

Social Commerce and Brand Growth among Generation Z Consumers: A Comprehensive Conceptual Framework

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Abstract

Social commerce has emerged as a disruptive paradigm in digital marketing, fundamentally reshaping how Generation Z (Gen Z) consumers discover, evaluate, and purchase products. This article presents a comprehensive conceptual framework examining the multifaceted relationships between social commerce antecedents and brand growth outcomes among Gen Z demographics. Grounded in the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), Social Influence Theory, Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), and Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), the framework synthesizes influencer credibility, user-generated content (UGC) quality, platform affordances, perceived authenticity, and algorithmic personalization as key drivers of brand engagement and purchase intention. Gen Z consumers, born between 1997 and 2012, exhibit distinctively digital behavioral profiles characterized by reliance on peer validation, affinity for micro-influencers, cross-platform navigation fluency, and demand for values-aligned brand narratives. The framework further incorporates moderating variables including digital literacy, social media frequency of use, cultural disposition, and platform algorithm transparency. Six research hypotheses are proposed, and practical implications for brand managers and directions for empirical validation using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) are discussed.

Keywords: Social Commerce, Brand Growth, Influencer Marketing, Platform Affordances, Purchase Intention

1. Introduction

The convergence of social media and electronic commerce has engendered a powerful paradigm known as social commerce, wherein digital platforms simultaneously serve as spaces of social interaction, content consumption, and transactional activity [1]. Unlike conventional e-commerce, which is fundamentally transactional and unidirectional, social commerce is characterized by its embeddedness within peer networks, collaborative content ecosystems, and opinion-leader dynamics. Purchase

decisions are socially negotiated, communally validated, and driven by the trust architecture of digital communities rather than corporate advertising [2].

The economic significance of social commerce is substantial and growing. Global social commerce revenues, which surpassed USD 1.3 trillion in 2023, are projected to exceed USD 8 trillion by 2030, driven by in-app shopping features, live-stream commerce, and the accelerating integration of artificial intelligence into social platform architectures [3]. For brand strategists, these developments represent a fundamental realignment of competitive dynamics: visibility, credibility, and conversion are now mediated by social algorithms, influencer ecosystems, and community engagement metrics rather than traditional advertising expenditure.

Generation Z—individuals born between 1997 and 2012—constitutes the world's largest consumer cohort and the first generation of true digital natives. Gen Z consumers exhibit heightened skepticism toward overt brand messaging, profound reliance on peer validation, nuanced sensitivity to authenticity signals, and remarkable fluency in cross-platform digital navigation [4]. Their consumption behavior is constitutively shaped by digital channels: product discovery, evaluation, and social comparison occur within algorithmically curated feeds, rendering traditional marketing interventions largely ineffective.

Despite the explosive growth of social commerce, the academic literature remains fragmented. Extant studies tend to examine individual antecedents—influencer credibility, user-generated content, or platform features—in isolation, without providing an integrated framework mapping the full causal pathway from social commerce activities to measurable brand growth outcomes. This article addresses this gap by proposing a theoretically grounded framework integrating five key antecedents of social commerce—influencer credibility, UGC quality, platform affordances, perceived authenticity, and algorithmic personalization—and mapping their effects on brand engagement, purchase intention, and ultimately brand growth.

2. Theoretical Underpinnings of Social Commerce

2.1 Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

The Technology Acceptance Model, originally formulated by Davis (1989), posits that digital technology adoption is governed by perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness [5]. In social commerce, TAM accounts for the functional intuitiveness of social platforms and in-app shopping features. Platforms such as Instagram Shopping, and Pinterest Buyable Pins have progressively reduced navigational friction associated with in-platform purchasing. Simultaneously, AI-driven product recommendations, personalized discovery feeds, and streamlined checkout flows have elevated perceived usefulness for Gen Z users. Extended TAM models that incorporate social norm alignment, community trust, and algorithmic transparency offer greater explanatory power in social commerce contexts [6].

