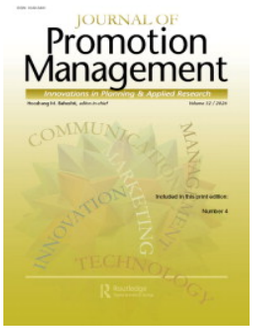

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'TikTok Made Me Buy It': Investigating Brand Influencer Impact on TikTok Users' Purchase Intention

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ABSTRACT

The TikTok social media platform has experienced exponential growth in the last few years and has become very popular among Gen Y and Gen Z users. Small and large businesses have started relying on the services of brand influencers for promotion and content marketing. Previous social media influencer literature has not examined whether brand influencer impact (defined as the persuasive influence exerted by influencers to impact purchase decisions) on TikTok environment can translate into purchase intention through engagement and loyalty. Using the lens of the social influence theory, the purpose of this study was to develop a model that investigates whether brand influencer impact predicts purchase intention directly, and whether engagement and loyalty explain any additional indirect effects on TikTok. Using a sample of 425 Generation Y and Generation Z TikTok users, data were collected and analyzed using partial least squares equation modeling. Results of this study showed that higher brand influencer impact on TikTok had a strong positive direct effect on purchase intention, while engagement and loyalty did not significantly mediate this relationship and gender did not moderate it. Theoretically, this study extended the social influence theory by showing that TikTok's influencer impact operates on a direct path rather than through influencer engagement. The practical implications of this study showed that TikTok marketers should prioritize content that triggers immediate product response within the feed such as short demonstrations and call to action over gender targeting or engagement metrics as primary indicators of sales impact.

KEYWORDS

social media marketing; digital advertising; customer engagement; brand loyalty; TikTok influencer marketing

Introduction

The TikTok social media network has experienced a meteoric rise in popularity among users, as evidenced by its 1.25 billion monthly active users worldwide in 2025. It has become the fifth- largest social media network after Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Instagram (Martin, 2026). Twenty-six percent of U.S. users of TikTok are Gen Z (ages 18–24) and 38% of users range between 25 and 40 years (Gen Y). Fifty-six percent of TikTok users are male, and 44% are female (Duarte, 2026). TikTok displays entertaining, educational, and aspirational content, which are the three components that can make posts go viral if many users watch and engage with the content (Darmatama & Erdiansyah, 2021). The TikTok algorithm then recommends this content to other users based on previous user interaction with content in similar categories.

What makes the TikTok platform different from other social media platforms is the sophisticated dynamic algorithm that can use mathematical core and human nature, along with machine learning applied to big data to curate short-form videos that are personalized for users based on their previous user interactions within the app (Choi et al., 2024). Businesses interested in advertising on social media are using *brand influencers*, who are content creators with many followers and high user engagement (likes/shares/comments), to create marketing promotions around products (Bentley et al., 2025). The phrase 'TikTok Made Me Buy It' is consistently the highest trending hashtag with millions of followers. Content and brand messages from brand influencers provide validation to a user to help extend the reach of a brand (John et al., 2017). Because of their reach and influence with their

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audience, the likelihood that users are more inclined to read and act on shared content from brand influencers is increased (Kim et al., 2023; Xue & Zhou, 2019). Because of the unique nature of the TikTok platform that involves influencer marketing, and the rise of TikTok in popularity over established social networks such as Facebook (Spais et al., 2025), there is a need to research the marketing efficacy of brand influencers on TikTok. The goal of this study was to investigate constructs such as purchase intention on TikTok, which can be influenced by various antecedents, as has been shown by previous research on other social media platforms (Alalwan, 2018; McClure & Seock, 2020).

Since segmentation can be used to aggregate users into groups with common needs and those who respond similarly to a marketing action (Shao et al., 2015), it is worth investigating how marketers can leverage TikTok by examining whether influencer impact predicts purchase intention directly, and whether engagement and loyalty contribute additional exploratory power. It is well recognized that purchase intention is a marketing tool for determining the effectiveness of marketing strategy and predicting sales and market share (Morwitz, 2014). However, the degree of impact of new media platforms such as TikTok has yet to be investigated. From a promotion and persuasion perspective, more research is needed to investigate whether influencer-generated promotional messages on TikTok function primarily as direct persuasion stimuli rather than through engagement and loyalty pathways. Because users on TikTok receive content through algorithmic recommendations rather than social ties, constructs such as engagement and loyalty, and moderators such as gender, may work differently on algorithm-driven platforms such as TikTok, compared to social connection networks such as Facebook, and need to be validated. This study contributes to theory by investigating whether the influencer persuasion process on TikTok follows the relationship-building pattern mentioned in social media marketing research, or whether TikTok's interest-graph environment produces a more direct-compliance-based effect on purchase intention. The result could show whether the algorithm structure changes the mechanism through which the influence operates. The social pressure mediated path of engagement and loyalty has shown to affect purchase due to interpersonal dynamics (Alalwan, 2018; Wang et al., 2016). On TikTok, the watch time is based on interest graph algorithm (Stokel-Walker, 2021; Choi et al., 2024) that can predict direct compliance for hyper-personalized feeds. The model used in this study goes beyond replication of established influencer relationships in a new setting because it assesses whether TikTok's algorithmic design changes the mechanism of social influence leading to purchase intention. Findings of this study can be used to understand consumer behavior and help marketers design promotional content for use on interest-graph algorithm platforms such as TikTok.

