

Does Influencer Expertise Matter Most? A PLS-SEM Investigation of TikTok Influencer Attributes, Brand Trust, and Purchase Intention among Generation Z Consumers in Vietnam

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Abstract

Original Research Article

The rapid proliferation of TikTok commerce has fundamentally transformed how Generation Z consumers evaluate and trust influencers, yet the existing body of research offers limited insight into which influencer attributes drive brand trust within short-form, algorithm-driven environments. This study addresses this gap by examining whether traditional credibility cues—including popularity, expertise, credibility, and informative value—retain their predictive power for brand trust and purchase intention among Vietnamese Gen Z consumers. Grounded in Source Credibility Theory and the Advertising Value Model, this research develops and empirically tests a structural model incorporating four influencer attributes as antecedents of brand trust, which in turn predicts purchase intention. Primary data were collected through an online survey administered to 142 TikTok users in Ho Chi Minh City and subsequently analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). The findings reveal that only influencer expertise significantly enhances brand trust, while popularity credibility, and informative value do not exhibit statistically significant effects. Brand trust, in turn, strongly predicts purchase intention. These findings indicate a paradigmatic shift toward competence-based evaluation in short-video platforms, challenging conventional assumptions derived from Source Credibility Theory and highlighting the diminishing relevance of surface-level cues in algorithm-mediated environments. This study contributes to the digital marketing literature by elucidating expertise-centric trust formation mechanisms and offers actionable implications for brands seeking to optimize influencer marketing strategies targeting Gen Z consumers in emerging Southeast Asian markets.

Keywords: Influencer marketing, TikTok, brand trust, purchase intention, Generation Z, source credibility, PLS-SEM, Vietnam.

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1. Introduction

In the contemporary digital landscape, social media platforms have fundamentally reshaped marketing strategies, with TikTok emerging as one of the most influential platforms for consumer

engagement and brand communication (Anh Tho, 2024; Dang et al., 2025a). In Vietnam, TikTok has achieved remarkable market penetration, with nearly 50 million active users (Vu, 2025) spending an average of 58 minutes per day on the platform (VietnamNet, 2025). As of early 2022,



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approximately 72% of Generation Z actively used TikTok (Nguyen, 2023), with 62% demonstrating a stronger inclination toward digital commerce compared to conventional retail channels (The Influencer Marketing Factory, 2021). Gen Z exhibits a notable tendency to engage in e-commerce, with social media platforms serving as primary drivers for purchase decisions (Thuy & Nguyen, 2024; Dang et al., 2025a). Against this backdrop, the global influencer marketing industry is forecasted to reach \$32.55 billion by 2025 (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2025), underscoring the strategic importance of understanding how influencer attributes shape consumer trust in digital environments.

Despite the burgeoning growth of TikTok commerce, the long-term effectiveness of influencer marketing in building sustainable brand trust remains inadequately understood. While some influencer campaigns generate rapid attention and short-term sales, many brands struggle to maintain sustained trust and loyalty, risking substantial resource misallocation (Leung, Gu, & Palmatier, 2022). Gen Z's propensity for novelty-seeking behavior (Sun et al., 2022) and high digital literacy (Kunja & GVRK, 2020) mean they can readily shift to competing brands if trust is not continuously reinforced. Additionally, Vietnam's Ministry of Industry and Trade has been progressively tightening regulations on identity verification and transparency, with plans to implement VneID authentication and increase influencer accountability (Tạp Chí Công Thương, 2025). These regulatory shifts are expected to significantly alter consumer trust evaluation mechanisms, yet previous studies have predominantly examined influencer marketing's impact on purchase intention or brand recognition, with limited direct attention to the underlying trust formation processes (Dang et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2025).

