To Buy or Not to Buy?
Investigating the Impact of Verification Status on Gen Z Purchasing Decisions

By

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Abstract

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Prior to the introduction of technology and surge of web 2.0 platforms, word-of-mouth (WOM) was the principal way for society to adopt and relay information to others. Given the onset of social media platforms, TikTok for example, information such as feedback on a person, product, or service, has been made accessible worldwide, giving rise to electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Popular eWOM comes from social media influencers, with many followers and are favored for their perceived experitise in a certain area (beauty, fashion, gaming, etc.). Generation Z (1997-2012), Gen Z for short, are the main users of the TikTok app and are known to make purchases influenced by others on the app. This study investigates the impact of TikTok user verification status on Gen Z consumers' willingness to pay for or buy a product reviewed on TikTok. Data was collected through a 2x1 between-subject design surveying 576 participants aged 18-2. The study found a positive but insignificant relationship between the verification status of a user and participants' willingness to buy or pay for the good. Additional variables measuring the demographics (race, gender, household income), participant perceptions of the TikTok user (relatability, trustworthiness), and other importance factors that influence TikTok induced purchasing (price and trendiness of product, and follower count of TikTok user) proved to have a greater impact.

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1.) Introduction:

The rapid advancement of technology and surge in online communication platforms have changed the way society adopts and relays information. Social media platforms, such as TikTok, have made information on trends, products (e.g. clothing, household items, beauty products, etc.), dining experiences, and life hacks globally accessible. TikTok, an algorithm based, video sharing social media platform, provides users with user-generated content they are most interested in and connects them with others around the world who share the same interests. Data shows that the TikTok app has more than 1 billion monthly active users, is available in 154 countries, and has a significant Generation Z presence (Doyle 2022). The engagement on the TikTok app between users has made it a popular source to seek out and engage with online information, or in other words, electronic word-of-mouth.

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) refers to the exchange of information via online platforms from one information source (a social media influencer, celebrity, satisfied/dissatisfied customer, etc.) to a receiver. A receiver can be anyone from a follower of a social media influencer to a curious customer looking for more information on a product they are interested in. Research finds that 84% of consumers find online customer reviews to be just as credible as personal recommendations (Bloem 2017). In the instance of eWOM engagement on TikTok, it allows users to come face to face with others who have what they are looking for or what they want to learn more about.

Popular eWOM via social media is delivered through a social media influencer (SMI), a popular online figure who has: a large following, perceived expertise in a specific field (beauty products, fashion, etc.), and has the ability to set trends and promote

products to those who engage with their content (Nefees et al. 2021). The use of a SMI to spread information about a product or service is referred to as social media influencer marketing. This type of marketing involves a well-known content creator, partnering with a corporation, in order to help increase a company's revenue, improve their image, or bring awareness to their brand. SMI marketing is considered to be an effective marketing tool as a result of its ability to give a brand an identity outside of its logo. Schouten et. al (2020) analyze the role of credibility in influencer and celebrity endorsements. They find that consumers who identify with a figure based on interests, values, or characteristics, are more likely to find an endorser trustworthy (Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget 2020, 261). Ultimately, SMIs whose lifestyles or perceived expertise, aligns with that of a brand's, ultimately help influence their followers' and a wider audiences' decisions to support a brand or buy a product.

eWOM in relation to SMI marketing on TikTok has become a popular trend among users making TikTok induced purchases. The information sources that drive these purchases on the app, consists of verified users with hundreds of thousands of followers or unverified users with a few hundred followers. Verified users are those with a blue checkmark, which is symbolic of a user's proof that they are who they say they are. Verified users can acquire benefits from the check mark, for example, increased online credibility, quick responses from businesses, and increased fees for speaking engagements and brand deals (Soto 2019). According to TikTok, the criteria for acquiring a verification badge requires a public, active, and complete account with the user being of social significance, with multi-factor authentication to protect their account (TikTok 2022). However, interestingly, on TikTok, whether a user is verified or unverified,

influence is within arm's reach to anyone who posts content that users find funny, relatable, or useful.

Generation Z, the population born within the 1997-2012 timespan, is a generation that has grown up with the evolution of advanced technology and web 2.0 platforms. As they make up 40% of global consumers and are heavily reliant on technology to make purchases, they are no strangers to eWOM (Amed et. al 2019). The popular hashtag "TikTokMadeMeBuyIt" refers to purchasing a product as a result of seeing a video made about it. This phenomenon has become a resource for Gen Z to learn more about products through the experience of others in order to make a well-informed purchase (Cortés 2022). As popular eWOM sources for Gen Z to consult before making a purchase tend to be social media platforms, their purchasing decisions are susceptible to being influenced by popular figures such as verified influencers. On the TikTok platform, however, a user's purchasing decision can be influenced by those without a blue checkmark. The blue checkmark which has become synonymous with a user's social status, has placed verified users at a level close to that of celebrities in the eyes of consumers (Dumas and Stough 2022). However, in aforementioned studies such as that of Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget (2020), they find that consumers respond more to influencer endorsements than celebrity endorsements. Understanding the effect of influencer verification on Gen Z buying decisions would provide businesses with interesting insight into what this generation responds to commercially.