In this study, we addressed the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent does brand influencer directly impact user engagement and loyalty on TikTok?

RQ2: How does brand influencer impact on TikTok influence users' purchase intentions, both directly and indirectly?

RQ3: In what ways do engagement and loyalty explain the relationship between brand influencer impact and purchase intention among TikTok users?

This study aimed to investigate how brand influencer impact can affect constructs such as engagement and loyalty, which in turn can be antecedents of purchase intention. In the context of this study, brand influencer impact is defined as the persuasive influence exerted by brand influencers to impact purchase decisions (Belanche et al., 2021).

Review of literature

The theoretical framework and areas critical to marketers for social media advertising on TikTok, empirically investigated in the article, are explained in more detail in the following sections.

Theoretical framework

Zahay (2021) noted that social media is evolving rapidly and often blurring the distinctions among different types of social media technologies. To identify a relevant framework that possibly encompasses

the popularity and unique features of the TikTok platform, theories were surveyed in the domains of personal behavior, social behavior, and mass communication (Ngai et al., 2015) since these fields formed the intersection of engagement on TikTok. Since the focus of this study was on the social component due to brand influencer impact, the theoretical lens of Social Influence Theory was selected to support the research model. The social influence theory was first put forth by Kelman (1958), who posited that an individual's attitudes, actions, behaviors, and beliefs are influenced by processes that include compliance, identification, and internalization. Compliance includes acceptance of influence and adoption of induced behavior (such as product promotion by a brand influencer). Identification refers to the act of conforming to the behavior induced to maintain a desired beneficial relationship (e.g. following or liking the content of the brand influencer). Internalization represents adopting the induced behavior since it is congruent with the individual's value system and is further reinforced by the actions of others in the group or social network (Zheng et al., 2020). This study uses social influence theory to explain internalization by TikTok users who may adopt behaviors suggested by brand influencers because these ideas match their own values. Within this framework, brand influencers function as a promotional communication source and provide content that can elicit compliance, identification, and support internalization of promoted products on TikTok. In recent promotion theory literature, influencers have been shown to function as hybrid promotional stimuli that blend credibility source effects (Belanche et al., 2021) with algorithmic amplification. In the context of promotion management, the three processes (compliance, identification, and internalization) can serve as key persuasion mechanisms since brand influencer content can serve as promotional messages to elicit compliance with influencer recommendations, help with user identification with the influencer and/or the brand, and create internalization if the message is perceived to be congruent with users' own values. The proposed model treats brand influencer videos as promotional content that may produce direct persuasive effects on purchase intention, while engagement and loyalty are included as exploratory pathways.

The social influence theory has been used extensively in marketing research. Loyalty, engagement, and purchase intention have been mentioned in relation to the compliance, identification, and internalization factors of the social influence theory literature (Sridhar & Srinivasan, 2012; Wang et al., 2016; Willis, 2021). The components of social influence theory are relevant to the TikTok environment because of the engagement and interaction of users on the platform (Chu et al., 2024). Brand influencers are trusted sources who are more influential than traditional forms of advertising and can further facilitate engagement. Jun and Yi (2020) found that brand influencers can help build relationships with social media users, resulting in loyalty with users who are more receptive and trusting of brand influencer content. The engagement and interaction among other users with content provided by brand influencers provides social proof that may cause a change in purchase intention. However, this finding needs to be investigated and validated specifically for the TikTok platform. Prior studies (Alalwan, 2018; Breves et al., 2019) have validated influencers on other platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, but TikTok's unique content graph algorithm could alter paths without mediation, unlike research by Wang et al. (2016). Also, gender moderation has been studied on other social media platforms (Dahl et al., 2009; Sanchez-Franco et al., 2009) but remains to be investigated on TikTok. This study filled the research gap by testing whether a chained path from brand influencer impact through engagement and loyalty to purchase intention is supported on the TikTok platform. The selected constructs were central to the research when developing the conceptual framework of the study. The theoretical linkages among constructs are presented below in the context of previous research, and the model is then presented, showing how the factors relate to each other.

Brand influencer impact

By leveraging their status as celebrities or trusted experts, influencers encourage word-of-mouth communication that is shared and amplified by users to promote the brand (Sharma & Bumb, 2022). Promotion theory treats brand influencers as source credibility cues to amplify persuasion (Belanche et al., 2021). The types of users on social media, e.g. the Gen Z audience, tend to give user-generated content more credibility. Since traditional influencers (e.g. well-known actors on television) are

perceived as transactional and have a promotional role on behalf of the sponsor, they do not appear to be successful on social media platforms such as TikTok (Jin et al., 2019). For an effective influencer marketing campaign, Zheng et al. (2020) identified factors such as the celebrity level of the influencer, brand control and congruence with the product, user trust toward the influencer, credibility of the message, as well as content and messaging format of the post as important factors for social media marketing. When seeking influencers, companies seek congruency between topics and the brand, and are aligned with the target audience sought by the brand (Syahrivar et al., 2025). An authentic partnership with influencers can help create engagement with followers, increasing interaction and attention toward the brand.

