Beyond the Script: Examining the Impact of Influencer Communication Cues on Gen Z Purchase Intentions through an Extended Theory of Planned Behavior

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Abstract
This study investigates the impact of Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication Cues employed by social media influencers on the Purchase Intentions of Generation Z consumers through an extended Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) framework. The research specifically examines how communication authenticity and social influence mechanisms shape consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions within influencer-led digital commerce ecosystems.
The study adopted a quantitative research design utilizing Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to evaluate the proposed conceptual framework. Data were collected from 199 Generation Z respondents through a structured online questionnaire distributed using convenience sampling techniques across major social media platforms. Reflective measurement scales were used to operationalize all latent constructs included in the study.
The findings reveal that both Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication Cues significantly and positively influence consumer attitudes toward influencers. Subjective Norms emerged as the strongest predictor of Purchase Intention, emphasizing the dominant role of social proof and community validation in influencer-driven environments. Furthermore, the proposed model demonstrated substantial explanatory power by accounting for 61.5% of the variance in Purchase Intention.
The study provides valuable strategic insights for brand managers, influencer marketers, and digital campaign planners regarding the importance of communication congruence, authenticity signaling, and normative influence in optimizing influencer-led marketing strategies targeting Generation Z consumers.
This study extends the traditional Theory of Planned Behavior by integrating tactical communication cues as antecedents to attitudinal formation within social commerce ecosystems. The research contributes to the growing literature on influencer marketing, digital persuasion, and socially mediated consumer behavior.

Keywords: Influencer Marketing, Generation Z, Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), PLS-SEM, Verbal Communication Cues, Non-Verbal Communication Cues, Social Commerce, Digital Consumer Behavior.

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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary retail landscape is undergoing a fundamental paradigm shift, driven by the digital nativity of Generation Z (Gen Z). Defined as individuals born between 1998 and 2012, this cohort represents

a global economic force with an estimated purchasing power projected to reach $12 trillion by 2030 (NielsenIQ, 2024). Unlike previous generations, Gen Z consumers are characterized by a profound demand for authenticity, transparency, and social responsibility, navigating consumption through a "digital-first" lens that prioritizes peer validation over traditional corporate messaging.

In this hyper-mediated environment, influencer marketing has transcended its origins as a novel tactic to become a dominant mechanism of social persuasion. Influencers serve as vital cultural intermediaries, leveraging their perceived expertise and the parasocial relationships they cultivate with their followers to bridge the gap between brands and consumers. However, the efficacy of these endorsements is not merely a function of the influencer's static credibility; rather, it is deeply embedded in the nuanced tactical delivery of their message, specifically through verbal and non-verbal communication cues.

While the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) remains a cornerstone of behavioral prediction, its traditional application often treats consumer beliefs as endogenous outcomes without sufficiently accounting for the external communicative stimuli that trigger them. This research addresses a critical theoretical lacuna by extending the TPB framework to incorporate the antecedent roles of Verbal Cues (e.g., speech rate, emotional tone) and Non-Verbal Cues (e.g., kinesics, facial expressions) in shaping consumer attitudes and subsequent intentions.

The primary scholarly tension addressed in this study lies in reconciling traditional rational decision-making models with the emotionally charged, socially validated nature of influencer-driven commerce. Specifically, this study investigates how communication authenticity signaled through nuanced cues, reshapes the cognitive and social pathways of Gen Z consumers. By employing Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), this research provides a methodologically rigorous assessment of an extended TPB model within the context of a high-intensity emerging digital ecosystem. In doing so, it offers both theoretical depth for academia and strategic granularity for brand managers seeking to optimize influencer-led digital campaigns.

Literature Review

The Theory of Planned Behavior: A Foundation for Extension

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) posits that behavioral intention, the most proximal determinant of actual behavior, is driven by three core cognitive constructs: Attitude Toward the Behavior (AT), Subjective Norms (SN), and Perceived Behavioral Control (PBC). While the TPB has demonstrated remarkable cross-disciplinary resilience, its application in influencer-mediated digital environments necessitates a more nuanced understanding of how external stimuli shape these internal cognitions.