2.2 Social Influence Theory

Social Influence Theory distinguishes between normative influence—pressure to conform to group expectations—and informational influence—the tendency to accept information from trusted sources as evidence about reality [7]. Both are pervasive in social commerce. Gen Z consumers experience normative influence through engagement metrics: products accumulating high likes, shares, and positive comments exert significant conformity pressure. Informational influence operates through influencer endorsements and peer reviews, which serve as epistemic shortcuts in information-overloaded digital

environments. The present framework accommodates both mechanisms through the constructs of influencer credibility and UGC quality [8].

2.3 Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)

The Elaboration Likelihood Model proposes two routes to persuasion: the central route, involving careful cognitive elaboration of message arguments, and the peripheral route, relying on heuristic cues such as source attractiveness [9]. In social commerce, influencer content operates along both routes simultaneously. High-credibility micro-influencers providing detailed product evaluations activate central route processing, fostering durable brand loyalty. Celebrity endorsements and visually compelling content trigger peripheral processing, generating rapid but potentially less enduring attitudinal shifts. High-involvement product categories—electronics, fashion, personal care—tend to elicit central route processing, emphasizing the importance of influencer expertise and UGC informativeness.

2.4 Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)

Uses and Gratifications Theory posits that media users actively select platforms and content formats to gratify specific psychological, social, and cognitive needs [10]. Applied to social commerce, UGT illuminates why Gen Z engages with platforms in commerce-relevant ways. Social gratifications—community belonging, identity expression, peer recognition—drive brand community participation and UGC creation. Informational gratifications motivate product research and influencer content consumption. Hedonic gratifications sustain engagement with short-form video commerce and live-stream shopping events. Platform features enabling participatory consumption—reaction mechanisms, comment threads, community hashtags, creator monetization tools—are powerful affordances for brand engagement and growth [11].

3. Generation Z Consumer Behavior in Social Commerce

3.1 Digital Nativity and Platform Fluency

Generation Z's consumer behavior is inseparable from their digital socialization. Unlike Millennials who transitioned from analog to digital media, Gen Z has been immersed in digitally mediated social environments from early childhood, producing exceptional platform fluency—the ability to navigate multiple platforms simultaneously, code-switch between platform-specific content norms, and leverage algorithmic dynamics for community engagement [12]. In social commerce, this manifests as sophisticated cross-channel behavior: a product discovery can trigger research on YouTube, price comparison on Amazon, peer consultation on Reddit, and final purchase via Instagram Shopping—all within a single decision episode. Brands lacking consistent, platform-native presences across this fragmented ecosystem risk losing Gen Z consumers at critical purchase journey touchpoints.

3.2 Authenticity Orientation and Distrust of Traditional Advertising

A defining characteristic of Gen Z consumer behavior is deep, structurally embedded skepticism toward traditional advertising [13]. Extensive childhood exposure to digital advertising has produced sophisticated advertising literacy and heightened sensitivity to inauthenticity and commercial intent. Polished, professionally produced brand content is frequently perceived as intrinsically suspect. Conversely, Gen Z demonstrates markedly higher receptivity to peer-generated content, unscripted influencer narratives, and values-aligned brand activism. Research consistently demonstrates that UGC is perceived as significantly more trustworthy and persuasive than equivalent branded content [14].

Brands investing in authentic UGC ecosystems—through hashtag campaigns, product seeding, and creator partnerships—gain access to a persuasion infrastructure corporate content cannot replicate.

3.3 Micro-Influencer Affinity and Social Validation Dynamics

Gen Z demonstrates a distinctive preference for micro-influencers—content creators with follower counts from 1,000 to 100,000—over macro-influencers or celebrity endorsers [15]. Micro-influencers are perceived as more accessible, relatable, and less commercially compromised. Their communities exhibit high engagement density, strong topical specificity, and elevated interpersonal trust. Engagement metrics—likes, shares, saves, comments—function as quantitative proxies for community endorsement, reducing uncertainty in the consumer decision process. Research demonstrates that Gen Z consumers are significantly more likely to trust product-related content displaying high engagement metrics, independent of content quality [16]. Engineering high-visibility community engagement is therefore as strategically important as content quality in social commerce.

