

Research Article

HOW INFLUENCER CHARACTERISTICS INFLUENCE ON GEN Z AUDIENCES' PURCHASE INTENTIONS THROUGH AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION: THE CASE OF VLOGGER KHOAI LANG THANG

Thi Hong Yen Dao^{1,2} and *Thi Le Trinh Dinh^{1,2}

¹International University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

²Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of influencer characteristics including physical attractiveness, social attractiveness, and attitude homophily on Generation Z audiences' purchase intentions, with a focus on the mediating role of audience participation. First, we investigate the direct effects of these three influencer characteristics on audiences' purchase intentions. Subsequently, we investigate how audience participation mediates these relationships. Data were collected through an online survey conducted in Ho Chi Minh City, involving 308 Gen Z respondents who follow food industry influencers, particularly the vlogger Khoai Lang Thang. Using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), the findings reveal that physical attractiveness and attitude homophily have significant positive effects on purchase intentions, whereas social attractiveness does not. Furthermore, audience participation fully mediates the relationship between physical attractiveness and purchase intentions and partially mediates the link between attitude homophily and purchase intentions. The implications and limitations of the study are discussed in the last section.

Keywords: physical attractiveness, social attractiveness, attitude homophily, audience participation, purchase intention.

INTRODUCTION

In today's digital landscape, social media plays a pivotal role in shaping consumer purchase intentions, particularly among Generation Z (Gen Z). According to the *Digital 2024 Global Overview Report* by We Are Social and Melt water (2024), users spend more than two hours daily on social platforms, and 45% of Gen Z rely on influencer recommendations when making purchase decisions, according to GWI report (2024). As such, Gen Z is increasingly recognized as a powerful consumer segment due to their digital nativeness and constant engagement with social media.

In urban centers such as Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnamese Gen Z frequently engages with platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram for entertainment, lifestyle exploration, and food-related decision-making (National Restaurant News, 2024). A recent report revealed that 73% of Gen Z and millennials have chosen a food item based on a social media recommendation, underscoring the persuasive impact of digital content on food purchase intentions (National Restaurant News, 2024). In Vietnam, particularly in Ho Chi Minh City, food-related content produced by influencers has emerged as a significant driver of consumer behavior (e.g., Luong & Ho, 2023). Among the most influential actors in this context are key opinion leaders (KOLs), who serve as trusted sources of information and inspiration for Gen Z consumers (Liu & Zheng, 2024). KOLs possess various personal traits, referred to as influencer characteristics that can shape audience participation and purchase intentions (Zhao *et al.*, 2024). Influencer characteristics refer to the personal attributes that make social media influencers appealing and persuasive to their audience (Nguyen & Vo, 2022). These typically include physical attractiveness (i.e., visual appeal), social attractiveness

(i.e., likability and friendliness), and attitude homophily (i.e., shared values and beliefs) (Mohamed, Gadiman, & Jaafar, 2025). Prior research has demonstrated that each of these dimensions positively influences followers' purchase intentions (Liu & Zheng, 2024; Mohamed *et al.*, 2025).

Although KOL-based marketing is increasingly prevalent in Vietnam, empirical research on its impact, especially concerning influencer characteristics, remains limited in the context of Gen Z's food-related purchase intentions. Moreover, existing studies (e.g., Mohamed, Gadiman, & Jaafar, 2025) have examined trust or influencer credibility as mediators, thereby emphasizing cognitive perceptions over behavioral engagement. Meanwhile, audience participation, defined as the degree of audience involvement with digital content (Luoma-Aho *et al.*, 2019), offers a more interaction-centered perspective on how Gen Z engages with influencers and how such engagement shapes purchase intentions, but lack of research investigates the mediating mechanism of audience participation in the effects of influencer characteristics and audiences' purchase intentions. Therefore, this study introduces audience participation as a mediator which encompassing both passive and active forms of engagement. Defined as the degree of audience involvement with digital content (Luoma-Aho *et al.*, 2019), audience participation

This study aims to investigate how three influencer attributes including physical attractiveness, social attractiveness, and attitude homophily affect food purchase intentions among Gen Z in the context of social media, with audience participation as the mediating factor. The research employs the case of *Khoai Lang Thang*, a prominent Vietnamese food and travel vlogger (Nguyen, Le, Leenders, & Poolsawat, 2024). By examining both direct and indirect effects, this study contributes to the influencer marketing literature by offering a deeper understanding of the interaction dynamics that drive Gen Z consumer behavior in a localized context.