Several critical theoretical and empirical gaps persist in the extant literature. First, existing applications of Source Credibility Theory (SCT) have primarily focused on traditional social media platforms such as Instagram and YouTube, leaving TikTok's distinctive short-form video format and algorithm-driven content discovery largely unexplored. The rapid, visual-centric nature of

TikTok may fundamentally alter how expertise and credibility signals are processed, yet this mechanism remains undertheorized (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Second, while the Advertising Value Model (AVM) emphasizes informative value as a key driver of advertising effectiveness, how this construct operates in emerging markets like Vietnam—where Gen Z consumers exhibit unique digital behaviors and cultural preferences for authenticity—requires deeper investigation (Dang et al., 2025a). Third, although SCT identifies expertise and credibility as separate dimensions, their combined effect with popularity and informative value on brand trust has not been comprehensively tested within a unified structural framework, particularly in the TikTok ecosystem where these attributes may interact differently than on follower-based platforms (Tien et al., 2023; Dang et al., 2023). Fourth, the specific pathways through which TikTok influencer attributes translate into brand trust and subsequent purchase intention in fast-paced, short-form video environments remain unclear, as consumption behaviors differ markedly from traditional media contexts where these theories were originally developed (Binh et al., 2024).

To address these gaps, this study examines how TikTok influencer marketing attributes influence brand trust formation among Vietnamese Generation Z consumers in Ho Chi Minh City. Drawing on Source Credibility Theory and the Advertising Value Model, this research systematically evaluates four key influencer attributes—popularity, expertise, credibility, and informative value—and their impact on brand trust within the Brand Trust Theory framework (Dang et al., 2025b; Tran et al., 2025). By examining the trust-to-purchase-intention conversion mechanism in short-form video contexts, this study extends existing theories to TikTok environments and emerging market settings, providing both theoretical contributions and practical guidance for brands navigating Vietnam's evolving digital landscape.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical background and develops five research hypotheses. Section 3 describes the research methodology. Section 4 presents the data analysis, measurement

model, structural model results, and discussion. Section 5 synthesizes conclusions, limitations, and future research directions.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1. Theoretical Foundations

2.1.1. Source Credibility Theory

Source Credibility Theory (SCT), established by Hovland et al. (1954), posits that the persuasive effectiveness of a message depends on how audiences perceive the source's credibility. The theory identifies two primary dimensions: expertise and credibility (AlFarraj et al., 2021). Expertise refers to the perceived knowledge, competence, and qualifications of the source in a specific domain (Ohanian, 1990), representing the extent to which an influencer is perceived as capable of making accurate claims and providing reliable product information. Credibility, in contrast, reflects the perceived trustworthiness, honesty, and integrity of the source (Pornpitakpan, 2004), representing the audience's belief that the influencer is sincere, transparent, and not motivated solely by commercial interests. In digital influencer marketing contexts, SCT provides the foundational framework for understanding how influencer expertise and credibility influence consumer trust formation and engagement (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Dang et al., 2023).

2.1.2. Advertising Value Model and Informative Value

The Advertising Value Model (AVM), developed by Ducoffe (1995), explains consumer attitudes toward advertising through the perceived value it delivers, encompassing three primary components: informative value, entertainment value, and irritation. Within the TikTok short-form video environment, informative value is particularly significant, representing the degree to which consumers perceive influencer content as useful, relevant, and capable of providing current product information. Research demonstrates that content perceived as highly informative positively influences

consumer attitudes toward both the content itself and the promoted brand (Ducoffe, 1995; Sánchez-Fernández & Jiménez-Castillo, 2021). This model provides the theoretical basis for examining how influencer informative value affects brand trust formation in algorithm-driven digital platforms (Nguyen et al., 2025; Binh et al., 2024).

2.1.3. Brand Trust Theory

Brand trust represents a consumer's willingness to rely on a brand based on the belief that it is dependable, competent, and will deliver on its promises (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2001). It reflects consumer confidence in a brand's reliability and its intention to act in the consumer's best interest (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). In digital contexts, trust can be transferred from credible and popular influencers to the brands they endorse, particularly when influencer attributes such as expertise, credibility, popularity, and informative value are strong (Keh & Xie, 2009; Dang et al., 2025b). Brand trust serves as a critical element in establishing lasting customer relationships and is recognized as essential for fostering loyalty and future purchase behaviors (Moorman et al., 1992; Tien et al., 2023).