In this study, I focus on consumer behavior, exploring the impact the verification status of a TikTok influencer has on Gen Z purchasing decisions. Using a 2x1 between-subject experiment I examine whether verification status affects a Gen Z consumer's

willingness to purchase a good and willingness to pay for the good. Additionally, the effect of other measurable variables, focusing on consumer perceptions of the influencer and product, are examined. This study contributes to the existing literature by examining the impact of eWOM on consumer purchasing behavior with a focus on TikTok's influence on Gen Z's purchasing behavior. More importantly, this work also contributes to a new focus of literature looking at the effect of influencer verification on Gen Z's purchasing decisions. Second, this research shows a positive yet insignificant relationship between Gen Z's purchasing decision and reviews from a verified TikTok influencer. However, it also demonstrates that there are significant relationships between the other variables used to measure participants' perceptions of the TikTok user, participant demographics, and importance factors that influence Gen Z's purchasing decision.

The next section of the paper discusses existing literature on the topics of eWOM, influencer impact on consumer behavior, as well as the impact of influencer verification status on consumer behavior. The following section outlines the methodology and the design of the study. The fourth section describes the economic specification used to measure the impact of influencer verification status among other variables on Gen Z's purchasing decisions, the variables used in the experiment as well as the hypotheses to be tested. The fifth section presents the results of the experiment, with the sixth section concluding this paper, including implications and limitations of the study as well as where future research can expand on this topic.

2.) Literature review:

The existing literature on the relationship between eWOM via social media and consumer purchasing behavior, while different, share similar motivations. Erkan and Evans (2016) study distinguishing features of online information such as its quality, credibility, and applicability to the consumers' needs. Additionally, their work looks at consumers' attitudes toward eWOM via social media and their relationship with the aforementioned aspects of online information that help determine whether or not they will use it to make a purchase (Erkan and Evans 2016, 50). With many ideas and opinions presenting themselves on social media, consumers are likely to make purchasing decisions based on sources they can trust. Similar to the work of Erkan and Evans (2016), Sulthana and Vasantha (2021) examine the relationship between trust, a consumers' perceived judgment of a product, and their intentions to purchase as a result of eWOM on social media. Their findings conclude that there is a positive relationship between a consumer's trust in social media and their likelihood to purchase a product. Looking more specifically at how eWOM via social media impacts Gen Z's buying behavior, Kurnaz and Duman (2021) find a positive relationship between eWOM and Gen Z purchasing behavior.

To better understand the role of eWOM via social media on consumers' purchasing intentions, it is also important to understand the characteristics of eWOM that attract consumers' engagement. Chu (2011) analyzes sociological factors that influence consumer participation in eWOM: social capital, tie strength, homophily, trust, and consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence. However, Lee and Watkins (2016) study the sociological factors such as social and physical attractiveness and attitude

homophily that attract consumers to eWOM sources, specifically Youtube vloggers in this instance (Lee and Watkins 2016, 5755). The papers by Lee and Watkins (2016) and Chu (2011) share similar findings, indicating that consumers respond to sources that align with their interests.

There is also literature that investigates the characteristics of consumers as it applies to their response to different information sources before purchasing a product (Chen et. al 2016). Chen et. al (2016) looks at the influence of eWOM, neutral/third party, and manufacturer/retailer information sources on consumers' purchase decisions. Looking at the influence of eWOM specifically, Chen et. al (2016) finds that eWOM has a significant effect on consumers who are more likely to rely on online information than those who are not. It is worth noting that in this study, the majority of participants were within the ages of 25-39 (Chen et. al 2016). Given that this paper looks at Gen Z, specifically those within the ages of 18-28 years old, who are frequent users of social media, it is possible that they are more influenced by online information.

When discussing eWOM and social media, the concept of influence is an important factor. On social media, influencers have been the figures accountable for helping promote and set trends. To help give more insight into this phenomenon, papers such as Masuda, Han, and Lee (2022) investigate consumers' perceptions of influencers as it relates to their purchase intentions. Their research finds that the perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and their seemingly close relationship with an influencer, influences a consumer to purchase a product promoted by that influencer (Masuda, Han, and Lee 2022). Other studies looking into the impact of social media influencers on consumer

purchasing behavior, also find that influencer reviews of a product positively affect consumers' willingness to buy (Dwidienawati et. al 2020).

Dwidienawati et. al (2020) conducted an experiment with 200 university students, mostly Gen Z, exploring whether influencer reviews or customer reviews matter in making a hypothetical purchase. In addition to finding that consumers respond more to influencer reviews, Dwidienawati et. al (2020) also find that Gen Z's purchasing decisions are influenced by the reviews of influencers. Furthermore, Bognar et. al (2019) conduct a similar study with the same sample size but with participants from 18-61+ and a focus on consumers' social media usage and engagement with social media influencer marketing. Their findings also conclude that influencer recommendations have a positive effect on consumers' purchasing decisions.

Additional research done by Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget (2020) examine the responses of consumers to a celebrity or influencer's fit in promoting a specific product through collecting data on identification and credibility variables. Their study finds that influencer endorsements are more effective to consumers than celebrity endorsements (Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget 2020). In this paper, Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget (2020) discover that the trust and perceived relatability of a consumer with an influencer, above all else, is what makes influencer marketing more effective. This work relates to the other works of authors who examine the relationship between consumers, their perceptions of social media influencers, and purchasing decisions (Masuda, Han, and Lee (2022); Chu (2011); Lee and Watkins (2016)).

In a similar study, Dumas and Stough (2021) study the effect that the verification status of influencers have on consumer perceptions and purchasing decisions. Their

research finds that consumers link verified influencers to celebrities and their purchasing decisions are less likely to be affected (Dumas and Stough 2021). More specifically, consumers are less likely to find verified users credible or authentic when promoting products outside of their realm of expertise. Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget (2020) identify the factors that influence consumers to perceive influencers as credible. Dumas and Stough (2021) examine the effects of the verification status of influencers in its relation to consumer's perceiving them as being credible or authentic. The findings of Dumas and Stough (2021), suggests that consumers are more likely to be influenced by unverified social media influencers than those who are verified.