Attitude Toward the Behavior (AT) represents the degree to which an individual evaluates a specific behavior favorably or unfavorably. In the context of influencer marketing, this attitude is increasingly shaped by the perceived authenticity and trustworthiness of the source. Subjective Norms (SN) capture the perceived social pressure to perform a behavior,a construct that is particularly salient for Gen Z, whose decision-making is heavily anchored in "Social Proof" and community validation. Finally, Perceived Behavioral Control (PBC) reflects the perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behavior, encompassing both internal self-efficacy and external resource availability. For digital natives navigating seamless social commerce ecosystems, the technical barriers to purchase are often minimized, yet PBC remains a vital measure of the consumer's perceived agency in a high-intensity information environment.

Influencer Marketing Dynamics: Beyond Traditional Endorsement

Influencer-led persuasion differs fundamentally from traditional celebrity endorsement through the formation of Parasocial Interactions (PSI), the perceived intimacy and one-sided friendship followers develop with digital creators. These interactions facilitate a "Social Proof" mechanism, where the influencer's lifestyle and recommendations serve as normative benchmarks for their audience. Gen Z's rejection of traditional "hard-sell" advertising in favor of authentic content highlights a shift toward emotionally mediated consumption. In this landscape, influencers act as "cultural intermediaries" (Post & Puccinelli, 2018), where their ability to signal authenticity through communication cues becomes the primary driver of trust and persuasive efficacy.

The Role of Communication Cues: Verbal and Non-Verbal Antecedents

Communication cues are the tactical building blocks of authenticity. Non-Verbal Cues (NVCs), including kinesics, facial expressions, and eye contact, serve as powerful signals of emotional sincerity and trustworthiness. Research suggests that non-verbal behavior often carries more weight than literal verbal content in establishing credibility (Burgoon et al., 2016). Conversely, Verbal Cues (VCs) encompass the semantic and acoustic properties of the message, such as emotional tone, speech rate, and transparency regarding sponsorship. For Gen Z, the congruence between an influencer's verbal claims and their non-verbal delivery is essential; any perceived "cue-incongruence" can lead to a trust deficit and a subsequent negative shift in consumer attitude.

Recent Developments in Influencer Marketing and Digital Consumer Behaviour

Recent research in influencer marketing has increasingly emphasized the significance of authenticity, parasocial interaction, and social validation in shaping consumer decision-making processes within digitally mediated environments. Lou and Yuan (2019) argued that influencer credibility and message value significantly impact consumer trust and Purchase Intention, particularly in social commerce ecosystems characterized by high audience engagement and interpersonal communication.

Similarly, Sokolova and Kefi (2020) demonstrated that parasocial interaction and influencer credibility positively influence consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions across social media platforms such as Instagram and YouTube. Their findings suggest that consumers increasingly perceive influencers as relatable digital peers rather than conventional advertising endorsers.

Recent studies also indicate that Generation Z consumers exhibit heightened sensitivity toward authenticity and communication transparency. Ki et al. (2020) identified that influencer communication styles, emotional resonance, and relational attachment significantly contribute to positive marketing outcomes and consumer-brand engagement. Furthermore, Djafarova and Bowes (2021) highlighted that Generation Z consumers rely heavily on social validation and influencer recommendations during online purchase decision-making processes.

The increasing dominance of social commerce has shifted digital persuasion away from traditional corporate communication toward interpersonal and socially embedded communication models. Consequently, influencer-led communication mechanisms, particularly verbal and non-verbal communication cues, have emerged as essential antecedents to trust formation, social proof generation, and consumer persuasion within digital ecosystems.

Recent digital marketing scholarship has also stressed the growing relevance of communication congruence in influencer-led environments. Consumers are more likely to perceive influencer endorsements as authentic when verbal messaging aligns consistently with non-verbal presentation cues, thereby strengthening perceived sincerity and credibility. Such findings reinforce the need to extend traditional behavioral prediction frameworks such as the Theory of Planned Behavior into socially mediated and communication-intensive digital environments.