2.1.4. Influencer Popularity

The popularity of influencers can be understood through their capacity to stimulate interaction and participation among audience members (Silvia & Putra, 2024). Popularity is typically assessed using metrics such as follower counts, engagement rates, and community standing. Research has demonstrated that influencers with substantial popularity can generate considerable consumer interest and improve brand recognition, leading to heightened consumer involvement with endorsed products (Ladhari et al., 2020; Dang et al., 2025a). Furthermore, influencers who maintain dedicated and actively participating audiences are more likely to develop deeper connections with their followers, thereby cultivating consumer trust in the brand and willingness to make purchases (Tanwar et al., 2022).

2.1.5. Purchase Intention

Purchase intention describes the consumer's willingness and likelihood to acquire a product or service following a multi-stage decision-making process encompassing need recognition, information gathering, alternative assessment, purchase, and post-purchase evaluation (Nayma et al., 2023). In contemporary digital environments, social media platforms significantly impact purchase intentions, as consumers often depend on influencer reviews and recommendations when considering purchases (Hasan & Sohail, 2021). Studies indicate that brand awareness, consumer trust, and social media interaction substantially affect purchasing behavior (Gani et al., 2023; Dang et al., 2023). Purchase intention is thus shaped by a confluence of product characteristics, social influences, and influencer endorsements that collectively affect consumer attitudes and buying propensity (Dang et al., 2025a).

2.2. Hypotheses Development

In an era of rapid social media platform growth, businesses' advertising strategies have undergone fundamental transformation. Influencer marketing involves companies partnering with digital influencers to activate their audience base across social platforms, utilizing these influencers' distinct attributes to promote products and improve business outcomes (Leung, Gu, & Palmatier, 2022). Implementing influencer marketing campaigns demands substantial resources while presenting measurement challenges, necessitating clear identification of the key determinants that companies can leverage to optimize their marketing initiatives (Leung, Gu, Li, et al., 2022; Dang et al., 2023).

Regarding influencer popularity and brand trust, Fitriasari et al. (2025) demonstrate that influencer popularity positively affects both customer trust and social media engagement. The correlation between an influencer's popularity level and consumer confidence illustrates how influencer prominence contributes to building trust in advertised products while reinforcing customer-brand relationships (Fitriasari et al., 2025; Nguyen et al., 2025). To further investigate this relationship in the TikTok context:

H1: Influencer popularity has a positive effect on brand trust.

Regarding influencer expertise and brand trust, while some studies suggest no significant relationship (Lou & Yuan, 2019), others demonstrate that expertise significantly impacts trust formation, as consumers differentiate experts and rely on their suggestions more heavily (Mammadli, 2021; Dang et al., 2023). Expert influencers' recommendations carry greater weight because perceived competence signals both knowledge and implicit trustworthiness (Dang et al., 2025b):

H2: Influencer expertise has a positive effect on brand trust.

Regarding influencer credibility and brand trust, Kemeç and Yüksel (2021) assert that influencer credibility has a significant and positive effect on brand trust. Research within the YouTube influencer community demonstrates that YouTuber credibility affects brand trust among young consumers (Eru et al., 2018). Trust is often measured through metrics such as honesty, reliability, and content accuracy, and research findings reveal that influencer credibility positively influences consumer buying intentions and brand confidence (Ishani & Seock, 2020; Nascimento, 2019; Tien et al., 2023):

H3: Influencer credibility has a positive effect on brand trust.

Regarding informative value and brand trust, strong argument quality or high perceived credibility in an influencer's communication leads to greater message acceptance and internalization (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016). Content creators on social platforms are viewed as genuine and knowledgeable due to their insightful perspectives (Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014), possessing the capability to deliver current and sophisticated insights (Hsu & Tsou, 2011). When influencers provide valuable information, consumers develop trust in the mentioned products or brands (Sánchez-Fernández & Jiménez-Castillo, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2025):

H4: Informative value of influencers has a positive effect on brand trust.