While the aforementioned literature shares interesting insight on the impact of eWOM via social media on consumer purchasing behavior, all do not focus their research on the TikTok platform, nor focus on one age group (Gen Z). Lee and Watkins (2016), for example, focus their research on Youtube, another video sharing platform, vloggers with their participants ranging from the ages of 18-82. Other works such as Kurnaz and Duman (2021), Erkan and Evans (2016), and Bognar et. al (2019) aggregate the effects of eWOM via social media on consumers' buying behavior. The work that is most similar to what this paper investigates is Dirir (2022) which looks into the impact of TikTok influencers on Gen Z purchasing behavior and their brand selection. However, where the research of this paper deviates from Dirir (2022) is that it sets out to study the impact of a TikTok influencer's verification status, the perceived characteristics, and attributes of TikTok influencers and products to determine what drives Gen Z buying behavior in the context of TikTok.

3.) Methodology

Empirical Analysis

This study used an online experiment with a 2x1 between-subject design with Gen Z participants, aged 18-28, who use the TikTok app. Participants looked at a video of a verified TikTok user whose verification status was either revealed or cropped out. The user in the video reviewed the Apple Airpods Max headphones. Participants were randomly assigned to view one of the two videos (with verification badge or without) and then asked to answer questions examining qualities of the influencer and product that would impact their hypothetical decision to purchase. To do this, participants were prompted to fill out an online survey that measured dependent variables, including the likelihood to purchase the product in the video and their willingness to pay for the product in the video. The survey also asked questions on the participants' familiarity with and perceived trustworthiness, attractiveness, and relatability of the TikTok influencer. Additionally, participants were asked to answer questions about the importance of various factors when deciding to make a TikTok influenced purchase in general using Likert scale responses.

Econometric Specification

Existing research examining the impact of eWOM on consumer purchasing behavior have used a variety of models. To investigate the factors of eWOM sources via TikTok on Gen Z's purchasing behavior, I set up my model as follows:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 V_i + X_i \lambda + Z_i \delta + \epsilon_i$$

Where Y_i is the outcome of interest: willingness to buy (WTB) or willingness to pay (WTP) for the good, V_i is the verification status of the TikTok influencer which is 1 if the the verification checkmark is visible in the TikTok video and 0 otherwise, X_i consists of the TikTok user specific perceptions (relatability, trustworthiness, physical attractiveness of TikTok influencer, and the perceived socio-economic status of TikTok influencer), and Z_i is the measure of the general factors that influence TikTok induced purchasing (follower count of TikTok influencer, usefulness, trendiness, and the price of the product).

Like previous studies, this research looks at the effect of variables that have been discussed (trustworthiness, relatability, and physical attractiveness of influencer) with the addition of new variables: price, usefulness, and trendiness of a product, perceived socio-economic status, and follower count of an eWOM source. These variables were chosen to gain additional insight into what drives consumers, Gen Z in this instance, to ultimately purchase what they see online.

Description of Variables and Hypotheses

Verification status of influencer:

The verification badge given to notable figures on social media, acts as a marker to let other users know that the person behind the account is who they say they are. Other benefits of account verification, for social media influencers particularly, include access to reach large companies, negotiating higher pay for brand endorsements, and appearing more trustworthy to those who follow them (Soto 2019). Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget (2020) find that consumers respond more to influencer endorsements than

celebrity endorsements. This is a result of consumers feeling more connected with an influencer than a celebrity. Similarly, Dumas and Stough (2021) find that consumers are less likely to trust an influencer who is verified, linking them to celebrity status, than an influencer who is unverified. Given these two studies, and Gen Z's value of authenticity, I hypothesize that there will be a negative relationship between Gen Z purchasing intentions and verified TikTok influencers. The importance of the verification status of a TikTok user when making a TikTok influenced purchase was measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Not important at all" to "Extremely important."

H1: The verified TikTok influencer will have a negative effect on Gen Z's purchasing intentions.

Price of product:

For many rational or financially conscious consumers, the cost of a product is a determinant of whether or not they will purchase it. In the context of eWOM via social media, followers are exposed to a product an influencer uses or markets and are inclined to purchase it. However, some consumers may be more sensitive to the price of a good than others. Wakefield and Inman (2003) investigate the relationship between the consumption of functional and hedonic goods, income, and social context to a consumer's sensitivity to price. One of their key findings was that consumers tend to be less price sensitive when purchasing hedonic goods (Wakefield and Inman 2003). Additionally, Kurnaz and Duman (2021) look at the impact of eWOM via social media on Gen Z consumer behavior, finding a positive and significant effect on Gen Z conspicuous and materialist consumption. As this work sets out to examine the effect of

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eWOM via TikTok, where the majority of potential consumers are a part of Gen Z, price in this study may not have a significant effect on their purchasing decisions. In this paper, the importance to participants of the price of a product was also measured using a 5-point Likert scale.

H2: Price will not have a significant effect on the purchasing decisions of Gen Z consumers.

Usefulness of product:

A product's usefulness refers to its ability to satisfy the needs of customers (Moldovan, Goldenberg, and Chattopadhyay 2011). Determining the usefulness of a product is subjective to each consumer as they may purchase it for different reasons. Understanding how useful a product is, within the context of this study, could help give more insight into the relationship between Gen Z consumers, TikTok influencers, and their decision to purchase a product. This also suggests that the usefulness of a product, as it applies to the needs or wants of Gen Z consumers, will have a positive effect on their decision to purchase a product. Like the measure of price, the importance of the usefulness of a product on participants' willingness to purchase a product seen on TikTok was measured using a 5-point Likert scale.