Recognizing and identifying factors that can shape how products and brands should be marketed is critical for any marketing campaign (Felix et al., 2017). While Zheng et al. (2020) and Syahrivar et al. (2025) investigated congruence and trust in general social media, the findings on TikTok may differ because it is a distinct platform that uses short-form video as its primary content. No empirical models have integrated brand influencer impact with engagement and loyalty on algorithmically driven platforms such as TikTok, where personalization may amplify direct effects on purchase intention. There is, therefore, a need for further research on how TikTok brand influencers' impact affects constructs such as engagement, loyalty, and purchase intention among TikTok users. In this study, the TikTok brand influencer impact construct was conceptualized as a promotional stimulus emerging from the role of influencer as a persuasive communication source to shape users' product evaluations and purchase decisions in comparison to other forms of promotion. This captured the effect of users watching brand influencer advertisement videos and their reactions to engagement with the content, feelings about brand influencers' characteristics, affinity toward the brand influencers, desire to learn more about the product as a result of being shown the product by the brand influencers, and purchase likelihood regarding the product promoted by brand influencers.

Although researchers such as Zheng et al. (2020) and Syahrivar et al. (2025) have previously examined congruence and trust on other social media platforms, empirical models are needed that investigate brand influencer impact with engagement and loyalty on algorithm-driven platforms such as TikTok. The unique characteristics of TikTok could allow for personalization to amplify direct effects on purchase intention rather than chained mediation. The impact of BII on loyalty has not been evaluated on TikTok and this study addresses the gap by modeling the chained path BII→ Engagement→ Loyalty→ PI by using the social influence theory's compliance→ identification→ internalization mechanisms. This approach addresses the specific theoretical gap and contrasts TikTok's interest-graph algorithm with previous social-graph research (Alalwan, 2018; Wang et al., 2016).

Engagement

Engagement refers to the interaction of consumers with marketing promotions of a company or a brand. Fang et al. (2013) found that cognitive, psychological, and demographic characteristics can significantly influence online consumers' attitudes and purchase intentions. Engagement is used by many digital analytics programs as a metric to determine the success of social media marketing campaigns. Related to the social influence theory, engagement with other users, such as reacting to their posts, has been shown to shape consumers' purchase decisions (Zhang & Benyoucef, 2016).

Users engage on social media platforms at various levels of interaction. On the TikTok platform, engagement can be related to the number of videos watched, shared, and commented on due to being inspired by ideas presented by brand influencer content on TikTok (Khan 2017). Liadeli et al. (2023) observed that although marketers create content for social media platforms, more research is needed on how different variables can affect engagement. They noted that engagement might be affected by a consumer's needs, goals, and motivation, influenced by prior interactions or brand awareness. Kautish et al. (2025) identified emotional and behavioral engagement as particularly influential pathways that contribute to social media marketing activities, but Khan (2017) suggests platform-specific metrics like the sharing of content. For the TikTok environment, engagement results from consuming and sharing video content, which helps the TikTok algorithm learn more information about engagement metrics to

customize video feeds for each user. According to Kelman's compliance mechanism, brand influencer content may translate to engagement as users accept promotional cues (Zheng et al., 2020) but the role of engagement as a meaningful contributor of purchase intention has not been investigated on TikTok. The results would provide a comparison with connection-based platforms such as Facebook. Based on the preceding review of the literature suggesting these relationships, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: *There is a significant positive brand influencer impact on engagement for TikTok users.*

Loyalty

Social media platforms allow users to interact with other users and content by using engagement metrics such as Likes, Shares, and Comments. Arli (2017) noted that consumer attitude on social media is associated with loyalty and purchase intention. Despite the popularity of social media and its use by marketers for advertising and promotion, businesses are facing challenges in effectively incorporating social media into their marketing campaigns (Ibrahim, 2022). This may be because constructs such as engagement and loyalty may impact purchase intention based on the unique characteristics of each social media platform. Social influence theory mentions the *compliance* factor (Kelman, 1958), which could be consistent with the behavior of TikTok users to align with influencer messaging that creates loyalty with multiple interactions with influencers' posts.

For more than two decades, social networks have emerged as virtual communities where users interact with other members of the group, which creates a psychological attachment among members of the social network, such that users derive value and contribute new information to the social network (Nisar & Whitehead, 2016) while remaining loyal to the network. Loyalty can be developed as a result of interactions with other members of the network who share a common belief or perception about a product or brand. Previous literature has also found that loyalty has antecedents such as satisfaction and trust (Dorsch et al., 1998; Rezaei & Ismail, 2014).

