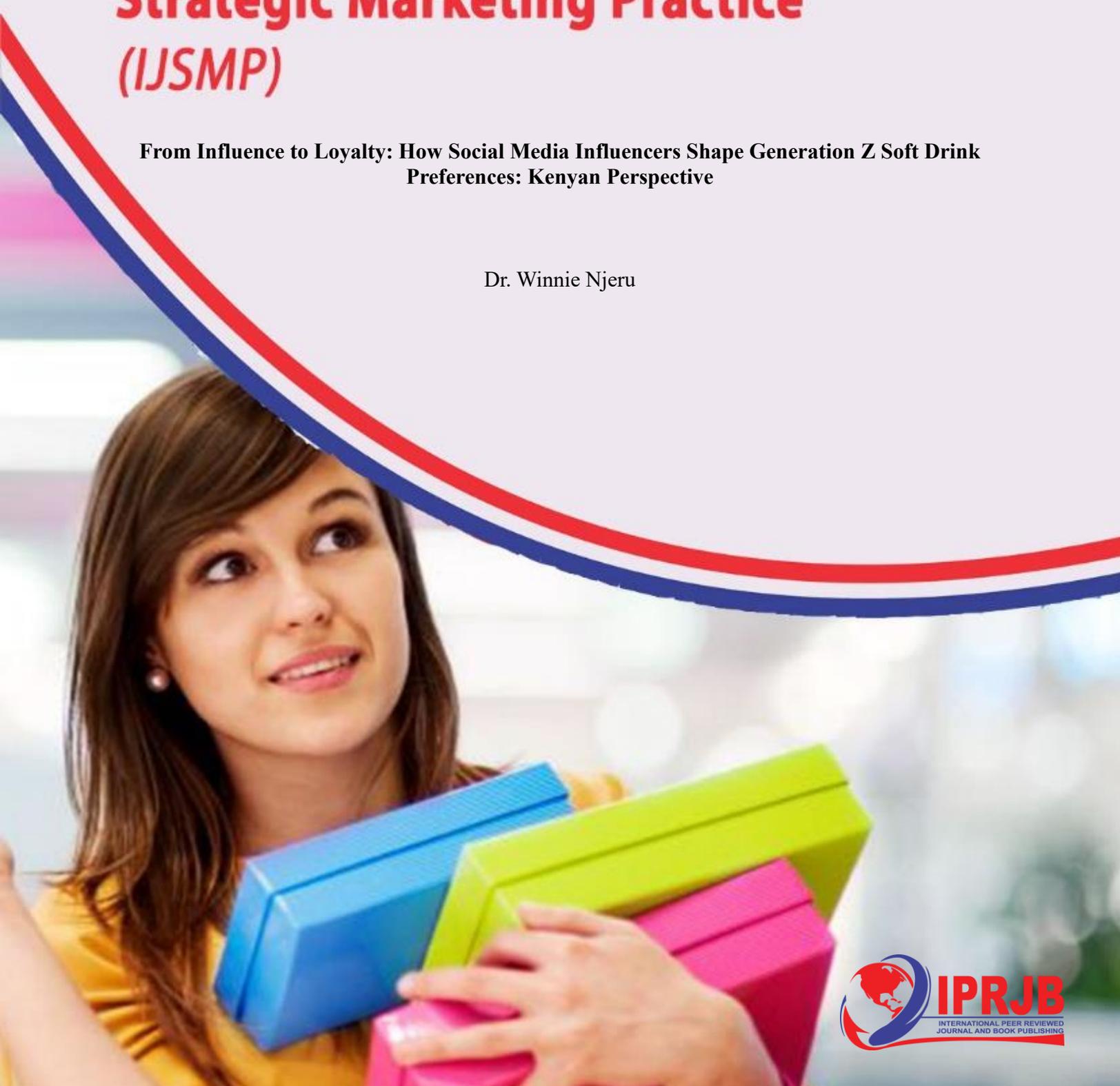


International Journal of Strategic Marketing Practice (IJSMP)

From Influence to Loyalty: How Social Media Influencers Shape Generation Z Soft Drink Preferences: Kenyan Perspective

Dr. Winnie Njeru



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¹*Dr. Winnie Njeru

Senior Lecturer, Department of Business Administration,
Faculty of Business and Management Sciences, University
of Nairobi

Article History

Received 23rd December 2025

Received in Revised Form 22nd January 2026

Accepted 20th February 2026



How to cite in APA format:

Njeru, W. (2026). From Influence to Loyalty: How Social Media Influencers Shape Generation Z Soft Drink Preferences: Kenyan Perspective. *International Journal of Strategic Marketing Practice*, 8(1), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.47604/ij SMP.3648>

Abstract

Purpose: This study examines the influence of social media influencers on soft drink brand loyalty among Generation Z students at the University of Nairobi, Lower Kabete Campus, Kenya. This is informed by how the growing reliance on social media influencers has transformed how brands engage Generation Z consumers, yet empirical evidence on how specific influencer attributes translate into brand loyalty in emerging markets remains limited.