*Corresponding Author: Thi Le Trinh Dinh

¹International University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

²Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, a growing body of empirical research has examined how social media influencers affect purchase intention. Studies (Liu & Zheng, 2024; Mohamed, Gadiman, & Jaafar, 2025) indicate that influencer characteristics, particularly physical attractiveness, social attractiveness, and attitude homophily, play a crucial role in shaping followers' perceptions and subsequent food-related decisions. For instance, Liu and Zheng (2024) found that physical attractiveness significantly enhances brand credibility and purchase intention, especially among younger demographics who are highly active on social media. Similarly, Mohamed, Gadiman, and Jaafar (2025) showed that social attractiveness and attitude homophily positively influence message credibility and followers' purchase intentions through the mechanism of trust.

Audience participation encompasses various reactions to content such as likes, dislikes, comments, shares, and subscriptions (Luoma-Aho *et al.*, 2019). On social media platforms, these behaviors reflect not only passive consumption but also active cognitive and emotional engagement with an influencer's content (Leung *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, high levels of audience participation have been shown to significantly increase purchase intention, particularly among Gen Z consumers who often rely on peer-like validation in their decision-making (Leung *et al.*, 2022). This suggests that audience participation could serve as a mediating factor in the relationship between influencer characteristics and consumers' purchase intentions.

While prior studies have contributed valuable insights into the effects of influencer characteristics on purchase intention, there remains a lack of research examining audience participation as a mediating mechanism, especially in the context of food marketing targeted at Gen Z in Vietnam. This study addresses that gap by empirically assessing how physical attractiveness, social attractiveness, and attitude homophily influence food purchase intention, with audience participation as the mediating mechanism. The analysis focuses on the case of *Khoai Lang Thang*, a prominent Vietnamese food and travel influencer.

The theoretical foundation for this study is drawn from two influential frameworks in psychology and communication: Similarity-Attraction Theory and Communicators and Persuasion Theory. These frameworks offer a conceptual basis for understanding how influencer characteristics shape audience participation and ultimately influence purchase intention in the digital environment.

The Similarity-Attraction Theory, developed by Byrne (1971), posits that individuals are more likely to be attracted to and persuaded by others who share similar values, attitudes, or beliefs. Within the context of social media, this is particularly relevant to attitude homophily, which describes perceived alignment between influencers and audiences' values and beliefs. Gen Z consumers often gravitate toward influencers who reflect their own identities and lifestyles, fostering stronger engagement and greater receptivity to persuasive messages, thereby enhancing purchase intentions.

The Communicators and Persuasion Theory, also known as the Yale Attitude Change Model (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953), asserts that the effectiveness of a persuasive message depends largely on communicator characteristics. Credibility, physical attractiveness, and likability (social attractiveness) significantly affect message reception. These concepts directly support the inclusion of physical attractiveness and social attractiveness as focal influencer characteristics in this study. An influencer perceived as both visually

appealing and socially likable is often regarded as credible and trustworthy, thereby increasing the persuasive impact of their content. Integrating these two theories enables a comprehensive understanding of how influencers' personal characteristics (source variables) interact with audience participation to shape purchase intention. This study extends these theoretical foundations by incorporating audience participation—manifested through likes, shares, and comments—as a mediating variable that bridges perception and action. The resulting conceptual model links influencer characteristics, audience participation, and food purchase intention among Vietnamese Gen Z consumers.

HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Wiedmann & von Mettenheim (2021) define physical attractiveness as possessing facial or body features that are aesthetically pleasant and argue that such attractiveness significantly enhances audience participation in influencer content. In the context of social media platforms, physical attractiveness encompasses traits such as facial symmetry, grooming, and overall visual appeal (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Jin and Phua (2021) further emphasize that Gen Z consumers, who are highly visually oriented, are more likely to engage with physically attractive influencers.