H3: The usefulness of a product reviewed on TikTok will have a positive impact on the purchasing decision of Gen Z consumers.

Attractiveness of influencer:

In research done by Lee and Watkins (2018), the attractiveness of a social media personality, physical or social, grows through consumers' frequent interactions with their content. However, attractiveness entails more than physical beauty, also including other skills and qualities of a person that makes them desirable. According to Erdogan (1999) a figure's physical attractiveness has been used as a primary resource to influence consumers' purchasing decisions. Though physical attractiveness is subjective, it is still an important variable to measure in the context of Gen Z purchasing intentions. Additional research by Croes and Bartels (2021) names social identification, the act of one linking themselves with a figure or group, as a motivation for Gen Z purchasing decisions. Through Gen Z consuming TikTok videos of influencers who are considered physically attractive, and their want of achieving a similar lifestyle or look of that influencer, suggests that the physical attractiveness of an influencer will have a positive effect on Gen Z's willingness to purchase a product. Participants' perceptions of the attractiveness of the TikTok user were measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree."

H4: The physical attractiveness of the TikTok influencer will have a positive effect on the purchasing decisions of Gen Z consumers.

Relatability of influencer:

Social media influencers, while they typically have a large following, are not celebrities. The relatability, or sense of connectedness, that a consumer feels between themselves and a social media influencer is another key factor when it comes to

influencing their purchasing decisions. Through consumers' perceptions of an influencer sharing similar qualities as them, they are more likely to align themselves with the ideas, values, and behaviors of that influencer (Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget 2020). Other works such as Masuda, Han, and Lee (2022) look at attitude homophily and mention that it relates to the similarity between people and is rooted in the idea that interactions with those who share similar interests occur more frequently than those who do not share similar interests. Given that TikTok is an algorithm-based app that shows users content that they would be most interested in, users would be exposed to influencers who they relate to. Thus, the relatability of a TikTok influencer would have a positive effect on Gen Z's purchasing decisions. The relatability of the TikTok user in the video was measured using a 5-point Likert scale measuring how much participants agreed or disagreed with 5 statements. The statements refer to whether they perceive themselves to think like the TikTok user, share similar physical characteristics, similar personalities, similar interests and whether purchasing the product would make them feel like they have a similar lifestyle as the TikTok User.

H5: The relatability of the TikTok influencer will have a positive effect on the purchasing decision of Gen Z consumers.

Trustworthiness of influencer:

Trustworthiness, an aspect of credibility, is important in maintaining relationships that consumers have with brands and social media influencers. The trust of consumers in eWOM via social media influencers help to alleviate any worries consumers feel before purchasing a product or service (Dwidienawati et al. 2020). As mentioned prior, social

media influencers are coveted for their perceived expertise in a specific field. Social media influencers are also deemed as more trustworthy given their relatability to their followers and continuous interactions with them (Shcouten, Janssen, and Verspaget 2020; Kim and Kim 2021). Followers having an option to follow their favorite influencers, allow them to frequently keep up with their content and interact with them. Trustworthiness being developed between the frequent interactions of influencers and their followers imply that it positively influences consumer purchasing behavior. Like the previous measure of participant perceptions on relatability of the TikTok user, the trustworthiness of the TikTok user was measured using a 5-point Likert scale for 4 statements. The statements refer to whether they find the TikTok user trustworthy, whether they believe what the TikTok user is saying about the product, whether they think the TikTok user is being themselves and whether the TikTok user was paid to review the product.

H6: The trustworthiness of the influencer will have a positive effect on Gen Z's purchasing decisions.

Trendiness of product:

Social media influencers have the ability to set and promote trends to those who interact with their content. Kurnaz and Duman (2021) examine the conspicuous and materialist consumption of Gen Z as a result of eWOM. Conspicuous consumption is referred to as a concept in which people flaunt their wealth through the goods that they possess. Materialist consumption is referred to as a concept in which an individual values a good above anything else (Kurnaz and Duman 2021). Kurnaz and Duman (2021) find

that materialism has a substantial influence on Gen Z impulse buying behavior. Through

TikTok influencers setting trends, they encourage consumers to purchase what they have.

In the context of this paper, the trendiness of a product refers to a consumer's willingness

to purchase a product as a result of seeing an influencer with it. Given Gen Z's impulsive

purchasing tendencies, it can be implied that the trendiness of a product will have a

positive effect on their decision to purchase. The importance of the trendiness of a

product on participants' decision to purchase a product seen on TikTok was measured

using a 5-point Likert scale.

H7: The trendiness of a product will have a positive effect on Gen Z's purchasing

decisions.

Follower count of influencer:

In addition to an influencer having a verified badge, serving as a marker of

credibility, an influencer's follower count can also influence consumer purchasing

decisions. As perceived opinion leaders, influencers with hundreds of thousands of

followers are capable of shaping the ideas of others on a brand or product on a large scale

(Dwidienawati et al. 2020). In the case of Gen Z and TikTok, Dirir (2022) finds that

70.8% of his 120 participants aged 15 to 25 highly trust TikTok influencer

recommendations about a product or service. He also finds that 94.2% of participants

agreed that a company's image is shaped by an influencer's feedback on their product or

service. The popularity and role of influencers in shaping consumer perceptions of brands

and products suggests that the number of followers an influencer has, positively

influences the purchasing decisions of consumers. Similar to the process measuring the

importance of a TikTok user's verification status, the importance of the follower count of a TikTok user was measured through the use of a 5-point Likert scale.

