

From Impulse to Regret: The Psychological Toll of Parasocial-Driven Purchases and Algorithmic Amplification Among Gen Z

Shreya Kaloha

Master's Student, Advertising and Public Relations, Department of Media Studies, Gurugram University, Haryana

Abstract:

It is undeniable that Gen Z, being these pragmatic, independent and tech-proficient individuals, in this digital era, are predominantly influenced by social media, content creators and so, their purchasing behaviour is also increasingly shaped by parasocial, one-sided bonds with the online opinion leaders, which very strategically and rather emotionally sway these consumers via their branding tactics leading to impulsive purchases. While these interactions result in fleeting gratification, they also expose young consumers to unnecessary psychological and financial toll along-with consumerism-driven identity crisis, particularly when intensified by algorithmic recommendation systems, engineered to place addictive, emotionally provocative content. Drawing on theories of emotional branding, parasocial interaction, and algorithmic reinforcement, the findings shed light on how algorithmically- amplified para social dynamics between influencers and Gen Z consumers result in compromised purchasing autonomy and significant mental health consequences. The study advances discourse on digital consumer vulnerability and proposes policy and design interventions to promote ethical platform governance and consumer protection in social commerce.

Keywords: Gen Z, parasocial relationships, algorithmic amplification, post-purchase regret, impulsive buying, emotional branding, social media influencers

Introduction:

In this rapidly evolving landscape of digital consumerism, social media influencers have emerged as powerful cultural mediators shaping the attitudes, preferences and behaviours of the consumers, particularly Generation Z, whose purchasing choices have been weighed down by the parasocial relationships (PSRs)- one-sided emotional bonds with the content creators, often leading to unconscious trust and emotional engagement, that drives impulsive spending. However, this dynamic takes a darker turn when algorithmic amplification on platforms like Instagram, YouTube and Tik Tok further deepens this connection by consistently surfacing content that aligns with the user's preferences and engagement patterns, that in turn fuels compulsive purchases by creating a sense of urgency, fear of missing out(FOMO) and emotional resonance. While the commercial benefits of parasocial and influencer marketing are well-documented, the pressing ethical concerns in social commerce, like the post-purchase remorse of impulsive buying, in the form of psychological distress and financial strain driven by unreciprocated emotional engagement and algorithmic exposure, among Gen Z consumers remain

alarmingly under-studied.

This study seeks to:

1. Explore how parasocial relationships influence Gen Z's impulsive buying behaviour.
2. Examine how algorithmic amplification exacerbates these parasocial-driven hedonic shopping habits.
3. Identify the psychological and financial outcomes of such purchases, including eroded trust, cognitive dissonance and dissatisfaction.
4. Highlight the ethical implications for brands and influencers to mitigate harm in emotionally-driven marketing.

Literature Review:

The digital marketplace has redefined consumer behavior, particularly for Generation Z, who grew up in the age of Instagram and TikTok—platforms that have deeply impacted their lives both socially and emotionally. With regard to emotional influence, these digitally driven natives often succumb to overwhelming impulsive buying habits, fueled by parasocial interactions—first conceptualized by Horton and Wohl (1956) as one-sided relationships individuals form with public figures and online content creators.

In today's digital age, influencers have replaced traditional celebrities, fostering perceived intimacy with followers through consistent, relatable, and emotionally charged content (Abidin, 2015). According to Djafarova and Rushworth (2017), these influencers hold significant persuasive power due to their perceived authenticity and relatability, which often leads to impulsive purchase behavior. Supporting this, Sokolova and Perez (2021) found that “influencers who disclose personal experiences with a product increase consumer trust and purchase intention, particularly among younger audiences.” However, these unnecessary, impulsive purchases often result in post-purchase dissonance—a psychological state where the consumer begins to question the purchase—explained by Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory.

In parallel, increasing impulsive buying among Gen Z is further fueled and aggravated by algorithmic recommendation systems that prioritize emotionally charged content to maximize engagement (Gillespie, 2014). These algorithms shape user exposure in a way that narrows consumer choice while heightening emotional triggers, as noted by Kapoor et al. (2022) who assert that “algorithmic curation reinforces existing biases and emotional states, thereby accelerating impulsive digital behaviors.” This often leads to cognitive dissonance when the purchased product fails to meet expectations, resulting in post-purchase regret and erosion of trust (Festinger, 1957; Laato et al., 2020).