Physical attractiveness is among the most extensively studied influencer characteristics in social media marketing (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2021). According to Kim (2022), visually appealing influencers effectively capture attention, stimulate emotional engagement, and enhance the perceived quality of their messages. Physical attractiveness has been shown to have a direct positive impact on audience participation (Kim, 2022). Moreover, empirical evidence further indicates that physical attractiveness significantly influences purchase intentions in food-related advertising (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Therefore, we propose that:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Physical attractiveness of media influencers' food advertising positively affects the audiences' purchase intentions.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Physical attractiveness of media influencers' food advertising positively affects audience participation.

Social attractiveness refers to the extent to which an individual is perceived as friendly, pleasant, and interpersonally appealing by others (McCroskey & McCain, 1974). In the context of influencer marketing, social attractiveness reflects how approachable, likable, and socially engaging an influencer appears to their audience (Yuan & Lou, 2022).

Social attractiveness fosters perceived similarity and emotional closeness, which in turn builds trust and strengthens parasocial relationships between the influencer and their followers (Lee & Eastin, 2021). Social attractiveness has been shown to significantly enhance audience participation by encouraging followers to engage with content through likes, comments, and shares (Yuan & Lou, 2022). When influencers are perceived as socially attractive, followers are more likely to interact with their content and become emotionally involved (Lee & Eastin, 2021). Lee and Eastin (2021) demonstrated that parasocial relationships mediate the relationship between social attractiveness and behavioral outcomes such as purchase intention. Therefore, we propose that:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Social attractiveness of social media influencers' food advertising positively affects the audiences' purchase intentions.

Hypothesis 5 (H5): Social attractiveness of social media influencers' food advertising positively affects audience participation.

Attitude homophily refers as the perceived similarity in values, beliefs, and preferences between an influencer and their followers (McCroskey, McCroskey, and Richmond, 2006). On social media platforms, attitude homophily enhances the feeling of psychological closeness, as followers perceive that the influencer "thinks like me" or "understands me" (Hwang & Zhang, 2021). This perception of shared worldview significantly shapes consumer responses to influencer content (McCroskey *et al.*, 2006).

In addition to its effect on audience participation, attitude homophily has also been shown to directly impact purchase intention. Hwang and Zhang (2021) demonstrated that attitude homophily leads to higher levels of brand congruence, making consumers feel that the promoted brand fits their identity. When consumers perceive such congruence, they are more inclined to internalize product claims and convert engagement into actual purchase intention (Hwang & Zhang, 2021). It is proposed that:

Hypothesis 3 (H3): The attitude homophily between the audience and the social media influencers' food advertising positively affects the audiences' purchase intentions.

Hypothesis 6 (H6): The attitude homophily of social media influencers' food advertising positively affects audience participation. Audience participation refers to audience reactions such as likes, comments, shares, and subscriptions, representing both passive consumption and active cognitive-emotional engagement with influencer content (Luoma-Aho *et al.*, 2019; Leung, 2023). When influencers are perceived as physically attractive, socially appealing, or attitudinally similar, followers are more likely to engage with their content. Such participation reflects trust, strengthens the follower-influencer connection, and acts as social proof, thereby increasing message resonance and the likelihood of purchase intention (Leung, 2023). Integrating the Communicators and Persuasion theory with the Similarity-Attraction theory offers a comprehensive understanding of how influencers' personal characteristics interact with audience participation to influence purchase intentions. Therefore, in influencer marketing, audience participation can serve as a key mediating factor between influencer characteristics and purchase intention. We therefore propose that:

Hypothesis 7 (H7): Audience participation in the content of social media influencers' food advertising positively affects the audiences' purchase intentions.

Hypothesis 8a (H8a): Audience participation mediates the relationship between the physical attractiveness of social media influencers' food advertising and the audiences' purchase intentions.

Hypothesis 8b (H8b): Audience participation mediates the relationship between the social attractiveness of social media influencers' food advertising and the audiences' purchase intentions.

Hypothesis 8c (H8c): Audience participation mediates the relationship between the attitude homophily of social media influencers' food advertising and the audience's purchase intentions.