H8: The number of followers an influencer has will have a positive effect on Gen Z purchasing decisions.

Perceived socio-economic status of influencer:

The perceived socio-economic status of an influencer is worth measuring as it can help to better understand why consumers purchase a product, they see an influencer reviewing. Lee and Watkins (2016) provide interesting insight in regard to influencers influencing consumer's brand perceptions and purchase intentions. They find that the influence of vloggers via YouTube is generated through consumer's perceived similarities with the vloggers and an attraction to the qualities of a vlogger that they lack (Lee and Watkins 2016). In relation to consumer's attraction to desirable traits of influencers, Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget (2020) mention that influencers review products in familiar spaces which can include one's closet space, living room, dining area, etc. The products consumers view in the backgrounds of influencer videos can give consumers a hint of an influencer's socio-economic status. In regards to Gen Z, this would arguably influence their decisions to purchase a product as a means of wanting to live like the influencer or feel as if they live like the influencer, given the work of Kurnaz and Duman (2021). This suggests that the perceived socio-economic status of an influencer will have a positive effect on Gen Z purchasing decisions. The perceived socio-economic status of a TikTok user was measured by their answer to the question "I think this TikTok user makes a lot of money" using a 5-point Likert scale.

H9: The perceived socio-economic status of an influencer will have a positive effect on Gen Z's purchasing decisions.

Sample and Descriptive Statistics

        Prolific, a recruiting website that connects researchers with participants who have relevant characteristics was used to recruit participants for this study. The parameters set for choosing participants were that they 1.) used the TikTok app and 2.) were between the ages of 18-28. Eligible participants were compensated $0.75 cents for approximately 5 minutes of their time. Participants for this study were also recruited via email sent to students at Union College, a small liberal arts college in Schenectady, NY where the study was being conducted. Tables 1 and 2 present the pooled descriptive statistics for the total 576 participants surveyed through the Prolific platform and Union College email.

        The tables include the results of participants who finished the survey and answered the demographic questions in the survey. Key characteristics of the sampled group include a mean age of about 22 years old, with 60 percent of the participants being White, and 83 percent of the participants using TikTok daily for about 1-2 hours. This is consistent with general usage data for TikTok users as the global daily average for TikTok users was a little over an hour and a half (Chan 2022). This is also consistent with data on the gender distribution of users on TikTok which indicate that female users make up about 55 percent of the users in general, with female users continuing to outnumber male users when broken up into different age groups (Statista 2023).

        The statistics for the education level of the participants is also noteworthy. Those who have a four-year degree or some college made up the majority of the those surveyed.

Other research on the demographics of TikTok users noted that those with some college

experience make up most of the users on TikTok, followed by high school graduates,

those with experience less than high school, and then college graduates (Andre 2023).

While the descriptive statistics in our study rank the demographics for the education of

participants differently, it is not far off the existing data.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of participant demographics (N=576)

	Mean/Proportion	Min.	Max.	SD
Age	22.48	18.00	28.00	2.62
Gender				
Male	30%			
Female	66%			
Non-binary/Third gender	4%			
Prefer not to say	1%			
Ethnicity				
White	60%			
Black or African American	8%			
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.2%			
Asian	12%			
Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin	14%			
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.4%			
Other	4%			
Prefer not to say	1%			
Income Categories				
<$60,000	47%			
$60,000-$120,000	40%			
>$120,000	13%			
Education				
Less than high school	1%			
High school graduate	14%			
Some college	34%			
2-year degree	7%			
4-year degree	36%			
Professional degree	1%			
Doctorate degree	1%			
Master's degree	6%			
Prefer not to say	0.4%			

Table 2: TikTok usage of participants (N=576)

	Proportion
Usage	
Daily	83%
Weekly	14%
Monthly	3%
Daily Usage	
<30 minutes	16%
~1-2 hours	58%
3-4 hours	20%
More than 4 hours	6%
Weekly Usage	
<30 minutes	31%
~1-2 hours	51%
3-4 hours	17%
More than 4 hours	2%
Monthly Usage	
<30 minutes	38%
~1-2 hours	38%
3-4 hours	15%
More than 4 hours	8%

Table 3 shows the measures for the independent variables (X_i) measuring participants' familiarity with and perceptions of the TikTok user in the video using a 5-point Likert scale. Similarly, Table 4 displays the measures for the independent variables (Z_i) measuring the factors that influence TikTok induced purchasing. Surprisingly, in Table 3 with the categories measuring relatability and familiarity, more than half of the surveyed participants were not familiar with the TikTok user and found her unrelatable. Noticeable statistics in Table 4 show that recommendations from verified users and the number of followers a user has are not important when deciding to purchase a product. Additionally, in Table 4, the majority of participants were in agreement that the

usefulness and the price of the product reviewed in a TikTok video is extremely important before deciding whether or not to purchase.