3.4 Live-Stream Commerce and Frictionless Purchase

Live-stream commerce—wherein creators or brand representatives conduct real-time product demonstrations and sales events via social platforms—has emerged as a powerful channel for Gen Z engagement [17]. The format combines informational richness with community participation dynamics and real-time urgency cues. The integration of in-app checkout capabilities within live shopping and short-video contexts eliminates platform transition friction, compressing the decision journey from discovery to purchase. Platforms including Instagram Live Shopping, and YouTube Shopping have invested substantially in these capabilities, creating seamless commerce experiences that convert social engagement into transactional outcomes [18]. For brands targeting Gen Z, native platform commerce capabilities represent a high-priority strategic investment.

4. Conceptual Framework and Research Hypotheses

4.1 Framework Overview

The proposed framework conceptualizes social commerce as a mediating ecosystem between brand strategic activities and measurable growth outcomes. Five independent antecedent constructs are identified: (1) Influencer Credibility, (2) UGC Quality, (3) Platform Affordances, (4) Perceived Authenticity, and (5) Algorithmic Personalization. These antecedents exert direct and mediated effects on two intermediate variables—Brand Engagement and Purchase Intention—which in turn drive the dependent construct of Brand Growth, operationalized as brand awareness, loyalty, market share expansion, and revenue growth. Four moderating variables—digital literacy, social media frequency, cultural disposition, and algorithm transparency perception—account for boundary conditions on the proposed relationships.

Table 1: Social Commerce Conceptual Framework – Construct Summary

Construct	Dimensions	Mediators	Outcome
Influencer Credibility	Expertise, Trustworthiness, Attractiveness, Homophily	Brand Engagement	Brand Awareness
UGC Quality	Relevance, Authenticity, Informativeness, Virality	Purchase Intention	Brand Loyalty
Platform Affordances	In-app checkout, Live shopping, AR Try-on, Short-video	Brand Engagement	Market Share

Perceived Authenticity	Transparency, Values Alignment, Narrative Consistency	Purchase Intention	Competitive Advantage
Algorithmic Personalization	Content relevance, Feed curation, Predictive targeting	Brand Engagement	Revenue Growth

4.2 Influencer Credibility

Influencer credibility is a multidimensional construct encompassing expertise (perceived knowledge and competence in a product domain), trustworthiness (perceived honesty and integrity), attractiveness (physical and social appeal), and homophily (perceived similarity between the influencer and their audience) [19]. Expertise activates central route processing (per ELM), leading to durable attitude formation and higher purchase intention. Trustworthiness reduces perceived risk in high-involvement categories. Attractiveness generates positive affect transfer from influencer to product. Homophily—particularly pronounced in micro-influencer communities—facilitates social identification and normative influence [20]. Influencer credibility is theorized to exert positive effects on both brand engagement and purchase intention, with perceived authenticity mediating the pathway to brand loyalty.

- H1: Influencer credibility positively influences brand engagement among Gen Z consumers in social commerce contexts.
- H2: Perceived authenticity mediates the relationship between influencer credibility and brand loyalty.

4.3 User-Generated Content Quality

UGC encompasses textual reviews, photographs, videos, ratings, and social media posts created by consumers rather than brands [21]. UGC quality is conceptualized as integrating relevance (addressing decision-relevant information), authenticity (perceived genuineness), informativeness (richness and accuracy of product information), and virality potential (likelihood of amplification within social networks). High-quality UGC reduces information asymmetry, provides peer-validated social proof, generates organic brand visibility, and creates self-sustaining content ecosystems that reduce dependence on paid advertising. For Gen Z, UGC represents the gold standard of product information, superseding branded content in credibility and persuasive impact [22]. Brands facilitating high-quality UGC through product seeding, hashtag campaigns, and creator rewards are theorized to achieve superior brand engagement and conversion outcomes.

- H3: User-generated content quality significantly and positively influences purchase intention among Gen Z social commerce consumers.