Methodology: The study adopts a descriptive cross-sectional research design. Primary data were collected from 373 undergraduate Generation Z students using structured questionnaires administered online. Descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis were employed to analyze the data.

Findings: The findings reveal that social media influencers have a strong and statistically significant effect on soft drink brand loyalty, explaining 38.8% of the variance in loyalty outcomes. Specifically, influencer relatability, authenticity, relevance, and credibility exert positive and significant effects on brand loyalty, with relatability emerging as the strongest predictor. In contrast, influencer trustworthiness was found to have a negative and statistically insignificant effect, suggesting a shift in how Generation Z evaluates influencer credibility in digital contexts. Overall, brand loyalty among respondents was moderate, reflecting fragmented preferences within a highly competitive beverage market.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: The study makes three key contributions. Theoretically, it extends Social Influence Theory and the Consumer-Based Brand Equity model by demonstrating that identification-based mechanisms (relatability and authenticity) outweigh compliance-based trust cues in shaping Generation Z loyalty. Practically, the findings provide actionable guidance for soft drink brands and marketers in Kenya on prioritizing influencer selection criteria aligned with Generation Z values. From a policy perspective, the study underscores the need for clearer influencer marketing standards and digital transparency frameworks to support sustainable and ethical brand–consumer relationships in youth-driven markets.

Keywords: Brand Loyalty, Social Media Influencers, Consumer Preferences, Soft Drinks, Generation Z, University of Nairobi, Kenya

JEL Codes of Classification: M31, L82, D12, M31, J13, R22

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid diffusion of social media platforms has fundamentally reconfigured contemporary marketing communication, shifting influence from firm-controlled advertising to peer-mediated and personality-driven endorsement mechanisms. Within this evolving landscape, social media influencers have emerged as central actors in shaping consumer perceptions, preferences, and loyalty, particularly among Generation Z consumers who are deeply embedded in digital ecosystems. Influencer marketing has consequently become a strategic priority for brands seeking to build emotional engagement, trust, and long-term brand equity in highly competitive consumer markets (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Khan, 2023).

Generation Z commonly defined as individuals born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s represents the first cohort of true digital natives, characterized by constant connectivity, high social media literacy, and skepticism toward traditional advertising formats (McKinsey, 2024). Unlike previous generations, Gen Z consumers actively evaluate brand messages through the lenses of authenticity, relatability, and value congruence, often privileging influencer-generated content over firm-produced communications. As a result, influencer marketing has become particularly salient in categories involving low differentiation and high brand switching, such as fast-moving consumer goods and beverages (Stoica & Hickman, 2024).

The global growth of influencer marketing expenditure reflects this shift. Industry projections indicate sustained annual growth as brands intensify efforts to leverage platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube to engage younger audiences (Statista, 2025). In emerging markets, including Kenya, influencer marketing is expanding rapidly alongside increased smartphone penetration and social media usage among youth populations (Njathi & Watkins, 2024). However, despite the strategic importance of influencers, empirical research examining how specific influencer attributes translate into brand loyalty within African consumer markets remains underdeveloped.

The soft drink industry provides a compelling context for examining influencer effects on brand loyalty. The sector is characterized by intense competition, minimal functional differentiation, and increasing pressure to sustain loyalty among younger consumers whose preferences are fluid and socially mediated. In Kenya, multinational brands such as Coca-Cola and Red Bull continue to dominate market visibility, while regional and local brands compete aggressively through digital engagement strategies (Standard Bank, 2019). As consumption decisions increasingly intersect with lifestyle signaling and online identity formation, influencer-led communication has become a critical mechanism for shaping brand meaning and loyalty within this category.

Extant literature offers mixed evidence regarding the relationship between social media influencers and brand loyalty. While studies in Indonesia, Nigeria, and South Africa report positive and significant effects of influencer marketing on loyalty outcomes (Pinto & Paramita, 2021; Olatunji & Amodu, 2022; Nkosi & Mahlangu, 2021), research from European and Asian contexts has yielded weaker or insignificant relationships, suggesting that influencer effectiveness may be contingent on cultural, generational, and market-specific dynamics (Malmgren, 2022; Ahmed et al., 2024). Moreover, many prior studies treat influencer marketing as a unidimensional construct,

offering limited insight into how discrete attributes such as authenticity, credibility, relevance, trustworthiness, and relatability differentially shape loyalty among Generation Z consumers.