Regarding brand trust and purchase intention, numerous scholars have established that consumer purchasing behavior is closely related to brand trust (Chinomona et al., 2013; Sheth, 2002). Brand trust has been identified as a predictor of brand preference and purchase intention (Dam, 2020), reducing consumer uncertainty in purchasing situations (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Doney & Cannon, 1997). Multiple studies confirm brand trust as an antecedent of purchase intention with substantial effect sizes (AR et al., 2014; Saragih et al., 2019; Cuong, 2020; Dang et al., 2023):

H5: Brand trust significantly influences purchase intention.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive and explanatory research design employing a quantitative approach to explore and clarify the relationships between influencer attributes, brand trust, and purchase intention. Descriptive research approaches are particularly valuable when examining phenomena where limited information exists or when exploring newly emerging patterns (Dulock, 1993). The quantitative data analysis approach was employed to elucidate underlying trends and relationships using statistical tools (Albers, 2017), ensuring objectivity, reliability, and the capacity to test proposed hypotheses and evaluate the magnitude of influence between variables in the structural model (Dang et al., 2023; Tran et al., 2025).

Primary data were collected through a structured online questionnaire administered via Google Forms to Generation Z consumers in Ho Chi Minh City who actively use the TikTok platform. The questionnaire approach was selected due to its efficiency in collecting data from large samples, its cost-effectiveness, and its suitability for measuring participants' attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions (Yaddanapudi & Yaddanapudi, 2019; Ajayi, 2025). This technique was considered most appropriate for

the objectives and scope of the present study, consistent with established methodological practices in digital marketing research (Dang et al., 2025a; Nguyen et al., 2025).

3.2. Questionnaire Design and Measurement

The questionnaire was designed in two main parts: demographic information of participants and measurement items related to the five constructs— influencer popularity (IIP), influencer expertise (IIE), influencer credibility (IIC), influencer informative value (IIV), brand trust (BIT), and purchase intention (PII). The questionnaire content was reviewed and adjusted prior to distribution to ensure clarity and contextual suitability, then translated into Vietnamese to facilitate accurate comprehension. The measurement scales were developed based on previously validated instruments from the extant literature. All observed variables were measured using a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from (1) “Strongly Disagree” to (7) “Strongly Agree.” The 7-point scale was selected because it provides greater sensitivity and variance, particularly useful for detecting subtle attitudinal differences and enhancing scale reliability and statistical power in SEM-based studies (Dang et al., 2023; Tran et al., 2025).

3.3. Sample Size Determination

The minimum required sample size was determined using G*Power 3 software (Faul et al., 2007). For the linear multiple regression model with 5 predictor variables, effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$), significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$), and statistical power ($1 - \beta = 0.80$), the required minimum sample size was 92 participants. The final sample comprised 142 valid responses, substantially exceeding the minimum threshold and ensuring adequate statistical power for PLS-SEM analysis (Hair et al., 2022; Dang et al., 2023).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Demographic Profile

Data were collected from 142 Gen Z consumers in Ho Chi Minh City through an online

survey. After screening for incomplete and spam responses, the final sample consisted of 142 valid

observations. Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of respondents.

Table 1. Demographic profile of respondents.

Characteristic	Category	Freq.	%
Gender	Female	92	64.79
	Male	50	35.21
Age	18–24	122	85.92
	25–28	20	14.08
Monthly Income	< 5 million VND	86	60.56
	5–10 million VND	37	26.06
	> 10 million VND	19	13.38
Employment	Student/Part-time	101	71.13
	Full-time	41	28.87
TikTok Usage	> 5 times/day	53	37.32
	3–5 times/day	52	36.62
	1–2 times/day	37	26.06

Source: Authors' survey data (n = 142).