Table 3: Participant familiarity with and perceptions of the TikTok user in video (N=576)

Familiarity	Not familiar at all	Slightly familiar	Moderately familiar	Very familiar	Extremely familiar
How familiar are you with the TikTok user in the video?	60%	12%	9%	10%	9%
Perceptions	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Physical Attractiveness					
I think this TikTok user is physically attractive	6%	6%	14%	40%	34%
Perceived Socio-economic status (SES)					
I think this TikTok user makes a lot of money	1%	4%	13%	37%	46%
Relatability					
This TikTok user and I think alike	25%	31%	17%	25%	2%
This TikTok user and I share similar physical characteristics	51%	25%	10%	14%	1%
This TikTok user and I share the same interest(s)	20%	28%	24%	25%	3%
This TikTok user and I have similar personalities	38%	33%	16%	11%	1%
Purchasing the product in the video would make me feel as if I live a similar lifestyle as the TikTok user	37%	29%	14%	17%	3%
Trustworthiness					
I find this TikTok user to be trustworthy	17%	26%	35%	21%	2%
I believe what this TikTok user says about the product	11%	21%	30%	35%	4%
I think this TikTok user is being themselves	10%	20%	21%	41%	8%
I think this TikTok user was paid to review this product	6%	13%	14%	34%	33%

Table 4: Factors that affect participant purchasing decisions

	Not important at all	Slightly important	Moderately important	Very important	Extremely important
Price of product	1%	3%	7%	42%	48%
Verified user recommendation	42%	21%	20%	14%	3%
Trendiness of product	30%	30%	22%	14%	5%
Usefulness of product	2%	2%	8%	39%	50%
Follower count of user	54%	25%	14%	4%	2%

Table 5 displays the descriptive statistics by the verified video treatment for 469 participants. The results in the table show that participants were more willing to buy the product and had a greater willingness to purchase the product when they viewed the verified video. Participant perceptions of the TikTok influencer were also greater for those who saw the verified video, though not by a large amount. The statistics measuring the physical attractiveness of the TikTok user in the video was the same for participants who saw one video or the other.

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics for by Verified Video Treatment

	Unverified Video		Verified Video	
	Mean/Prop.	**SD**	**Mean/Prop.**	**SD**
WTB	0.60	.49	0.65	0.48
WTP	148.19	128.84	158.07	127.98
Relatability	2.22	0.86	2.26	0.81
Trustworthiness	2.93	0.87	2.96	0.93
Perceived SES	0.81	0.39	0.84	0.37
Physical Attractiveness	0.73	0.44	0.73	0.44

4.) Results

Regression Models

Tables 6 shows the results of the regressions for the dependent variable, willingness to buy (WTB) the product shown in the video. Column (1) includes only the dummy variable for whether the participant saw the video with the verification status visible, column (2) adds the demographic and TikTok usage variables to the dummy, column (3) adds the perceptions of the TikTok user to the dummy, column (4) adds the factors important for TikTok induced purchases to the dummy and column (5) includes all variables. The results in Table 6 show that the presence of the user's verification status had no statistically significant effect on participants' WTB, however it remained positive at varying magnitudes as additional control variables were included. This finding suggests that there is no significant relationship between user verification status and a consumer's willingness to purchase a product.

In columns (3) & (5), both the relatable and trustworthy dummy variables were statistically significant at the 0.01 level but negatively correlated to participants' willingness to buy the good. In column (5), controlling for all variables, an increase in the relatability of the TikTok user decreases users' willingness to purchase the product in the video by 0.2 percentage points on average. In the same column, an increase in the trustworthiness of the TikTok user, decreases users' willingness to buy the product in the video by about 0.1 percentage points on average. Other variables, such as the importance factors trendiness and follower count, in column (4), are negative and statistically significant at the 0.05 and 0.1 levels respectively.

Table 6: Effects of demographic information, TikTok user verification status, TikTok user specific and importance factors on WTB

VARIABLES	(1) WTB	(2) WTB	(3) WTB	(4) WTB	(5) WTB
Verified Vid (=1)	0.0524	0.0350	0.0597	0.0649	0.0447
	(0.045)	(0.048)	(0.040)	(0.045)	(0.042)
Age		-0.0021			-0.0014
		(0.011)			(0.010)
Female		-0.0321			0.1088**
		(0.051)			(0.049)
White		0.0089			0.0663
		(0.048)			(0.044)
Degree		0.1031*			0.0858*
		(0.055)			(0.048)
Income		0.0372			0.0303
		(0.034)			(0.030)
Daily		-0.0036			0.0391
		(0.065)			(0.057)
Familiar			0.0681		0.0227
			(0.044)		(0.049)
Attractive			-0.0209		-0.0176
			(0.049)		(0.051)
Perceived SES			-0.0029		-0.0366
			(0.055)		(0.059)
Relatable			-0.1945***		-0.2129***
			(0.031)		(0.034)
Trustworthy			-0.1076***		-0.0981***
			(0.027)		(0.029)
Verified User				-0.0381	0.0174
				(0.054)	(0.051)
Trendiness				-0.1118**	-0.0629
				(0.055)	(0.055)
Followers				-0.0999*	-0.0227
				(0.053)	(0.050)
Usefulness				0.0058	0.0319
				(0.048)	(0.046)
Price				0.0181	-0.0337
				(0.049)	(0.047)
Constant	0.5991***	0.5517**	1.3393***	0.7274***	1.2394***
	(0.032)	(0.262)	(0.084)	(0.058)	(0.251)
Observations	463	424	463	463	424
R-squared	0.003	0.015	0.228	0.043	0.263

Standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 7 displays the results of the regression results for the dependent variable, willingness to pay (WTP), for the product in the video. The results in Table 7 show that the presence of the user's verification status had no statistically significant effect on participants' WTP, however it remained positive at varying magnitudes as additional control variables were included. This finding suggests that there is no significant relationship between user verification status and a consumer's willingness to purchase a product. Furthermore, the results in Table 6 provides evidence for the hypotheses H5, H6, H7, given that there was some significance for the dummy variables assessing relatability, trustworthiness, and the trendiness importance factor. In column (3), controlling for participant perceptions of the TikTok user, participants who found the TikTok user relatable were more likely to pay for the product in the video, on average, by 22 percentage points, and 32 percentage points in column 5, controlling for all variables.