While studies highlight PSRs' commercial efficacy (Labrecque, 2014) and impulse triggers like FOMO (Chen et al., 2021), they often overlook the psychological toll of post-purchase regret, including cognitive dissonance and financial strain (Festinger, 1957; Dittmar et al., 2007). This gap underscores the importance of exploring how algorithm-driven content intensifies parasocial closeness, transforming it into consumer vulnerability—a key factor in understanding Gen Z's sensitivity to manipulation in the digital marketplace.

While previous research has addressed influencer impact and emotional branding separately, limited attention has been paid to the intersection of algorithmic amplification, emotional persuasion, and post-purchase regret. This study addresses that gap by investigating the interplay of these dynamics in driving compulsive consumption patterns and gradually undermining consumer trust. Through this lens, it advances critical insights into digital consumer psychology—especially for a generation raised within the

architecture of perpetual online engagement and curated realities.

Methodology and Data Collection:

This study follows a quantitative research approach, using both primary and secondary data.

Primary data was collected via a Google Form survey, shared through social media using convenience sampling. The survey targeted Gen Z (18–26 years) and included closed-ended and Likert-scale questions on impulsive buying, post-purchase regret, cognitive dissonance, and trust issues related to influencer marketing.

Secondary data was sourced from academic journals, books, and credible online databases to support theoretical understanding. Key frameworks such as Parasocial Interaction Theory and Cognitive Dissonance Theory were referenced, along with studies on algorithmic influence and Gen Z behavior.

Together, these methods provided a balanced foundation for analyzing the psychological effects of influencer-driven purchases.

Results and Findings:

The research uncovered key trends in Generation Z's engagement with influencer content and their purchasing habits. Emotional appeal, algorithmic repetition and perceived trustworthiness were identified as primary factors driving impulsive purchases. The insights are summarized below:

- A majority of respondents admitted to making purchase decisions not based on product value, but due to repeated influencer endorsements and emotional appeal.
- Many experienced a loop of content recommendation—once they engaged with one product, their feed was flooded with similar promotions, increasing temptation to buy.
- Emotional gratification was often short-lived; several participants reported regret and dissatisfaction with the product or the decision itself.
- The results imply that Gen Z shoppers may be susceptible to algorithmic manipulation in online retail settings.

Conclusion:

This research sheds light on the intricate relationship between Gen Z consumers, influencer culture, and algorithmic content exposure. The findings illustrate that emotional persuasion often overrides rational decision-making leading to impulsive purchases and in many cases, post-purchase regret. Additionally, the findings raise concerns about the potential for algorithmic manipulation in digital marketplaces, as repeated exposure to similar content heavily sways consumer decisions.

Scope for further research:

Future research could examine how post-purchase regret affects long-term brand trust in digital commerce. Exploring diverse age groups and cultural contexts may also offer broader insights into consumer vulnerability in the influencer economy.

References:

1. Abidin, C. (2015). Communicative Intimacies: Influencers and Perceived Interconnectedness. *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, (8).
2. Chen, Y., Lu, Y., Wang, B., & Pan, Z. (2021). How do product recommendations affect impulse

- buying? An empirical study on WeChat. *Information & Management*, 58(1), 103281.
3. Djafarova, E., & Rushworth, C. (2017). Exploring the credibility of online celebrities' Instagram profiles in influencing the purchase decisions of young female users. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 68, 1-7.
 4. Festinger, L. (1957). *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Stanford University Press.
 5. Gillespie, T. (2014). The Relevance of Algorithms. *Media Technologies*, 167-194.
 6. Horton, D., & Wohl, R. R. (1956). Mass communication and para-social interaction: Observations on intimacy at a distance. *Psychiatry*, 19(3), 215–229.
 7. Kapoor, K., Dwivedi, Y. K., Piercy, N. F., & Reynolds, N. (2022). Algorithmic persuasion and digital nudging: Conceptualizing the dark side of influencer marketing. *Journal of Business Research*, 144, 1131–1142.
 8. Labrecque, L. I. (2014). Fostering consumer–brand relationships in social media environments: The role of parasocial interaction. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 28(2), 134–148.
 9. Laato, S., Islam, A. K. M. N., Farooq, A., & Dhir, A. (2020). Unusual purchasing behavior during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic: The stimulus-organism-response approach. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 57, 102224.
 10. Sokolova, K., & Perez, C. (2021). You follow fitness influencers on YouTube. But do you actually exercise? How parasocial relationships, and watching fitness influencers, relate to intentions to exercise. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 53, 102–117.
 11. Dittmar, H., Long, K., & Bond, R. (2007). When a better self is only a click away: Associations between materialistic values, emotional and identity–related buying motives, and compulsive buying online. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 26(3), 334–361.