The respondent pool was predominantly female (64.79%), with 85.92% aged 18–24, aligning with the core Gen Z demographic. Income levels were skewed toward lower brackets, consistent with the student and part-time employment status of 71.13% of participants. TikTok engagement was exceptionally high, with 37.32% accessing the platform more than 5 times daily. This intensive usage pattern validates the sample's relevance for investigating influencer-driven brand trust formation on short-form video platforms (Dang et al., 2025a).

4.2. Assessment of the Measurement Model

The analysis was performed using SmartPLS 4.0, employing PLS-SEM with bias-corrected confidence intervals. The reflective measurement model was evaluated using the criteria proposed by Hair et al. (2022). Reliability was confirmed with Cronbach's α ranging from 0.792 to 0.856, ρ_a from 0.801 to 0.856, and composite reliability (ρ_c) from 0.864 to 0.903, all exceeding the minimum threshold of 0.70. The average variance extracted (AVE) ranged from 0.614 to 0.699, surpassing the minimum requirement of 0.50, confirming convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Dang et al., 2023; Tran et al., 2025). Table 2 presents the measurement model results.

Table 2. Measurement model testing results.

Construct	Items	Loadings	α	rho_a	CR (rho_c)	AVE
BIT	BIT1– BIT4	0.787– 0.870	0.846	0.848	0.897	0.685
IIC	IIC1– IIC4	0.732– 0.813	0.792	0.801	0.864	0.614
IIE	IIE1– IIE4	0.802– 0.873	0.846	0.847	0.896	0.684
IIP	IIP1– IIP4	0.783– 0.851	0.838	0.839	0.892	0.673
IIV	IIV1– IIV4	0.733– 0.824	0.801	0.813	0.869	0.624
PII	PII1– PII4	0.797– 0.876	0.856	0.856	0.903	0.699

Note: BIT = Brand Trust; IIC = Influencer Credibility; IIE = Influencer Expertise; IIP = Influencer Popularity; IIV = Informative Value; PII = Purchase Intention.

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). As presented in Table 3, the square roots of AVE for all reflective constructs—Brand Trust (0.828), Influencer Credibility (0.784), Influencer Expertise

(0.827), Influencer Popularity (0.820), Informative Value (0.790), and Purchase Intention (0.836)—exceeded their respective latent variable correlations, confirming acceptable discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2022; Dang et al., 2023).

Table 3. Fornell-Larcker criterion.

	BIT	IIC	IIE	IIP	IIV	PII
BIT	0.828					
IIC	0.648	0.784				
IIE	0.785	0.713	0.827			
IIP	0.598	0.533	0.632	0.820		
IIV	0.653	0.721	0.695	0.623	0.790	
PII	0.817	0.611	0.812	0.638	0.675	0.836

Note: Diagonal values (bold) represent the square root of AVE.

4.3. Structural Model Assessment

The structural model was evaluated using bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples to assess the

significance of path coefficients. Table 4 presents the results of the hypothesis testing. The findings indicate that influencer expertise (IIE) has a significant positive influence on brand trust (BIT) (β

= 0.552, $t = 6.305$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H2. Brand trust demonstrates a strong positive effect on purchase intention (PII) ($\beta = 0.817$, $t = 21.020$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H5. However, influencer popularity (IIP \rightarrow BIT: $\beta = 0.118$, $t = 1.293$, $p = 0.196$), influencer credibility (IIC \rightarrow BIT: $\beta = 0.104$,

$t = 1.186$, $p = 0.236$), and informative value (IIV \rightarrow BIT: $\beta = 0.121$, $t = 1.018$, $p = 0.309$) do not exhibit statistically significant effects on brand trust at the 0.05 significance level. Thus, H1, H3, and H4 are not supported.

Table 4. Structural model results.

Path	β	Mean	SD	T	p	2.5%	97.5%	Result
IIP \rightarrow BIT	0.118	0.117	0.091	1.293	0.196	-0.058	0.303	Rejected
IIE \rightarrow BIT	0.552	0.548	0.088	6.305	<0.001	0.376	0.716	Supported
IIC \rightarrow BIT	0.104	0.107	0.088	1.186	0.236	-0.061	0.282	Rejected
IIV \rightarrow BIT	0.121	0.128	0.119	1.018	0.309	-0.129	0.337	Rejected
BIT \rightarrow PII	0.817	0.820	0.039	21.020	<0.001	0.721	0.881	Supported

Notes: Significance at $p < 0.05$. Bootstrap $n = 5,000$.