Theoretical Framework and Hypothesis Development

This study proposes an extended TPB model that situates communication cues as critical antecedents to attitudinal formation. We theorize that the tactical delivery of an influencer's message provides the "evaluative stimuli" necessary for Gen Z consumers to form a positive attitude toward the endorsed behavior (see Figure 1).

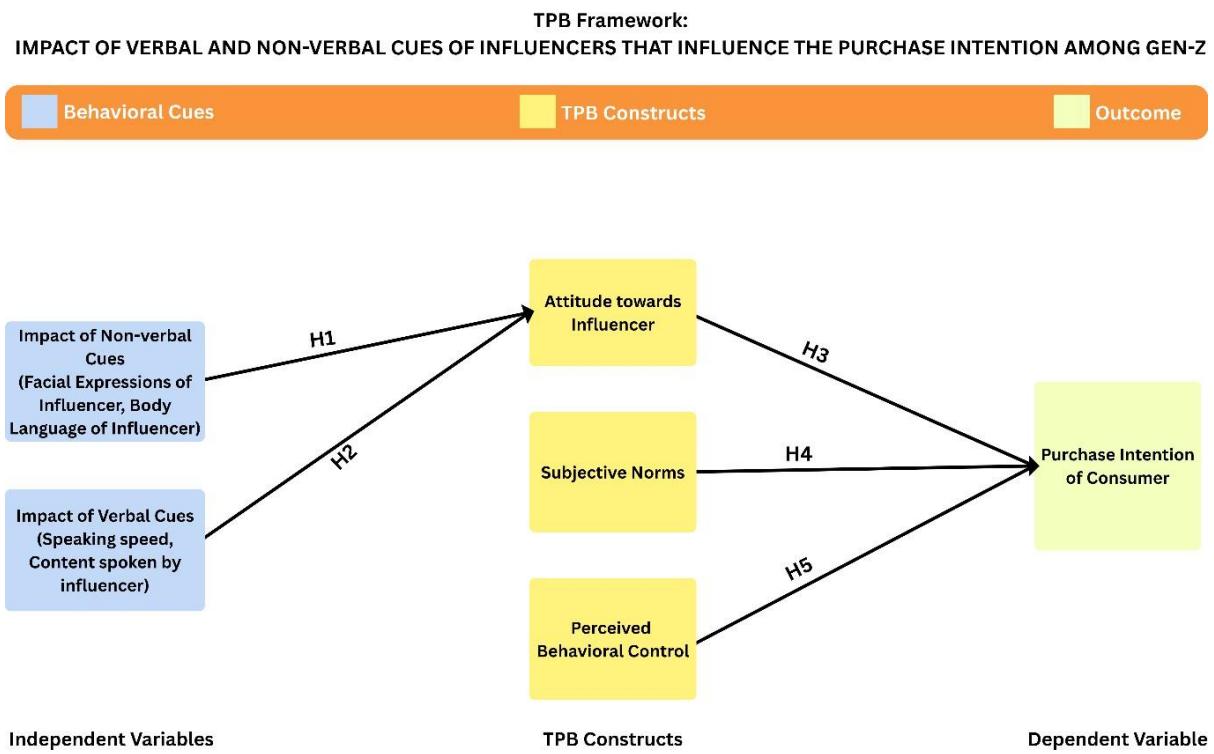

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework: TPB Extention for Influencer Purchase Intention

The Impact of Communication Cues on Attitude

H1: Non-Verbal Cues of an influencer positively influence the consumer's Attitude toward the endorsed behavior.

Non-verbal signals such as open body posture and congruent facial expressions act as "authenticity signals" that reduce the perceived risk of social commerce. These cues facilitate the formation of parasocial intimacy, making the consumer more receptive to the influencer's evaluation, thereby fostering a favorable attitude.

