term impact of influencer marketing initiatives and achieving sustainable sales growth.

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