Arli (2017) has shown that attitude affects loyalty and purchase intention on general social media, which is consistent with Nisar and Whitehead's (2016) research on virtual communities, but Ibrahim (2022) has called into question platform-specific challenges. Rezaei and Ismail (2014) have emphasized satisfaction and trust antecedents, but their effects may vary by platform type. Using the identification mechanism, users can form affinity with influencers leading to loyalty (Jun & Yi, 2020). If users identify with influencer content, BII should strengthen loyalty and if identification deepens over time, engagement should contribute to loyalty. The impact of brand influencers on loyalty has not been tested for TikTok. There is a need to further investigate loyalty in relation to other constructs, such as engagement and the impact of brand influencers on modern social networks, such as TikTok. The following hypotheses are proposed:

H2: *There is a significant positive brand influencer impact on loyalty for TikTok users.*

H3: *There is a significant positive impact of engagement on loyalty for TikTok users.*

Purchase intention

When marketing products to drive purchase intention, Mann and Ghuman (2018) identified two routes by which corporate brand associations can influence consumers' purchase intention: by affecting their cognitive responses or by influencing their affective responses toward the company. The TikTok platform is best suited to provide both types of influences by displaying hyper-targeted videos that appeal to users based on previous interactions with videos showing similar products. The TikTok algorithm learns from users' behaviors toward videos of previously sponsored posts.

Since social media brand influencers encourage engagement with their content, the interaction may improve users' attitudes toward the brand (Belanche et al., 2021). Since TikTok is a visual medium with short videos that capture attention, companies, and brand influencers have created unique promotions by using product ideas to inspire users to buy their products. Shreffler and McCullough

(2021) noted that the phrase and hashtag 'TikTok Made Me Buy It' had 5.4 billion views in 2021 and is trending not only on TikTok but also on other social media channels such as Instagram and YouTube, thereby influencing purchase intentions of other users. It has been shown that TikTok's interest-graph predicts direct compliance bypassing mediation (Choi et al., 2024), unlike Facebook's social pressure path. If compliance is strong on TikTok, BII should have a direct effect on purchase intention. Since this study focused on the outcome variable of purchase intention with antecedents of TikTok brand influencer impact, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: *Higher brand influencer impact on TikTok directly results in higher purchase intention.*

If identification and internalization operate as expected, engagement and loyalty should mediate the effect of BII on purchase intention. Chained mediation has assumed social-graph dynamics (Wang et al., 2016) but since the path from brand influencer impact and purchase intention can also be an indirect path through other mediating constructs, such as engagement and loyalty, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H5: *Engagement directly mediates the relationship between brand influencer impact and purchase intention.*

H6: *Loyalty directly mediates the relationship between brand influencer impact and purchase intention.*

In this study, data were collected on the demographic characteristics of respondents. Since contemporary social media platforms differ in the user interface, features, interaction, and objectives (Alalwan, 2018; Ibrahim, 2022), marketers need to understand the preferences and characteristics of social network platforms to reach consumers by creating content that sparks interest and accommodates different needs (Hazari et al., 2017). For example, it is well known in traditional marketing literature that males and females respond differently to advertising due to differences in cognitive styles and information-processing approaches (Dahl et al., 2009). In a previous study focused on the Pinterest social network, Ottoni et al. (2021) found that females made greater use of the commercial nature of Pinterest while males curated items that are related to their personal tastes. Shreffler and McCullough (2021) have documented TikTok's viral purchase trends, but Alalwan (2018) showed mixed mediation on other platforms. The direct versus mediated paths and gender moderation need to be validated on TikTok's hyper-personalized short-video platform. This suggests that the three mechanisms of social influence theory—compliance, identification, and internalization (Kelman, 1958) may operate differently across genders on TikTok. For example, females may be more inclined to identify with and internalize the values of those influencers who provide emotional and social validation. Males, in contrast, would be more influenced by influencers who showcase product features, technical aspects, or performance outcomes (Meyers-Levey & Loken, 2015; Hudders & De Jans, 2022).

TikTok's interest graph algorithm of curated feeds presents an environment in which emotional and informational cues are embedded in influencer videos. For female TikTok users, the relational aspect of influencer videos may strengthen the pathways from brand influencer impact to engagement, loyalty, and purchase intention. For male users, influencer videos that focus on product features or performance may trigger compliance and ultimately purchase intention. An investigation into gender differences on TikTok regarding brand influencer impact and purchase intention would have implications for marketers by providing targeted opportunities. Therefore, using the context of social influence theory and gender-related information processing, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H7: *The direct effect of brand influencer impact on purchase intention is moderated by the gender of TikTok users.*

H8: *The indirect effect of brand influencer impact on purchase intention is moderated by gender through engagement and loyalty.*

Using the mechanisms of social influence theory, influencers can shape attitudes and behaviors through compliance (brand influencer impact, prompting engagement on TikTok; identification

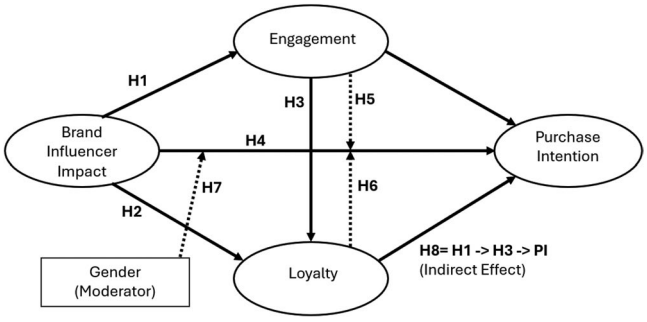

Figure 1. Conceptual model.

(aligning with admired influencers by showing loyalty); and internalization (genuinely believing the product fits one's own values). By validating these mechanisms on the algorithm-driven TikTok platform, which is much different from connection-based networks such as Facebook, the social influence theory can be extended.