A central tension in influencer-driven marketing is the trade-off between authenticity and commercialization, which is particularly salient for Generation Z consumers. Influencers initially derive their persuasive power from appearing relatable, informal, and peer-like qualities that resonate strongly with Gen Z's preference for perceived honesty and social proximity. However, as influencers become more professionalized through brand contracts, scripted content, and overt sponsorship disclosures, this peer-like identity can erode (Njathi & Watkins, 2024). In the Kenyan context, where Generation Z consumers are highly attuned to social media cues and skeptical of overt advertising, excessive commercialization risks reframing influencers from trusted peers into conventional marketers. This shift weakens credibility and can reduce the effectiveness of influencer endorsements in translating influence into sustained brand loyalty, especially in low-involvement products such as soft drinks. The resulting tension highlights that influencer effectiveness depends not only on reach and frequency but on maintaining a delicate balance between monetization and perceived authenticity.

In the Kenyan context, TikTok and X have emerged as the primary battlegrounds for soft drink "wars," operating through influence mechanisms that differ markedly from the Instagram-centric literature. TikTok Kenya amplifies influence through short-form video, humor, music, and participatory trends, allowing soft drink brands to embed themselves organically within everyday youth culture and peer imitation rather than polished lifestyle imagery (Ahmed et al., 2024). By contrast, X functions as a real-time discursive arena where brand loyalty is shaped through memes, commentary, call-outs, and public brand consumer interactions, often driven by wit, controversy, and collective sentiment rather than visual aesthetics. These platforms reward immediacy, relatability, and cultural fluency, intensifying the authenticity commercialization tension: overly scripted influencer content is quickly rejected, while spontaneous, peer-aligned engagement can rapidly translate into visibility and loyalty. As a result, influencer effectiveness in Kenya's soft drink market is increasingly platform-specific, challenging the applicability of Instagram-heavy influencer models to Generation Z behavior.

This study addresses these gaps by empirically examining the influence of social media influencers on soft drink brand loyalty among Generation Z students at the University of Nairobi, Lower Kabete Campus. Anchored in Social Influence Theory (Kelman, 1961) and the Consumer-Based Brand Equity framework (Keller, 1993), the study disaggregates influencer influence into core attributes to assess their relative explanatory power. By focusing on an emerging market context and a youth-dominated consumption setting, the study contributes to the growing but uneven literature on influencer marketing effectiveness, while offering evidence-based insights for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers seeking to understand digital influence mechanisms in contemporary consumer markets.

Problem Statement

Despite the rapid institutionalization of influencer marketing as a core component of digital strategy, there remains limited theoretical and empirical clarity regarding how and why social media influencers contribute to brand loyalty, particularly among Generation Z consumers in

emerging market contexts (Njathi & Watkins 2024). While influencer marketing is widely assumed to enhance loyalty through trust, identification, and emotional engagement, extant empirical evidence presents mixed and sometimes contradictory findings across industries, generations, and cultural settings.

Prior studies have reported positive associations between influencer marketing and brand loyalty, emphasizing mechanisms such as credibility, authenticity, and electronic word-of-mouth (Pinto & Paramita, 2021; Olatunji & Amodu, 2022; Nkosi & Mahlangu, 2021). Conversely, other studies have found weak or insignificant effects, raising questions about the generalizability of influencer-driven loyalty outcomes and the contextual conditions under which they materialize (Malmgren, 2022; Ahmed et al., 2024). These inconsistencies suggest that influencer effectiveness is neither uniform nor universal, but rather contingent on consumer cohort characteristics, market structure, and the specific attributes embodied by influencers.

A further limitation in the literature lies in the dominant treatment of influencer marketing as a unidimensional construct. Such an approach obscures the possibility that individual influencer attributes such as relevance, authenticity, credibility, trustworthiness, and relatability may exert qualitatively different and even opposing effects on brand loyalty. This limitation is particularly salient in studies of Generation Z, a cohort that exhibits heightened advertising skepticism, strong identity signaling through consumption, and a preference for peer-like influence over authority-based persuasion. Consequently, assumptions derived from earlier generational cohorts or traditional endorsement models may no longer hold.

In addition, existing research remains disproportionately concentrated in Western and Asian markets, with comparatively limited empirical evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa. Given the rapid expansion of social media use, influencer economies, and youth-driven consumption in African markets, this geographic imbalance constrains theoretical development and limits the contextual validity of current influencer marketing frameworks. The soft drink industry in Kenya, characterized by intense competition, low product differentiation, and fragmented brand loyalty among young consumers, presents a particularly relevant yet underexplored setting for examining influencer–loyalty dynamics.