The conceptual model presented in Figure 1 highlights how physical attractiveness, social attractiveness, and attitude homophily influence audience participation and influence purchase intention in the context of social media food reviewers. All these concepts and the hypothesized relationships are presented in the next sections.

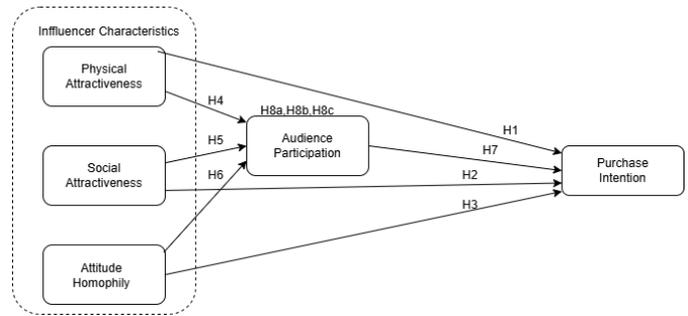


Figure 1: Research model

RESEARCH METHODS

Sampling and data collection

This study employed a purposive sampling approach to efficiently reach the target population of young individuals aged 18 to 28 residing in Ho Chi Minh City. The screening questions are designed to filter and categorize respondents accurately. For instance, asking "Are you currently residing in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC)?" ensures that only individuals living in HCMC are included, aligning with the study's focus on this geographic area. Additionally, "What is your age?" filters respondents into the target age range of 18-28, which is crucial for analyzing the impact of influencer marketing on young consumers. This non-probability approach enables data collection from participants who are readily available and willing to participate. Moreover, this strategy helps align the sample with the study's objective of investigating how social media influencers shape food purchasing intention of digitally audience participation in urban areas of Vietnam. To enhance the study's relevance, the survey reference popular local influencers, such as Vlogger Khoai Lang Thang, who is well-known for his engaging food content and substantial following among this age group. The survey was distributed online through Facebook, a widely used platform among the target demographic, enabling broad outreach and rapid data collection. Data for this research were obtained via an online questionnaire through an online survey, designed to capture the perceptions and behaviors of individuals regarding social media food reviewers. The original English version of the questionnaire was translated into Vietnamese to ensure linguistic clarity and relevance for the target audience. The questionnaire was carefully designed and adapted from previous research related to social media influence and consumer behavior, ensuring relevance to the study's focus on social media food reviewers. After translating the questionnaire from English to Vietnamese, it was thoroughly reviewed by experts in social science research. Additionally, feedback was sought from social media users within the target demographic, ensuring that the questions were clear and easily understandable to eliminate potential misunderstandings.

Measurement scale

A five-point Likert-scale was applied to measure the variables in the research model, from 1 representing strongly disagree to 5 for strongly agree. All measurement items were adopted from previous empirical research and had been extensively used by many scholars.

Table 1. Measurement Items

Constructs	Items	Observed Variables	Sources
Physical Attractiveness	PA1	I think Vlogger Khoai Lang Thang is quite handsome	Sokolova and Kefi (2020)

	PA2	I find Vlogger Khoai Lang Thang very attractive physically	
Social Attractiveness	SA1	I think Vlogger Khoai Lang Thang could be a friend of mine	Lou and Kim (2019)
	SA2	I would enjoy having a casual conversation with Vlogger Khoai Lang Thang	
Attitude Homophily	AH1	Vlogger Khoai Lang Thang thinks like me	Jin and Muqaddam (2021)
	AH2	Vlogger Khoai Lang Thang shares my values	
Audience Participation	AP1	I was heavily into the Vlogger Khoai Lang Thang's video.	Munnukka et al. (2019)
	AP2	I perceived a high level of participation in interacting with the Vlogger Khoai Lang Thang's video.	
	AP3	I was very much involved with Vlogger Khoai Lang Thang's video.	
Purchase Intention	PI1	I intend to explore the products promoted by the Vlogger Khoai Lang Thang in more detail	Plotkina and Munzel (2016)
	PI2	I will take into consideration purchasing the products promoted by the Vlogger Khoai Lang Thang.	
	PI3	I would purchase the products promoted by Vlogger Khoai Lang Thang in the future	Choi and Lee (2019)
	PI4	I would encourage people close to me to buy the products promoted by Vlogger Khoai Lang Thang	

30.8%, while 14.0% are self-employed or freelancers, and 11.0% are general laborers. A minority (3.2%) reported working in other professions. This variation in employment suggests that participants have differing levels of disposable income, work-related constraints, and consumer habits, all of which could shape their interaction with shopping environments and services.