The hypotheses listed above test Social Influence Theory's mechanisms on TikTok. The conceptual model that was derived from theory with constructs of brand influencer impact, engagement, loyalty, purchase intention, and the moderating role of gender is shown in Figure 1.

Research methodology

Sampling design

This study aims to investigate whether brand influencer impact affects purchase intention directly and whether engagement and loyalty provide indirect explanatory pathways. Data for this study were collected from TikTok users in the United States, a market characterized by high social media penetration and advanced adoption of influencer-driven promotional strategies, making it an appropriate context for examining digital promotion effectiveness. The demographics of TikTok users show that the majority of TikTok users are members of Generation Y (born 1981–1996) and Generation Z (born 1997–2012). This study focused only on samples from these generations. There was an equal representation of males and females in each group.

Westland (2010) recommended that the sample size be determined using a 95% confidence level, a standard deviation of 0.5, and $a \pm 1\%$ margin of error. A minimum sample size of 384 participants was recommended based on the statistical power of 0.80. For this study, a sample size of 425 participants from the United States was used. To assess sample size adequacy, a power analysis was conducted using G*Power with a recommended medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$; Hair et al., 2017). The analysis confirmed that $N = 425$ provided >99% power to detect hypothesized path effects in the PLS-SEM model. Before the survey was administered, a pilot test was conducted after approval from the university's Institutional Research Board (IRB). The survey was administered online using the Qualtrics survey platform during September and October 2025. Participants provided informed consent, and data were collected anonymously. Qualtrics has a national database of users (representing all U.S. states) from which a sampling frame of participants was selected based on screening criteria using a non-probability quota sampling design. Screening criteria to be eligible for the survey included an existing TikTok account, use of the TikTok platform for at least six months and TikTok use at least twice a week. Participants who did not meet the screening criteria were excluded from the survey. Quota sampling has been widely used in promotion marketing since it is able to capture a sample that reflects screening criteria that are relevant to campaign goals. Khan and Saima (2021) used quota sampling to investigate brand loyalty, advertising attitudes, and consumer responses to promotional stimuli. The use of quota sampling provides desired characteristics more effectively than probabilistic sample. Zhang et al. (2020) found that a Facebook-recruited quota sample provided similar metrics compared to a probability panel of a national survey.

Participants screened for inclusion in the study were then presented with demographic questions (Table 1). The study participants ranged in age from 22 to 44 years. The demographic profile of respondents and TikTok use is shown in Table 1. The next set of questions asked about participants' interactions on TikTok and other social networks. Information was then collected from scale items, which included TikTok engagement, loyalty, and purchase intention. Statements from all constructs were combined and presented to participants in random order.

The product featured in this video, shown by brand influencers, was the Lull mattress, made by a company (https://www.lull.com) that sells directly to consumers. Since males and females participated in the study, the mattress was chosen because it is a gender-neutral product that would mitigate unconscious bias toward the product. Similarly, since there could also be a bias toward using only a male or female brand influencer, a brand influencer couple (male & female) was chosen. These TikTok brand influencers had high follower counts and engagement rates, as evidenced by other TikTok videos they had published. The brand influencers in the video provided information about the features of the mattress in a conversational style. As is typical for all TikTok videos, music played in the background. The video frame also showed the TikTok username of the influencers, the hashtags for the Lull company, and the counts for likes, comments, bookmarks, and shares. The clip ended with a call to action to purchase the mattress. After the video ended, participants were asked a set of questions about purchase intention. The average time to complete the survey was 15 min.

Questionnaire design

The latent constructs of brand influencer impact, engagement, loyalty, and purchase intention were developed based on extant literature. Since TikTok is a fairly new platform and there is scant literature on constructs directly used in TikTok research studies, the indicator items were adapted from previous scales that had been developed for traditional marketing, as well as more recent literature related to digital marketing and social media platforms. All latent construct indicator items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree to 5= Strongly agree). For the brand influencer impact, previous research by Breves et al. (2019), Martínez-López et al. (2020), and Ibáñez-Sánchez et al. (2022) was used. The seven items included in this scale addressed the impact of TikTok content made by brand influencers on product recommendations, comparison with other types of ads, reviews provided by brand influencers, intention to view other recommendations from brand influencers, helpfulness of reviews, and attention paid to product features described by brand influencers. For the engagement construct, previous research by Taheri et al. (2014), Baldus et al. (2015), and Paruthi and Kaur (2017) was used. Items included in this scale were interest in using TikTok, long-term use, the role of TikTok in providing education, entertainment, and information, engagement with posts, the value obtained from using TikTok, and the role and importance of TikTok among social media interactions.

For the loyalty construct, previous research by Lim et al. (2015), Ismail (2017), and Ceyhan (2019) was used. In this study, loyalty was framed in the context of users' loyalty to TikTok from repeated

Table 1. Demographic profile and TikTok use of survey respondents.