4.4 Platform Affordances

Platform affordances refer to the functional capabilities of social media platforms that enable commerce-facilitating consumer behavior [23]. Key affordances include in-app checkout functionality, live shopping capabilities, augmented reality product try-on features, short-form video commerce, and AI-powered product discovery feeds. In-app checkout eliminates platform transition—a major source of cart abandonment—by enabling transactions within the social discovery environment. Live shopping activates both informational and normative social influence in a single commerce event. AR try-on features address fit and appearance uncertainty, a critical barrier to online apparel and beauty purchase [24]. Platform affordances are theorized to moderate the relationship between social commerce antecedents and purchase intention, amplifying conversion effects on higher-affordance platforms.

- H4: Platform affordances positively moderate the relationship between social commerce activities and purchase intention among Gen Z consumers.

4.5 Perceived Authenticity

Perceived authenticity is perhaps the most critical construct in social commerce marketing to Gen Z, reflecting this cohort's pronounced sensitivity to genuineness, transparency, and values alignment [25]. Authenticity dimensions include transparency (openness of commercial relationship disclosure), values alignment (congruence between influencer or brand values and consumer values), narrative consistency (coherence of brand storytelling across platforms and time), and aesthetic sincerity (deliberate use of unpolished content to signal non-commerciality). Authenticity perceptions exert effects through both affective mechanisms—generating positive brand affect, emotional identification, and psychological closeness—and cognitive mechanisms, reducing skepticism and lowering persuasion defenses [26]. Brands investing in honest product communication, transparent influencer disclosure, and community-centered content strategies achieve superior brand loyalty outcomes.

- H5: Perceived authenticity directly and positively influences brand engagement and mediates the effects of influencer credibility on brand loyalty.

4.6 Algorithmic Personalization

Algorithmic personalization is an increasingly important yet theoretically underexplored antecedent in social commerce [27]. Platform algorithms dynamically curate content feeds based on engagement history, search patterns, and social graph characteristics, generating highly individualized product discovery environments. Gen Z consumers exhibit a paradoxical relationship with algorithmic personalization: appreciating relevance and serendipitous discovery while expressing concern about data privacy and filter bubble effects [28]. The framework proposes that algorithmic personalization creates virtuous cycles in which high-engagement content receives amplification generating further engagement and brand visibility. Brands aligning strategies with platform algorithm dynamics—through consistent posting schedules, trending content formats, and community interaction management—achieve disproportionately superior brand awareness and market penetration.

- H6: Algorithmic personalization significantly amplifies the positive relationship between social engagement metrics and brand growth outcomes among Gen Z consumers.

Table 2: Summary of Research Hypotheses

H	Statement	Direction
H1	Influencer credibility positively influences brand engagement among Gen Z consumers	Positive (+)
H2	UGC quality significantly enhances purchase intention in social commerce contexts	Positive (+)
H3	Platform affordances moderate the link between social commerce activities and purchase intention	Moderating
H4	Perceived authenticity mediates the relationship between influencer credibility and brand loyalty	Mediating
H5	Algorithmic personalization amplifies the effect of engagement metrics on brand growth outcomes	Positive (+)
H6	Digital literacy positively moderates the impact of platform affordances on purchase intention	Moderating

4.7 Moderating Variables

The framework incorporates four moderating variables delineating boundary conditions on the proposed relationships. Digital literacy—encompassing platform-specific knowledge, content evaluation skills, and algorithmic awareness—is expected to strengthen positive effects of platform affordances on purchase intention, as more digitally literate consumers are better positioned to exploit in-app commerce capabilities. Social media frequency of use is expected to amplify the effects of UGC quality and influencer credibility, reflecting greater exposure among high-frequency users. Cultural disposition—particularly collectivist versus individualist orientations—is expected to moderate the relative influence of normative versus informational social influence mechanisms. Finally, algorithm transparency perception is expected to moderate the relationship between algorithmic personalization and brand engagement, with higher transparency awareness producing more deliberate consumer responses to algorithmically curated content [29].