In terms of content engagement, over half of the participants (52.6%) reported viewing Khoai Lang Thang's content several times per week, while 20.5% watch his videos several times a month. A smaller segment (4.5%) engages with his content daily, and 22.4% view it less than once per month. These figures suggest a relatively high level of interaction with the influencer's media, indicating sustained audience interest.

When examining the platforms through which participants typically access the vlogger's content, Facebook stands out as the leading channel (51.9%), followed by YouTube (27.3%) and TikTok (20.5%). Instagram was minimally utilized (0.3%). This distribution underscores Facebook's dominant role in digital content dissemination among this demographic.

To further verify internal consistency, two specific indicators are examined: the corrected item-total correlation and the Cronbach's Alpha if the item is deleted (Hajjar, 2018; Vaske, Beaman & Sponarski, 2017). A corrected item-total correlation above 0.3 indicates that an item contributes positively to the overall consistency of the construction (Yusoff, Rahim & Yaacob, 2010). Additionally, if the Cronbach's Alpha value increases when a particular item is removed, it suggests that the item may weaken the overall reliability and should be considered for elimination to enhance the construct's internal consistency (George & Mallery, 2018; Cho & Kim, 2015).

Table 2: Reliability test

Constructs	Cronbach's Alpha	Measurement Items	Corrected ItemTotal Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
Physical attractiveness (PA)	0.835	PA1	0.718	
		PA2	0.718	
Social attractiveness (SA)	0.784	SA1	0.650	
		SA2	0.650	
Attitude homophily (AH)	0.850	AH1	0.739	
		AH2	0.739	
Audience participation (PA)	0.640	AP1	0.718	
		AP3	0.718	
Purchase intention (PI)	0.874	PI1	0.686	0.859
		PI2	0.781	0.820
		PI3	0.767	0.823
		PI4	0.715	0.850

As shown in Table 2, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all constructs assessed in this study range from 0.640 to 0.874, indicating acceptable to strong internal reliability. Most values exceed the commonly accepted minimum threshold of 0.70, supporting the reliability of the constructs. Moreover, the corrected item-total correlation values for all items are above 0.30, indicating adequate internal consistency among the scale items. Notably, there is no evidence that removing any item would improve the reliability of its construct, suggesting that all items contribute meaningfully to the measurement. Overall, these results demonstrate that the

RESULTS

Participant characteristics

A total of 308 questionnaires were administered to the intended target population between March 2025 and April 2025, all of which were fully completed and returned. Each response was verified as valid and suitable for analysis. This reflects a perfect response rate of 100%, demonstrating complete participation from the respondents. A total of 308 individuals participated in the survey. The gender breakdown According to the data, 60.7% of the participants were female, whereas 39.3% were male, indicating a gender imbalance in the sample. Although gender distribution is somewhat uneven, the presence of both groups ensures that the study captures diverse perspectives across gender lines.

Regarding monthly income, most participants reported earning between 5 and 10 million VND (37.3%), followed closely by those 24.7% of respondents earned less than 5 million VND monthly, and 24.4% reported a monthly income ranging from 10 to 15 million VND. A smaller percentage of respondents earned from 15 to 20 million VND (10.7%), and only 2.9% had a monthly income exceeding 20 million VND. This range of income levels demonstrates the economic diversity within the sample and allows for an examination of how financial status may influence purchasing behavior.

In terms of occupational status, office workers constitute the largest group, representing 40.9% of the total sample. Students follow with

measurement instruments employed in this study are internally consistent and statistically reliable.