	Items	*n*	%
Generation	1981–1996 (Gen Y)	212	50.3
	1997–2003 (Gen Z adults)	213	49.6
Gender	Males	208	49.9
	Females	217	50.1
Frequency of TikTok Use	2–3 times per week	45	10.3
	4–5 times per week	7517.2	
	>6 times per week	31772.5	
TikTok session time	<30 min	14	3.2
	30–60 min	131	30.0
	1–2 h	145	33.2
	>2–3 h	81	18.5
	>3 h	66	15.1
TikTok products purchasedNone	137	31.4	
	1–5	204	46.6
	>5	96	22.0

exposure to brand influencer content and purchase prompts, reflecting sustained attachment to TikTok and its influencer-driven content. The six-item scale captured information about affinity toward TikTok use, the importance of TikTok compared to other social networking platforms, intention to use TikTok in the future, interest level, time spent consuming content, and whether users encourage their social network to use TikTok. The six purchase intention indicator items were adapted from Wright and McRae (2007), Prasad et al. (2019), and Nasir et al. (2021). Items included in this scale were related to how likely users were to purchase products advertised on TikTok, the purchase desire generated by seeing videos on TikTok, the influence of user comments on purchase intention, and the interest level in products shown by the TikTok algorithm.

Results

Measurement model assessment

The measurement model showed excellent reliability and validity as shown in Table 2. Exploratory factor analysis confirmed the scale structure (KMO = 0.95; Bartlett's test $p < .001$), with all constructs (Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.7$, CR > 0.7, AVE > 0.5) exceeding the recommended thresholds (Hair et al., 2017).

Discriminant validity was established *via* Fornell–Larcker criterion (Fornell & Bookstein, 1982) and Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratios below 0.9 as shown in Table 3. Common method bias was not a concern as Harman's single-factor test showed the first factor accounted for 41% of variance (below the 50% threshold), and the marker variable (attitudes toward blue) showed no multicollinearity with focal constructs.

Brand influencer impact showed a strong direct effect on purchase intention ($\beta = 0.774$, $t = 23.223$, $p < .001$; Table 4), bypassing mediation through engagement and loyalty. This result demonstrates TikTok's unique compliance pathway, where promotional content drives purchases directly rather than through chained social effects. Engagement strongly predicted loyalty ($\beta = 0.774$, $t = 26.756$, $p < .001$), but BII showed only a weak negative link to loyalty ($\beta = -0.076$, $t = 1.983$, $p = 0.047$), possibly reflecting ad fatigue on algorithm-driven feeds.

Model fit

The structural model exhibited strong predictive capability ($R^2 = 0.744$ for purchase intention) and good fit (SRMR = 0.072; $Q^2 = 0.362$ for loyalty), confirming the model's robustness for path analysis.

Direct effects Table 4 shows BII significantly predicted engagement (H1: $\beta = 0.612$, $t = 16.72$, $p < .001$) but showed a small negative direct effect on loyalty (H2: $\beta = -0.076$, $t = 1.983$, $p = 0.047$). Engagement strongly drove loyalty (*H3:* $\beta = 0.774$, $t = 26.756$, $p < .001$), and BII powerfully predicted purchase intention (H4: $\beta = 0.774$, $t = 23.223$, $p < .001$).

Mediation analysis

As shown in Table 5, neither engagement (H5: $\beta = 0.045$, $t = 1.362$, $p = 0.173$) nor loyalty (H6: $\beta = -0.006$, $t = 1.183$, $p = 0.237$) significantly mediated the BII-purchase intention relationship, confirming the dominance of TikTok's direct path.

Moderation analysis

As shown in Table 6, Gender showed no significant moderating effect on indirect paths through engagement and loyalty (H7, H8) to purchase intention. PROCESS macro analysis (5000 bootstraps) confirmed equivalent coefficients across genders. This result suggests that marketers can promote influencer campaigns across genders rather than separate promotions for males versus females.

Similarly, gender did not moderate the direct BII → PI relationship as shown in Table 7, suggesting that marketers may not need to rely primarily on gender-segmented targeting when designing influencer content on TikTok.

Table 2. Measurement model assessment.

Factors/indicators	Factor loading	Cronbach alpha	AVE	CR
BRAND INFLUENCER IMPACT (BII)				
TikTok posts from brand influencers help me make purchase decisions	0.838	0.909	0.686	0.929
I trust TikTok brand influencers when they recommend a product	0.840			
I am more likely to purchase products if recommended by a brand influencer	0.838			
Brand influencers provide added value to my TikTok experience	0.824			
I look forward to seeing product recommendations from TikTok brand influencers	0.847			
In general, TikTok brand influencers provide helpful reviews	0.782			
ENGAGEMENT (ENG)				
I have a strong interest in using TikTok	0.668	0.845	0.516	0.881
TikTok is very important to me	0.782			
TikTok matters a lot to me	0.797			
TikTok is very relevant to my life	0.763			
I am satisfied with the features provided on TikTok	0.639			
Losing TikTok forever would upset me	0.690			
Watching TikTok videos is a good use of my time	0.673			
LOYALTY (LOY)				
I have encouraged people I know to use TikTok	0.727	0.859	0.576	0.891
TikTok is one of my favorite social media sites	0.762			
I do not want TikTok to be shut down by the government	0.744			
I will continue using TikTok because the videos on it are interesting	0.760			
I have said positive things about TikTok to people I know	0.798			
TikTok is one of the most interesting social media sites that I use	0.762			
PURCHASE INTENTION (PI)				
Seeing videos on TikTok helps me make product purchase decisions	0.763	0.878	0.618	0.907
I am likely to buy products that I see mentioned on TikTok	0.808			
User comments on TikTok videos can help me make product purchase decisions	0.770			
I sometimes use TikTok to find interesting products	0.755			
TikTok videos show useful products that I would be interested in purchasing	0.807			
I intend to purchase products shown on TikTok	0.812			

Table 3. Discriminant Validity (Fornell–Larcker | HTMT).