Some noticeable differences in Tables 6 and Table 7 can be seen in columns (2) & (5) with the Female and White dummy variables. In Table 6, column (2), controlling for demographic variables, the White dummy variable was negative and statistically significant at the 0.01 level. On average, those who identified as White were less willing to pay for the product in the video by 47 percentage points. The magnitude of the coefficient of the White variable decreased even more when all variables were controlled for in column (5), including the Female variable which was now statistically significant at the 0.01 level. In Table 5, both the Female and White dummy variables were insignificant in column (2), with the Female dummy becoming significant at the 0.05 level in column (5). Ultimately, the participants who identified as Female were willing to buy the product in the video by 0.1 percentage points on average.

Table 7: Effects of demographic information, TikTok user verification status, TikTok user specific and importance factors on WTP

VARIABLES	(1) WTP	(2) WTP	(3) WTP	(4) WTP	(5) WTP
Verified Vid (=1)	8.5925	11.7572	7.0147	4.3981	9.0436
	(11.980)	(12.530)	(11.752)	(11.970)	(12.128)
Age		-1.5242			-2.0700
		(2.897)			(2.824)
Female		-7.8110			-38.8740***
		(13.382)			(14.264)
White		-47.2069***			-61.1522***
		(12.716)			(12.652)
Degree		-1.4595			1.5286
		(14.349)			(13.954)
Income		21.1512**			17.7103**
		(8.975)			(8.763)
Daily		20.8689			15.5238
		(16.957)			(16.500)
Familiar			8.6320		18.6089
			(12.991)		(14.054)
Attractive			14.5502		23.3173
			(14.287)		(14.827)
Perceived SES			4.0256		11.2641
			(16.303)		(16.878)
Relatable			22.8030**		33.0080***
			(9.182)		(9.808)
Trustworthy			9.0405		6.7145
			(8.138)		(8.377)
Verified User				2.1982	-5.3270
				(14.510)	(14.831)
Trendiness				27.1454*	11.1698
				(14.794)	(15.865)
Followers				-8.2602	-17.9683
				(14.150)	(14.535)
Usefulness				-11.0850	-9.9282
				(12.976)	(13.225)
Price				-22.6774*	-15.1374
				(13.142)	(13.406)
Constant	148.7117***	165.7146**	54.2765**	150.5902***	104.3321
	(8.635)	(68.782)	(24.781)	(15.548)	(72.423)
Observations	462	424	462	462	424
R-squared	0.001	0.052	0.052	0.025	0.145

Standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 8 depicts the regression results measuring participants' willingness to pay for the good in the TikTok video for the participants who indicated that they would buy the product. A noticeable difference in this table compared to Table 7 is that the size of the coefficient on the verified video dummy decreased compared to the coefficients in Table 7, however the values remain insignificant. In column (3) of Table 8, controlling for the participants' perceptions of the TikTok user, the trustworthiness of the user in the video became significant at the 0.05 level. This finding suggests that participants who find the TikTok user trustworthy were willing to pay 16 dollars more on average for the product in the video.

Columns (4) & (5) in Table 8 show a change in the significance level for the coefficients measuring the importance of a TikTok user's follower count on participants' willingness to pay for the good reviewed in a TikTok video. In Table 8, columns (4) & (5), controlling for importance factors and all factors respectively, the follower count importance variable was now significant at the 0.05 level. In column (4), indicating that the follower count of a TikTok user is important in making a TikTok influenced purchase decreases participants' willingness to pay for the product in the TikTok video by 32 dollars on average.

Table 8: Effects of demographic information, TikTok user verification status, TikTok user specific and importance factors on WTP if WTB=1

VARIABLES	(1) WTP	(2) WTP	(3) WTP	(4) WTP	(5) WTP
Verified Vid (=1)	-2.2687	1.2910	-3.9302	-6.2631	-0.7956
	(11.925)	(12.292)	(11.852)	(12.004)	(12.304)
Age		-4.7494*			-4.0260
		(2.824)			(2.836)
Female		4.2479			-11.3058
		(12.853)			(14.674)
White		-39.1827***			-44.9135***
		(12.404)			(12.799)
Degree		13.8165			7.3609
		(14.463)			(14.646)
Income		17.7289**			18.4254**
		(8.488)			(8.542)
Daily		17.5830			16.7854
		(16.391)			(16.612)
Familiar			-7.2764		-9.0930
			(13.428)		(14.772)
Attractive			19.6052		22.2657
			(13.404)		(13.817)
Perceived SES			22.9203		17.2869
			(16.164)		(16.781)
Relatable			0.2775		9.0699
			(9.866)		(10.712)
Trustworthy			16.4775**		10.0073
			(8.025)		(8.297)
Verified User				12.2921	16.1096
				(14.208)	(14.677)
Trendiness				27.2629*	17.9604
				(14.196)	(15.341)
Followers				-32.7716**	-37.5449**
				(14.408)	(15.074)
Usefulness				2.6483	4.3197
				(12.828)	(13.158)
Price				-9.0935	-10.4416
				(12.966)	(13.259)
Constant	121.9098***	197.6109***	48.7229**	116.0490***	126.5849*
	(8.761)	(66.853)	(24.467)	(14.492)	(74.313)
Observations	289	262	289	289	262
R-squared	0.000	0.067	0.039	0.028	0.128

Standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

5.) Discussion

In the context of existing literature focusing on consumer perceptions of influencers and the effect of their reviews on consumer purchasing decisions, the findings presented in the previous tables are consistent in some cases and inconsistent in others with the existing literature. Similar to this study which measures consumer perceptions of a TikTok user as a factor in consumers' decisions to purchase or willingness to pay for a product, Masuda, Han, and Lee (2022) find a positive relationship between the trustworthiness, attitude homophily, and physical attractiveness of Youtubers on consumer purchasing intentions. In Table 6, the variables measuring relatability and trustworthiness were significant and negative which is inconsistent with the previous literature and rejects H5 and H6. However, in Table 7, columns (3) & (5), the coefficients for the relatability variable were positive and significant at the 0.05 and 0,01 levels respectively, providing evidence for H5. And in Table 8, column (3), the trustworthiness variable was positive and statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

Support for H7 can be seen in Tables 7 and 8 in column (4) with the Trendiness variable being both positive and significant at the 0.1 level. In Table 6 H7 is rejected as the coefficient for the Trendiness variable is negative and statistically significant at the 0.05 level. These regression results suggests that the importance factor of trendiness is positively correlated with participants' willingness to purchase the product in the video controlling for other importance factors. And the results also suggests that the trendiness of a product is negatively correlated with participants' willingness to buy the product in the video.

In addition to the literature looking at the impact of a user's verification status on consumers' purchasing intentions, the findings of Dumas and Stough (2022) suggests that consumers are less likely to relate, and trust verified users opposed to unverified users on Instagram. However, the data in Table 5 shows that the participants who saw the verified video considered the TikTok user to be more relatable and trustworthy than in comparison to the results of those who saw the unverified video. There was no significant difference in the statistics for Table 5, however, it provides interesting insight into how verified users on TikTok are perceived versus verified user on Instagram.

Tables 6 & 8 provide evidence that rejects H8. In Table 6, column (4), the variable measuring the importance of a TikTok user's follower account was negative and statistically significant at the 0.1 level. In Table 8, columns (4) & (5), the same coefficient was negative and statistically significant but at the 0.05 level. These findings imply that the more followers a TikTok user has, participants are less willing to purchase or buy the product being reviewed in the video. And these results are also inconsistent with studies such as that of Dwidienawati et al. (2020) that suggests a positive relationship between the number of followers a user has and consumers' purchasing intentions. Regression results in Table 7, column (4) reject H2 as the variable measuring the importance of price in participant's willingness to pay is negative and statistically significant at the 0.1 level. H1, H3, H4, and H9 were neither accepted nor rejected given the results of the regression models.

Implications

Implications of this study imply that the verification status of a TikTok user is not an important determinant when it comes to Gen Z's willingness to buy or purchase a product they see reviewed. To check for any overlap in the variables being measured, a regression interacting the "Verified User" and "Verified Vid" terms was created controlling for all variables. The results showed no change in significance for the interaction terms, but the main treatment dummy remained positive for both WTB and WTP. This finding further suggests that the verification status of a TikTok user is not a significant factor for Gen Z consumers when deciding to buy a product they see on TikTok.

Surprisingly, the factors that were more indicative of participants' willingness to pay for and buy the reviewed product has to do with their ethnicity, gender, perceptions of the TikTok user in terms of relatability, trustworthiness, and importance factors of trendiness and the follower count of the TikTok user. In an effort to understand the significance of gender and ethnicity within the context of this study, a regression interacting the "Female" and "White" variables was created, in addition to controlling for all variables. The results of the regression showed a negative and statistically significant coefficient interaction term at 0.01 level for WTP and a positive and statistically significant coefficient of interaction term at the 0.05 level for WTB. This indicated that white women were more willing than white men and nonwhite women to buy the product but willing to pay less for the product.

6.) *Conclusion*

The findings of this study suggest that variables measuring the demographics of participants, along with participant perceptions of the TikTok user and product had more of an impact on their WTB and WTP than the verification status of the user. For example, in Table 7 column (5), both the Female and White variables were negative and statistically significant at the 0.01 level controlling for all variables. In Table 6, column (5) the Female variable was positive and statistically significant. And in Table 8, column (5), the White variable was statistically significant and negative, controlling for all variables. The variable measuring household income was also positive and statistically significant in Tables 7 & 8, columns (2) & (5) respectively. These variables, in addition to the variables measuring participant perceptions of the TikTok user and importance factors, have shown to be more important indicators when analyzing Gen Z's consumption behavior on TikTok.

Limitations

While this study focuses on a new area of literature dealing with Gen Z consumption behavior and social media verification, more work needs to be done to understand what aspects of an eWOM source Gen Z responds most to. First, this paper looked at only one type of social media, TikTok. There was not much work discussing the phenomenon of TikTok induced purchasing and I wanted to understand influencer marketing within the context of this app. Second, the strict age range limit of the participants, which was 18-28, limited those of older generations who may have responded differently to the treatment.

Additionally, there was only one TikTok user used in this study to measure the impact of user verification status on Gen Z's purchasing decisions. Not all participants may have been familiar with the TikTok user chosen for the study which could have influenced their perceptions, WTB, and WTP. As TikTok is an algorithm-based app, users will often see content in which they are most interested in, and so may be more influenced in real life than they were in the context of this study.

Future Research

To expand on this current research, the effect of influencer verification on different social media sites can be explored. Additionally, the effect on different product types such as clothing or beauty products that are reasonably priced, rather than an expensive electronic good could contribute to this emerging literature. Those who may have been familiar with the product reviewed in this study could have had that background knowledge which affected their willingness to purchase the good. In addition to recruiting participants who are users of a particular social media app, finding participants whose interests align with the products being studied would also potentially give more accurate insights.

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