Hypothesis test

We used confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to assess the measurement model using maximum likelihood estimation (AMOS 24). All constructs (i.e., physical attractiveness, social attractiveness, and attitude homophily, audience participation, purchase intentions) were added in the structural model. The model showed excellent fit (CMIN/df = 2.849; RMSEA = .018; CFI = 0.998; TLI = 0.997). Overall, the fit indices provide strong evidence that the measurement model achieves an acceptable to high level of fit. These findings validate the constructs and support the continuation to structural model testing.

Then, SEM analysis using maximum likelihood estimation (AMOS 24) was applied to empirically test from hypotheses H1 to H8c. In the first stage, we tested from H1 to H3 without adding the mediator of audience participation into the model. The evaluation of model fit was conducted using four conventional fit indices: CMIN/DF, CFI, RMSEA, and TLI. The model also showed excellent fit (CMIN/df = 2.849; RMSEA = .078; CFI = .968; TLI = .950). The results showed that physical attractiveness has a significant positive effect on audiences' purchase intentions ($\beta = 0.237$, $p < 0.001$), thereby providing support for Hypothesis H1. Similarly, hypothesis H3 was also supported, with attitude homophily exhibiting the strongest direct with a strong positive effect on audiences' purchase intentions ($\beta = 0.413$, $p < 0.001$). However, hypothesis H2 was rejected, as social attractiveness did not significantly affect audience's purchase intentions ($\beta = 0.059$; $p = 0.506$).

In the second stage, we tested SEM from H4 to H8c by adding the mediator of audience participation into the model. The evaluation of model fit was conducted using four conventional fit indices: CMIN/DF, CFI, RMSEA, and TLI. The model also showed excellent fit (CMIN/df = 2.849; RMSEA = .075; CFI = .968; TLI = .921). The results show that all three influencer characteristics showed significant effects on audience participation, so H4, H5 and H6 were all accepted. Specifically, physical attractiveness had a positive effect on audience participation ($\beta = 0.352$, $p < 0.001$), thereby providing support for H4. Similarly, social attractiveness also had a positive effect on audience participation ($\beta = 0.199$, $p = 0.040$), while attitude homophily was identified as the most influential factor among the three ($\beta = 0.404$, $p < 0.001$), thereby supporting H5 and H6. In addition, the results also showed that audience participation had a positive effect on audiences' purchase intentions ($\beta = 0.648$, $p < 0.001$), and thus H7 was supported.

We run bootstrap to see the mediating role of audience participation in the relationships between three influencer characteristics and audiences' purchase intentions. The results showed that there was an insignificant effect of the mediating role of audience participation in the relationship between physical attractiveness and audiences' purchase intentions ($\beta = 0.228$, $p = 0.1$), although the finding revealed that physical attractiveness did not yield a statistically significant effect ($\beta = 0.048$, $p = 0.548$), thus H8a was unsupported. Meanwhile, there was a significant effect of the mediating role of audience participation in the relationship between social attractiveness and audiences' purchase intentions ($\beta = 0.129$, $p = 0.001$), and there is an insignificant effect of social attractiveness on audiences' purchase intentions ($\beta = -0.071$, $p = 0.435$), thus H8b was supported. For H8c, there was a significant effect of the mediating role of audience participation in the relationship between Attitude homophily and audiences' purchase intentions ($\beta = 0.262$, $p = 0.001$), but the finding

show that Attitude homophily had a positive effect on audiences' purchase intentions ($\beta = 0.220$, $p = 0.028$), thus H8c are partially supported. Overall, the findings emphasized that audience participation acts as a significant mediator in the pathways from social attractiveness and attitude homophily to purchase intention, but not for physical attractiveness.

DISCUSSIONS

The findings provide nuanced insights into how influencer characteristics affect audiences' purchase intentions, both directly and indirectly through audience participation. Consistent with prior literature (Kim, 2022; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020), physical attractiveness significantly increased purchase intention and enhanced audience participation. However, audience participation did not significantly transmit the effect of physical attractiveness to purchase intention, suggesting that its persuasive power operates primarily through immediate cognitive-emotional appeal rather than engagement-based mechanisms.

Social attractiveness did not directly influence purchase intention, but it positively impacted audience participation. However, social attractiveness indirectly influenced purchase intention via audience participation, consistent with Lee and Eastin's (2021) finding that relational closeness enhances persuasive effectiveness through engagement behaviors rather than direct persuasion.