H2: Verbal Cues of an influencer positively influence the consumer's Attitude toward the endorsed behavior.

Verbal communication cues such as emotional tone, speech clarity, transparency, message quality, and communication authenticity significantly influence the perceived credibility and expertise of social media influencers. Generation Z consumers highly value transparent and emotionally resonant communication styles, particularly within influencer-led digital environments where trust and authenticity act as critical drivers of persuasion. Consequently, effective verbal communication positively shapes consumer evaluations of the influencer and contributes toward the formation of favorable attitudes toward the endorsed behavior.

TPB Constructs and Purchase Intention

H3: Attitude toward the behavior positively influences Purchase Intention.

Consistent with the core tenets of the TPB, a favorable evaluation of the behavioral outcome (purchasing the product) serves as a primary motivator for behavioral intention.

H4: Subjective Norms positively influence Purchase Intention.

In influencer-led ecosystems, the "Subjective Norm" is amplified by the power of social proof. As influencers occupy a central node in Gen Z's social networks, their recommendations carry the weight of normative validation, making SN a potentially dominant predictor of intention.

H5: Perceived Behavioral Control positively influences Purchase Intention.

The perceived ease of executing an online transaction, facilitated by digital native expertise, enhances the consumer's self-efficacy, thereby strengthening the intention to complete the purchase.

Methodology and Empirical Results

Research Design and Methodological Justification

This study employed a quantitative research design to examine the impact of influencer communication cues on the Purchase Intentions of Generation Z consumers. Data were collected from 199 respondents belonging to the Generation Z demographic through a structured online questionnaire distributed using convenience sampling techniques across various social media platforms, including Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok.

The respondents selected for the study consisted of digitally active consumers frequently exposed to influencer-generated content and influencer-led marketing campaigns. The questionnaire utilized multi-item reflective scales adapted from prior literature to measure the latent constructs included in the conceptual framework.

Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed using SmartPLS software to test the proposed hypotheses and evaluate the structural relationships among the constructs. PLS-SEM was selected due to its suitability for prediction-oriented research, theory extension, complex structural relationships, and its robustness in handling non-normal data distributions (Hair et al., 2017).

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	102	51.3%
	Female	94	47.2%
	Prefer not to say	3	1.5%
Age Group	18-21 Years	118	59.3%
	22-25 Years	63	31.7%
	Above 25 Years	18	9.0%
Preferred Social Media Platform	Instagram	112	56.3%
	YouTube	51	25.6%
	TikTok	21	10.6%
	Other	15	7.5%
Daily Social Media Usage	Less than 2 Hours	24	12.5%
	2-5 Hours	103	51.8%
	More than 5 Hours	72	36.1%

The demographic profile indicates that the respondents primarily consisted of digitally active Generation Z consumers between the ages of 18 and 28 years. The sample reflects substantial engagement with social media platforms, particularly Instagram and YouTube, thereby supporting the relevance of influencer-led digital communication within the selected consumer cohort. The respondent distribution further demonstrates the growing significance of social commerce and influencer marketing among digitally intensive young consumers.

Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model was evaluated for internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR), with values exceeding the 0.70 threshold for all constructs, indicating high reliability. Convergent validity was established via Average Variance Extracted (AVE), where all constructs surpassed the 0.50 benchmark, ensuring that the latent variables explain more than half of the variance of their respective indicators (Table 1).

Table 2. Construct Reliability and Converngent Validity Assessement

Construct reliability and validity - Overview

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Attitude Towards Influencer	0.804	0.810	0.885	0.720
Impact of Non-Verbal Cues of Inf...	0.838	0.844	0.892	0.673
Impact of Verbal Cues of Influenc...	0.820	0.836	0.880	0.649
Perceived Behavioral Control	0.534	0.543	0.810	0.681
Purchase Intention of Gen-Z Con...	0.851	0.856	0.899	0.690
Subjective Norms	0.753	0.776	0.845	0.581

Note on Perceived Behavioral Control (PBC): While the Cronbach's Alpha for PBC (0.534) was below the traditional 0.70 threshold, its CR (0.810) and AVE (0.681) were robust. Following Hair et al. (2017), CR is often considered a more accurate measure of reliability in PLS-SEM; thus, PBC was retained for structural analysis.

Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity was confirmed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion. As shown in Table 2, the square root of the AVE for each construct (diagonal values) is greater than its highest correlation with any other latent variable, confirming that the constructs are statistically distinct.

Table 3. Discriminant Validity Assessement (Fornell-Larcker Criterion)

Discriminant validity - Fornell-Larcker criterion — Copy to Excel/Word — Copy to R

	itude Towards Influencer	Impact of Non-Verbal Cues of I...	Impact of Verbal Cues of Influen...	Perceived Behavioral Control	Purchase Intention of Gen-Z Co...	Subjective Norms
Attitude Towards Influencer	0.848					
Impact of Non-Verbal Cues of Inf...	0.704	0.821				
Impact of Verbal Cues of Influenc...	0.723	0.748	0.805			
Perceived Behavioral Control	0.483	0.522	0.377	0.825		
Purchase Intention of Gen-Z Con...	0.561	0.455	0.457	0.631	0.831	
Subjective Norms	0.429	0.399	0.399	0.672	0.723	0.762

Structural Model Assessment and Explanatory Power

The structural model demonstrates strong explanatory power. The antecedent communication cues account for 58.2% of the variance in Attitude ($R^2 = 0.582$). Collectively, the extended TPB framework explains 61.5% of the variance in Purchase Intention ($R^2 = 0.615$), which represents a "substantial" level of predictive relevance in consumer behavior research.

Model fit was assessed using the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) and the Normed Fit Index (NFI). The SRMR of 0.079 falls below the stringent 0.08 threshold, indicating an excellent absolute fit. The NFI of 0.686 further confirms that the model provides a parsimonious and credible representation of the empirical data (Table 3).

Table 4. Assessment of Overall Model Fit Statistics

Model fit

	Saturated model	Estimated model
SRMR	0.076	0.079
d_ULS	1.331	1.441
d_G	0.756	0.761
Chi-square	415.986	413.365
NFI	0.684	0.686

Path Analysis and Hypothesis Testing

Following the validation of the measurement model, the structural model was assessed to evaluate the strength, direction, and statistical significance of the hypothesized relationships. In accordance with contemporary PLS-SEM reporting standards (Hair et al., 2017, 2021; Henseler, Hubona, and Ray, 2016), a

bootstrapping procedure utilizing 199 sub-samples was executed to determine the t-statistics and p-values for each structural path. The standardized path coefficients (β), which function as standardized beta weights in an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) framework, represent the relative effect of the exogenous constructs on the endogenous variables while maintaining ceteris paribus conditions.