	BII	ENG	LOY	PI
BII	**0.829**			
LOY	0.612	**0.718**		
ENG	0.447	0.701	**0.759**	
PI	0.653	0.614	0.491	**0.786**
	BII	ENG	LOY	PI
BII				
ENG	0.693			
LOY	0.488	0.841		
PI	0.855	0.708	0.549	

Note: Bold diagonal values are the square root of AVE, and off-diagonal are correlation coefficients.

Table 4. Direct effects on constructs.

	ß	STDEV	*t*	*p*	2.50%	97.50%
H1: BII → ENG	0.612	0.037	16.729	0.000	0.534	0.678
H2: BII → LOY	−0.076	0.038	1.983	0.047	−0.151	−0.001
H3: ENG → LOY	0.846	0.032	26.756	0.000	0.78	0.904
H4: BII → PI	0.774	0.033	23.223	0.000	0	0.18
	$\mathbf{R^2}$	$\mathbf{Q^2}$				
ENG	0.374	0.189				
LOY	0.642	0.362				
PI	0.746	0.453				

Table 5. Mediation analysis results.

	Indirect Effects (ß)	*t*	*p*
H5: BII → ENG → PI	0.045	1.362	0.173
H6: BII → LOY → PI	−0.006	1.183	0.237
BI → ENG –> LOY	0.518	12.653	0.000
H7: BII → ENG → LOY	0.047	1.837	0.066

Table 6. Gender moderation: indirect paths.

	ß (Females)	*t* (Females)	*p* (Females)	ß (Males)	*t* (Males)	*p* (Males)
BII → ENG→ LOY→ PI	0.060	1.835	0.067	0.021	0.524	0.600
BII → ENG→ LOY	0.477	8.884	0.000	0.576	9.457	0.000
BII→ ENG→ PI	0.043	1.132	0.258	0.043	0.773	0.440
BII → LOY→ PI	−0.002	0.321	0.749	−0.006	0.461	0.645

Table 7. Gender Moderation: Direct Path.

Predictor	ß	SE	*t*	*p*	95% CI
BII (main effect)	0.220	0.071	3.110	.002	[0.081, 0.359]
Gender (main)	−0.027	0.079	−0.341	.733	[−0.183, 0.129]
BII × Gender	−0.005	0.105	−0.050	.960	[−0.212, 0.202]

Discussion and implications

Theoretical contributions

The TikTok platform differs from conventional social media platforms, where prior social influence theory work has been focused (Sridhar & Srinivasan, 2012). To extend the limited work investigating how the specific constructs affect purchase intention on the TikTok platform, this study provided evidence for the applicability of the social influence theory (compliance, identification, and internalization) in the context of TikTok users and brand influencer impact. The study found that these processes were relevant for TikTok conceptually, but the empirical results showed that TikTok is dominated by direct compliance pathway rather than by mediated engagement and loyalty pathways. This result extends the findings of previous research on social influence and marketing (Dholakia et al., 2004; Sridhar & Srinivasan, 2012), and specifically the compliance component of the theory, by demonstrating the power of TikTok brand influencers to influence consumers through the videos they create and post on TikTok (e.g. by watching and interacting with 'TikTok Made Me Buy It' videos). TikTok's interest-graph algorithm (Stokel-Walker, 2021) may operate differently than predicted by prior social influence theory applications, elevating compliance over identification and internalization in influencer persuasion. The empirical findings of this study link to Kelman's (1958) core mechanisms of social influence, suggesting that the theory could be refined for TikTok's algorithm-driven context. *Compliance* was the dominant BII → Purchase Intention effect (β = 0.774, p < .001), where TikTok users accepted influencer promotions to gain rewards without deeper processing, which is distinct from mediated paths in social-graph platforms. *Identification* aligned with BII → Engagement (β = 0.612, p < .001), showing that users identified with influencers' behavior for aspirational relationships, driving loyalty *via* social proof. *Internalization* showed non-significant mediation (H5 & H6) and BII's weak negative loyalty effect (β = −0.076) suggested saturation from short-form videos that kept users from adopting promoted values. From a promotion management perspective, the results showed that on TikTok, the influencer message is effective due to direct persuasive impact on purchase intention rather than the ability of influencers to build engagement and loyalty-based pathways, thereby adding more information to assumptions on how social media advertising works.

The results of this study showed that brand influencer impact directly affects purchase intention (β = 0.774), which aligns with Alalwan (2018) and Belanche et al. (2021), who found that, in general,

social media influencers can boost purchase intention *via* trust and congruence. However, unlike the findings of Wang et al. (2016) and Jun and Yi (2020), who had found engagement and loyalty fully mediating influencer effects on other platforms (not TikTok), the results of this study suggested that the non-significant mediations (H5/H6 rejected) could be due to the personalization algorithm; however, this interpretation should be treated cautiously due to the study design. The absence of chained social processes bypassing loyalty can be attributed to ad saturation (Liadeli et al., 2023). The negative finding for the relationship between brand influencer impact and loyalty (H2) contradicts Arli (2017) and Nisar and Whitehead (2016), possibly because TikTok's hyper-targeted feeds may be causing fatigue compared to Facebook's connection-based loyalty (Sridhar & Srinivasan, 2012).