Attitude homophily emerged as the most influential characteristic, strongly affecting both purchase intentions and audience participation. Furthermore, a partial mediating role for audience participation, suggesting that attitudinal similarity boosts purchase intention through both direct identification with the influencer and indirect engagement effects.

Finally, audience participation significantly affected purchase intention, reinforcing its role as a central mechanism in influencer marketing (Leung, 2023). These findings underscore that while physical attractiveness primarily exerts direct persuasive influence, social attractiveness and attitude homophily leverage audience participation as a behavioral conduit for persuasion.

Theoretical implications

This study contributes to the theoretical development of influencer marketing by examining the mediating role of audience participation in the relationships between physical attractiveness, social attractiveness, and attitude homophily of social media influencers' food advertising and Gen Z audiences' purchase intentions. While previous research has primarily emphasized the direct relationships between influencer characteristics and consumer outcomes (e.g., Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2021) or the mediating role of trust (Lee & Eastin, 2021; Shan *et al.*, 2022), this study offers a more nuanced perspective by demonstrating that audience participation serves as a pivotal mechanism linking influencer traits to purchase intention.

Moreover, the present study reveals that mediating mechanism of audience participation varies across the effects of influencer attributes on audiences' purchase intentions. This nuanced understanding advances theoretical models of social media influence by specifying attribute-dependent engagement mechanisms.

By confirming attitude homophily as the strongest predictor of both engagement and purchase intention, the study reinforces the role of value congruence in parasocial and persuasive processes,

particularly among Gen Z consumers. This finding deepens theoretical discussions on authenticity and relational closeness in digital persuasion.

Practical implications

Marketers should prioritize influencers whose values, beliefs, and lifestyles closely align with those of their target audience, as this alignment maximizes both audience participation and purchase intention. For Gen Z consumers, *attitude homophily* may be a stronger driver of conversion than purely aesthetic appeal, making value congruence a critical selection criterion.

For influencers with high *social attractiveness*, campaign strategies should emphasize interactive formats such as polls, Q&A sessions, and live streams to leverage participation-driven persuasion. In contrast, for influencers with high *physical attractiveness*, visually striking, immediate-impact content should be prioritized to capture attention quickly and stimulate engagement. Given that audience participation significantly mediates the effects of social attractiveness and attitude homophily, marketers should track engagement metrics (e.g., likes, comments, shares) not as mere vanity indicators but as meaningful predictors of sales outcomes.

Furthermore, the finding that *social attractiveness* alone does not significantly predict purchase intention underscores the limited value of likability in isolation. Influencers and campaign managers should place greater emphasis on authenticity, personal relevance, and value alignment rather than relying solely on charm or approachability. Selecting influencers for their ability to convey strong attitude homophily, rather than general friendliness, is likely to produce stronger audience connections and more effective campaigns targeting Gen Z consumers.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite its meaningful contributions, this study acknowledges several limitations that suggest avenues for future investigation. Firstly, the use of convenience sampling focused on Gen Z respondents in Ho Chi Minh City may limit the generalizability of the results. Cultural, regional, and socio-economic factors could influence how physical attractiveness, social attractiveness, attitude homophily, and audience participation are perceived. To enhance external validity, future research should include more diverse and geographically varied samples. Secondly, this research was conducted using a cross-sectional approach, which captures participants' attitudes and behaviors at a single moment in time. As audience participation and purchase intention may evolve with prolonged exposure to influencers, longitudinal studies are recommended to track these dynamics over time and examine the cumulative impact of influencer interactions. Third, the research focused exclusively on three influencer characteristics—physical attractiveness, social attractiveness, and attitude homophily without accounting for other critical factors such as perceived credibility, content quality, message framing, or platform engagement tactics. Future studies should Future research is encouraged to include additional relevant variables to build a more comprehensive framework for understanding how social media influencers shape purchase intention. Finally, the study did not differentiate among social media platforms, even though engagement mechanisms and user expectations vary across channels like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. Future research should explore platform-specific dynamics to uncover how audience participation and purchase intention differ depending on the medium used for influencer communication.

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