4.4. Discussion of Findings

The structural model results reveal a selective trust formation pattern among Vietnamese Gen Z consumers on TikTok, where only influencer expertise significantly drives brand trust, while popularity, credibility, and informative value show negligible effects. This empirical pattern challenges conventional influencer marketing frameworks and necessitates theoretical reexamination within Vietnam’s unique digital ecosystem.

The dominance of influencer expertise over other credibility components ($\beta = 0.552$, $p < 0.001$) provides robust empirical support for the expertise dimension of Source Credibility Theory (Hovland et al., 1954). This finding indicates that Vietnamese Gen Z consumers rely primarily on competence-based heuristics when evaluating influencer trustworthiness, consistent with Dual Process Theory (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). TikTok’s short-form visual content enables influencers to demonstrate product knowledge through comparisons, technical explanations, and usage tutorials, offering observable cues that audiences can evaluate systematically within brief timeframes. Unlike text-based platforms where expertise must be verbally

asserted, TikTok enables influencers to visually demonstrate their competence, making expertise signals more convincing (Dang et al., 2023; Dang et al., 2025a). Cultural factors also reinforce this pattern, as Vietnamese consumers traditionally value practical knowledge and demonstrable capability (Thuy & Nguyen, 2024). Combined with Gen Z’s digital literacy and limited disposable income, young consumers tend to prioritize functional and informational content that reduces perceived purchase risk, positioning expertise as the most influential factor shaping brand trust in this context (Dang et al., 2025b; Tien et al., 2023).

The non-significant effect of influencer popularity ($\beta = 0.118$, $p = 0.196$) challenges Social Proof Theory (Cialdini, 2001) and Parasocial Interaction Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956) within the TikTok context. These theories assume that popularity indicators—such as follower counts and engagement rates—act as heuristic cues signaling influence and trustworthiness. However, Vietnamese Gen Z consumers appear to reject this heuristic, demonstrating advanced media literacy that distinguishes superficial popularity from genuine influence. This pattern reflects TikTok’s algorithmic

structure, which differs fundamentally from follower-centric platforms: the “For You Page” relies on content-based recommendations that prioritize engagement quality over creator popularity, enabling even micro-influencers to achieve viral reach if their content resonates (Nguyen et al., 2025; Dang et al., 2025a). Moreover, the prevalence of fake followers and manipulated engagement metrics has likely increased skepticism toward popularity indicators among digitally native consumers (Audrezet et al., 2020).

The non-significant effect of influencer credibility ($\beta = 0.104$, $p = 0.236$)—while expertise remains significant—suggests these dimensions may not function independently in the TikTok environment. The high correlation between credibility and expertise ($r = 0.713$) indicates potential construct overlap that suppresses credibility’s independent effect. From a theoretical perspective, this finding may reflect cognitive efficiency in trust evaluation: when consumers can assess expertise directly through observable behaviors such as product demonstrations, they may bypass separate trustworthiness evaluations, as expertise itself becomes an implicit trustworthiness signal (Dang et al., 2023; Dang et al., 2025b). Additionally, Vietnam’s evolving regulatory environment—including identity verification for sellers and increased influencer accountability (Tạp Chí Công Thương, 2025)—may create implicit baseline honesty assumptions, reducing the salience of individual credibility assessments and further elevating expertise’s role in shaping brand trust.