Managerial implications

The findings of this study offer guidance for marketers who are looking to leverage the TikTok platform for promotion. On social network platforms, influencers have the power to affect the purchasing decisions of others because of their knowledge, position, or relationship with their audience (Freberg et al., 2011). The dominant direct effect of brand influencer on purchase intention (H4) suggests that promotional messages on TikTok should include feature-focused content rather than trying to focus on engagement or loyalty metrics to drive sales, because the results of this study found that engagement and loyalty do not significantly mediate the BII to purchase intention relationship (H5-H6). Unlike relationship-based traditional platforms such as Facebook, the results of this TikTok study show that to make the marketing message more effective, a direct brand influencer impact on the purchase intention path suggests that marketers should enable compliance through hyper-personalized feeds, such as by emphasizing product demonstrations similar to the Lull mattress video used in this study. As another example, Chipotle, a company active on all social media platforms (Belasen & Belasen, 2019), could shift from a story-based narrative to a 15-second TikTok burrito assembly demo. Similarly, Nike ads could demonstrate the cushioning bounce effect of its shoes on different surfaces rather than showcasing influencer athletes, as it has done on other social media. This approach will challenge previous models of social media strategy by leveraging TikTok's algorithm of direct influence path and will allow brands to measure sales impact without the loyalty-building phases. Marketers can allocate budgets toward high-impact influencers while monitoring completion rates as key performance indicators for direct purchase conversion (Chu et al., 2024).

Gender moderation on TikTok

Gender has been widely used in traditional marketing for segmentation purposes (Friedmann & Lowengart, 2019). There has not been much research on gender differences on TikTok that could inform gender-targeted marketing messages. This study investigated the moderating role of gender for direct and indirect effects of brand influencer impact on purchase intention. The results showed no moderating role of gender for brand influencer impact to purchase intention directly or indirectly. The lack of gender moderation (H7/H8) in this study contrasts with earlier findings by Sanchez-Franco et al. (2009) on Pinterest and Facebook, as TikTok prioritizes behavioral data over demographics (Stokel-Walker, 2021). On TikTok, this result suggests that marketers should design campaigns that are broad and do not target specific genders, thereby increasing reach to a wider audience through popular hashtags such as #TikTokMadeMeBuyIt. Therefore, it can be proposed that despite previous literature showing gender differences that can be used for segmentation on other social media platforms such as Facebook and Pinterest (Hazari et al., 2017; Shao et al., 2015), on the TikTok platform, the finding of non-significant moderating effects of gender on the pathway between brand influencer impact and purchase intention offers a boundary condition for gender-segmentation theories in social media marketing. The TikTok persuasion process depends less on relationship-building as users may move from exposure to purchase intention without engagement or loyalty. Gender segmentation strategy would not be effective on TikTok because of the algorithm-driven personalization. This finding modifies the predictions of social influence theory as it focuses more on personalizing content based on viewing behaviors of TikTok users rather than social connections found in other social networks.

Future studies investigating outcomes on interest-graph social media platforms should treat gender as context-dependent rather than a universal moderator, given that interests shape content discovery.

The results of this study extend previous findings related to social media engagement and marketing. This study adds new insights into user interaction with content promoted by brand influencers on TikTok, which can be useful to marketers in promoting their brands. As TikTok becomes more innovative than other competing social media networks, marketers should include TikTok in their marketing campaigns and identify and align themselves with influencers who can drive TikTok consumers from awareness to purchase faster than other traditional marketing promotions.

Limitations and recommendations

Although brand influencer marketing has become a popular channel for promoting products through recommendations from influencers, many marketing managers are struggling to integrate brand influencer marketing and develop a roadmap for effective influencer marketing. A quantitative paradigm was used to study the constructs of brand influencer impact and purchase intention for TikTok users. Due to the use of non-probability purposive approach for data collection, findings may have limited generalizability to the broader TikTok user base. The results of this study were based on a sample of 425 Gen Y/Z TikTok users in the United States. The results of this study reflect algorithmic and cultural niches that were present during the data collection period, and use of probabilistic sample in future studies could mitigate limitations of quota sampling to offer wider applicability. Other possible biases in this study include self-selection bias, Qualtrics panel bias, digital literacy, and fluency bias, since participants opted in using shared links to access the Qualtrics platform. Future studies using random sampling and diverse recruitment of TikTok user base could mitigate these biases and enhance generalizability. Additional constructs can also be explored for TikTok users that affect brand influencer impact, engagement, loyalty, and purchase intention. This study provides researchers and practitioners with new opportunities to investigate constructs that affect purchase intentions. Future research could also examine the effects of the same product being advertised on other competing social networks, such as Facebook and Instagram. The findings of such research could provide further insight to marketers who run campaigns on different platforms to attract users to their products and services.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Sunil Hazari**: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – review & editing; **Salil Talpade**: Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing; **Cheryl Brown**: Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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