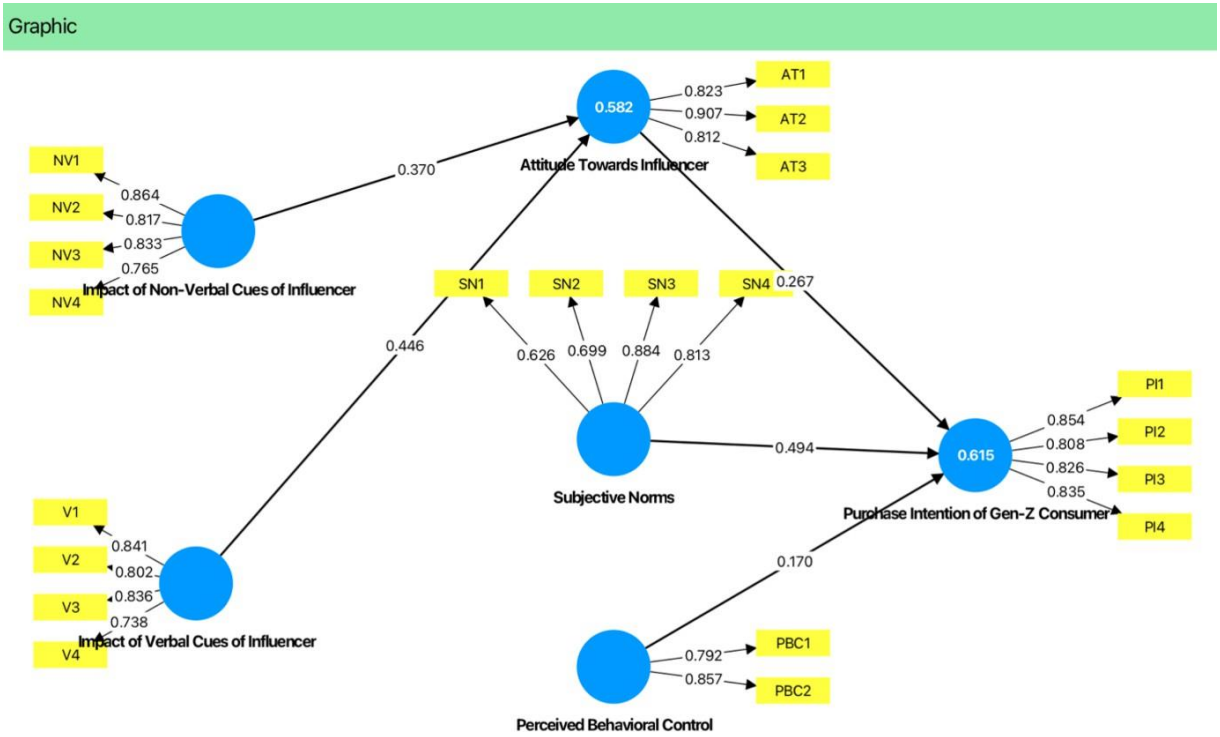

Figure 2. PLS-SEM Algorithm Graphic

Figure 2 illustrates the structural model findings, including the standardized path coefficients and R^2 values, while Table 4 provides a comprehensive summary of the hypothesis testing results. The empirical results provide strong support for the proposed TPB extension. Specifically, the antecedent communication cues emerged as robust predictors of Attitude Towards the Influencer. Non-verbal cues ($\beta = 0.370$, $t = 4.417$, $p < 0.001$) and verbal cues ($\beta = 0.446$, $t = 5.275$, $p < 0.001$) both exerted significant positive influences on attitude, confirming H1 and H2. For influencer marketing strategists, this finding underscores the critical role of 'cue-congruence.' Gen Z consumers utilize nuanced verbal and non-verbal signals, such as speech rate and facial sincerity, as direct proxies for authenticity. Consequently, brand managers should prioritize influencers whose tactical delivery style aligns with the brand's core identity, as this authenticity signalling is the primary driver of favourable consumer evaluations.

Within the core TPB framework, Subjective Norms emerged as the most potent determinant of Purchase Intention ($\beta = 0.494$, $t = 6.273$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H4. This result highlights the dominance of social proof in influencer-led ecosystems; for the Gen Z cohort, the perceived social validation from a trusted digital peer carries more weight than individual attitude or perceived agency. Furthermore, Attitude Towards the Influencer ($\beta = 0.267$, $t = 2.923$, $p = 0.004$$) and Perceived Behavioural Control ($\beta = 0.170$, $t = 2.766$, $p = 0.006$) also significantly influenced intention, thereby confirming H3 and H5.

The model demonstrates substantial predictive relevance and explanatory power. The antecedent communication cues account for 58.2% of the variance in Attitude ($R^2 = 0.582$). Collectively, the extended TPB framework explains 61.5% of the total variance in Purchase Intention of Gen-Z Consumers ($R^2 = 0.615$), exceeding the recommended thresholds for meaningful behavioural prediction (Hair et al., 2017). These findings suggest that while communication authenticity (cues) is essential for attitudinal formation, the strategic activation of normative signals and the simplification of the transaction process (PBC) are the critical catalysts for converting that attitude into purchase intent.