The non-significant effect of informative value ($\beta = 0.121$, $p = 0.309$) suggests that providing information alone does not distinguish trustworthy influencers in short-form video environments, contrary to the Advertising Value Model’s emphasis on informativeness (Ducoffe, 1995). This may reflect information saturation: Vietnamese Gen Z users who access TikTok multiple times daily encounter numerous product mentions, making informative content an expected baseline rather than a differentiating trust signal. The high correlation between informative value and expertise ($r = 0.695$) further suggests that audiences perceive content as informative when influencers demonstrate genuine

expertise, rendering separate informative value assessments less predictive of brand trust (Nguyen et al., 2025; Binh et al., 2024).

The strong positive relationship between brand trust and purchase intention ($\beta = 0.817$, $p < 0.001$) confirms that Trust Transfer Theory (Stewart, 2003) operates effectively in influencer marketing contexts. Trust established through perceived expertise transfers to endorsed brands and subsequently drives purchase intentions. TikTok’s integrated features—including TikTok Shop and livestream commerce—further facilitate this process by minimizing the gap between trust formation and transaction completion, enabling immediate conversion when trust thresholds are met (Dang et al., 2023; Dang et al., 2025a). The strength of this relationship suggests a streamlined decision-making process reflecting Gen Z’s digital nativity and preference for efficient online shopping experiences.

5. Conclusion, Implications, Limitations, and Future Research Directions

5.1. Conclusion and Implications

This study examined how TikTok influencer attributes affect brand trust formation among Vietnamese Generation Z consumers in Ho Chi Minh City. The investigation reveals that influencer expertise significantly impacts brand trust, while popularity, credibility, and informative value show no significant effects—contrary to established theoretical predictions. Brand trust, in turn, strongly influences purchase intention. These findings suggest that Vietnamese Gen Z consumers prioritize genuine competence and specialized knowledge over superficial popularity metrics when evaluating influencer endorsements on short-form video platforms (Dang et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2025).

Theoretically, this study contributes to the digital marketing literature by demonstrating that Source Credibility Theory requires recalibration for algorithm-mediated environments, where expertise dominates while trustworthiness operates through expertise demonstration rather than as an independent dimension. The Advertising Value Model’s informativeness dimension similarly

requires reconceptualization to account for visual and experiential information transfer unique to video content (Dang et al., 2025b; Tran et al., 2025).

For practitioners, these findings carry several actionable implications. First, brands should prioritize expertise over popularity when selecting influencer partners, as micro-influencers with specialized product category knowledge may build brand trust more effectively than mega-influencers with general popularity. Second, content strategies should emphasize visual competence demonstration through product comparisons, technical explanations, and usage tutorials rather than simple endorsements (Dang et al., 2025a; Tien et al., 2023). Third, brands should optimize the trust-to-purchase pathway by leveraging TikTok Shop integration and streamlined checkout processes to capitalize on the strong trust-intention relationship. Fourth, investing in long-term influencer partnerships allows the development of deep product knowledge and authentic audience relationships, as expertise recognition requires repeated exposure (Dang et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2025).

5.2. Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has several limitations warranting acknowledgment. First, while the sample size ($n = 142$) exceeds minimum statistical requirements, it remains modest and is predominantly young, female, and student-oriented, which may limit generalizability. Future research should employ larger and more demographically diverse samples across multiple Vietnamese cities and Southeast Asian markets. Second, the cross-sectional design captures only a momentary snapshot of consumer attitudes; future research should employ longitudinal designs to track how influencer-brand trust relationships evolve over time, particularly in light of Vietnam's evolving e-commerce regulations and platform algorithm changes (Dang et al., 2023). Third, the geographic focus on Ho Chi Minh City restricts applicability to other regions; future research should incorporate respondents from diverse geographical contexts to enhance external validity. Fourth, integrating advanced analytical approaches such as dual-stage SEM-ANN

techniques (Dang et al., 2023; Tran et al., 2025) could capture potential nonlinear relationships not detected by PLS-SEM alone. Finally, future research should examine moderating variables such as product category, purchase involvement, and content format (reviews, tutorials, livestreams), and investigate emerging phenomena including virtual influencers, AI-generated content, and interactive livestream commerce (Dang et al., 2025a; Dang et al., 2026; Binh et al., 2024).

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