5. Implications and Future Research Directions

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

The proposed framework makes several important theoretical contributions. First, it provides an integrated, multi-theoretical model synthesizing TAM, Social Influence Theory, ELM, and UGT within a single coherent framework specific to Gen Z social commerce behavior. Second, it extends existing social commerce models by incorporating algorithmic personalization as a formal antecedent construct, acknowledging the growing centrality of platform AI in mediating consumer-brand interactions. Third, it theorizes a mediating role for perceived authenticity, providing a more granular account of how influencer credibility translates into brand loyalty—a relationship prior research has largely assumed rather than unpacked [30]. Fourth, the repositioning of platform affordances as moderating rather than antecedent constructs is a theoretical refinement suggesting that platform capability investment without corresponding content quality may fail to generate expected brand growth benefits.

5.2 Managerial Implications

The framework generates actionable implications for brand managers. First, investment strategies should prioritize micro-influencer partnerships over macro-influencer or celebrity endorsements, given superior engagement density, community trust, and perceived authenticity in micro-influencer ecosystems [31]. Influencer selection should be guided by credibility dimensions—expertise, trustworthiness, and audience homophily—rather than reach metrics alone. Second, brands should invest systematically in UGC facilitation infrastructure through hashtag campaigns, product seeding, consumer creator reward mechanisms, and UGC amplification strategies, creating self-sustaining peer-validated content ecosystems. Third, authenticity must be operationalized as a strategic imperative through transparent influencer partnership disclosure, honest acknowledgment of product limitations, and values-driven brand positioning consistent across platforms. Fourth, brands should develop native platform commerce capabilities—live-stream shopping programs, in-app product collections, AR try-on integrations, and shoppable short-video content—to eliminate conversion friction [32]. Fifth, brand managers should develop algorithmic intelligence capabilities to optimize content strategies for platform amplification, including consistent posting schedules, community interaction management, and paid amplification of high-performing organic content.

5.3 Future Research Directions

The framework generates several important directions for empirical research. Most immediately, the pr-

oposed hypotheses require validation using primary data from Gen Z consumers across diverse geographical and cultural contexts. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) using AMOS or SmartPLS represents the most appropriate analytical approach, given the framework's incorporation of latent constructs, mediation pathways, and moderation effects [33]. Multi-group SEM analyses could simultaneously test the framework across different platform contexts and cultural settings. Longitudinal panel designs would add temporal validity by capturing the dynamic evolution of Gen Z brand loyalty over extended social commerce engagement histories. Future research should also explore emerging technologies—including generative AI content creation, virtual reality shopping environments, and blockchain-enabled UGC authentication—and their effects on the social commerce antecedent landscape. Cross-cultural comparative research examining Gen Z consumers across the United States, India, China, and Western Europe would advance understanding of the cultural contingencies embedded in the framework's moderating variables.

6. Conclusion

This article has proposed a comprehensive conceptual framework for understanding the mechanisms through which social commerce activities drive brand growth among Generation Z consumers. Grounded in four complementary theoretical traditions—TAM, Social Influence Theory, ELM, and UGT—the framework integrates five antecedent constructs, two mediating constructs, and four moderating variables within a coherent model of social commerce brand growth dynamics. Its theoretical contributions lie in its integrative scope, the extension of existing models to include algorithmic personalization, the nuanced theorization of perceived authenticity as mediator, and the repositioning of platform affordances as moderating variables. Its managerial contributions provide actionable guidance for brand managers through micro-influencer partnerships, UGC ecosystem investment, authenticity strategies, native platform commerce development, and algorithmic intelligence capabilities.

Generation Z represents not only the largest current consumer cohort but also the template for the digital consumer of the future. Understanding the social commerce dynamics governing their brand relationships is a strategic imperative for brands seeking to capture their purchasing power today and to build brand equities that will sustain competitive advantage through the coming decades of digital commerce evolution. The framework presented here represents a contribution toward that understanding and a foundation for the empirical research program it invites.

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