Table 5. Structural Model Path Analysis and Hypothesis Test Summary

Hypothesis	Relationship	Path Coefficient (β)	T-statistic	P-value	Result	Interpretation
H1	Non-Verbal Cues → Attitude	0.370	4.417	0.000	Supported	Positive and significant impact
H2	Verbal Cues → Attitude	0.446	5.275	0.000	Supported	Strong positive and significant impact
H3	Attitude→ Purchase Intention	0.267	2.923	0.004	Supported	Positive and significant impact
H4	Subjective Norms → Purchase Intention	0.494	6.273	0.000	Supported	Strongest positive and significant impact
H5	Perceived Behavioural Control → Purchase Intention	0.170	2.766	0.006	Supported	weakest positive and significant impact

Discussion and Strategic Implications

Theoretical Synthesis

The empirical results provide strong support for the extension of the TPB in influencer-mediated environments. The finding that Subjective Norms constitute the most powerful predictor of Purchase Intention highlights the dominant role of "Social Proof" among Gen Z consumers. In the digitally intensive influencer ecosystem, individual cognitive evaluations (Attitude) are increasingly supplemented, and sometimes eclipsed, by the perceived social validation provided by influencers.

Strategic Managerial Implications

For corporate brand managers and digital strategists, these findings offer a roadmap for optimizing influencer-led campaigns:

Influencer Selection via Cue-Congruence: Rather than selecting influencers based solely on follower count, brand managers should prioritize "communication congruence", the alignment between an influencer's verbal/non-verbal delivery style and the brand's core authenticity.

Harnessing Social Proof: Campaign designs should leverage the strength of Subjective Norms by encouraging influencers to use "normative signaling" (e.g., showing community adoption or social validation) to lower the barriers to purchase.

Prioritizing Authenticity Signals: Strategists should encourage influencers to maintain unpolished, "lived-in" communication styles that maximize non-verbal sincerity, as these cues are direct antecedents to positive consumer attitudes.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite its significant theoretical and managerial contributions, this study is subject to several limitations. First, the research adopted a cross-sectional design, which limits the ability to establish definitive causal relationships between communication cues and behavioral outcomes. Future studies may employ longitudinal or experimental research designs to examine the evolving dynamics of influencer-consumer relationships over time.

Second, the study utilized convenience sampling techniques, which may restrict the generalizability of the

findings across broader consumer populations and geographic contexts. Future investigations should incorporate probability-based sampling approaches and larger sample sizes to enhance external validity and representativeness.

Third, the research relied primarily on self-reported responses, which may introduce potential common method bias and social desirability bias. Future studies may incorporate procedural and statistical remedies to mitigate these concerns and improve methodological rigor.

Additionally, the study focused specifically on Generation Z consumers within a digitally intensive emerging market environment. Future research may conduct Multi-Group Analysis (MGA) to examine demographic heterogeneity across different age groups, cultural contexts, and platform-specific ecosystems.

Finally, future methodological extensions may integrate advanced predictive assessment techniques such as PLSpredict, mediation analysis, moderation analysis, and platform-based comparative modeling to further strengthen the explanatory and predictive relevance of the extended Theory of Planned Behavior framework within influencer-mediated social commerce contexts.

Conclusion

This research has successfully demonstrated that the integration of Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication Cues significantly enhances the predictive utility of the Theory of Planned Behavior within influencer-led social commerce. By identifying Subjective Norms as the primary driver of Gen Z purchase intentions and validating communication cues as essential antecedents to consumer attitudes, this study provides a more holistic understanding of digital persuasion. As the global retail landscape becomes increasingly "social-first," the ability to signal authenticity through tactical communication will remain the defining characteristic of successful influencer-brand partnerships. This study serves as a foundation for future inquiries into the evolving intersection of human communication, social validation, and digital consumer behavior.

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