In the soft drink category, brand loyalty is notoriously difficult to sustain because switching costs are extremely low: products are inexpensive, widely available, and easily substitutable, with minimal perceived risk in trying alternatives. For Generation Z consumers, this challenge is amplified by a “disposable” content economy in which trends, memes, and influencer narratives cycle rapidly, particularly on platforms such as TikTok and X. In this context, the core issue is not only how influencers shape preferences or short-term engagement, but whether they can generate durable brand loyalty that persists beyond momentary virality. Influencer content may successfully trigger trial or temporary affiliation, yet the speed at which attention shifts raises questions about the longevity of such effects. This tension reframes influencer marketing from a tool of sustained brand-building into a mechanism of episodic influence, where loyalty may be continuously renegotiated rather than firmly established.

A further challenge in the Kenyan market is sponsored content fatigue, driven by the high frequency with which influencers shift between competing soft drink brands. As the same

influencers sequentially promote rival products, brand messages risk appearing interchangeable, undermining credibility and diluting brand equity. For Generation Z audiences—who are highly attuned to commercial cues on platforms such as TikTok and X—repeated exposure to overt sponsorship can erode trust and reduce persuasive impact. Rather than reinforcing loyalty, this pattern may normalize brand switching and reinforce the perception of soft drinks as low-commitment, easily replaceable products. Sponsored content fatigue therefore raises a critical question for marketers: whether influencer strategies in Kenya are building long-term brand relationships or merely generating short-lived visibility at the expense of durable loyalty.

Against this backdrop, the central research problem addressed by this study is the lack of nuanced, context-specific empirical evidence on how distinct social media influencer attributes shape brand loyalty among Generation Z consumers in emerging markets. Specifically, it remains unclear which influencer attributes meaningfully contribute to loyalty formation, which attributes are neutral or ineffective, and how these effects align with established theories of social influence and consumer-based brand equity. Addressing this gap is essential for advancing theory, refining influencer marketing practice, and informing evidence-based policy and governance frameworks for digital marketing in youth-oriented consumer markets.

Theoretical Review

This study is theoretically anchored in Social Influence Theory (Kelman, 1961) and the Consumer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model (Keller, 1993), and is further enriched by Parasocial Interaction (PSI) Theory as a complementary relational framework. Together, these theories provide an integrated lens for explaining how social media influencers shape brand loyalty among Generation Z by linking interpersonal influence processes, relationship formation, and cognitive-affective brand responses. While Social Influence Theory explains *how* influence outcomes occur and the CBBE model explains *how* such outcomes translate into brand equity and loyalty, PSI Theory clarifies *why* influencer messages are experienced as personally meaningful by followers. This integration allows the study to move beyond descriptive accounts of influencer marketing toward a more nuanced explanation of the mechanisms through which influencer attributes translate into loyalty outcomes.

Social Influence Theory posits that individuals' attitudes and behaviors are shaped through social interaction via three primary processes: compliance, identification, and internalization (Kelman, 1961). Compliance reflects behavior driven by anticipated rewards or avoidance of sanctions; identification occurs when individuals adopt behaviors to maintain a psychologically satisfying relationship with an admired or relatable source; and internalization arises when influenced behaviors align with an individual's values and belief systems. In digitally mediated environments, these processes are enacted through continuous, socially embedded interactions rather than isolated persuasive encounters. Influencers function as salient social referents whose perceived attributes determine which influence process is activated.

However, Social Influence Theory alone does not fully explain *how* relationships between influencers and followers are formed in the absence of direct reciprocity. This gap is addressed by Parasocial Interaction Theory, which explains the development of one-sided, friendship-like relationships between audiences and media figures. Among Generation Z, repeated exposure to

influencers through short-form video, live commentary, and informal self-disclosure fosters perceptions of intimacy, familiarity, and emotional closeness. These parasocial bonds transform influencers from distant opinion leaders into perceived peers, making their recommendations feel socially embedded rather than commercially imposed. PSI therefore provides the missing relational link underlying the concept of *relatability*, explaining why influencers are able to trigger identification-based influence even in highly commercialized environments.

Within this integrated framework, influencer attributes operate through distinct but interconnected pathways. Relatability and authenticity are most strongly associated with parasocial interaction, strengthening identification by making influencers appear socially similar, emotionally accessible, and aligned with followers' lived experiences. Credibility and trustworthiness, by contrast, support internalization by increasing the likelihood that brand messages are accepted as valid and sincere. For Generation Z—whose consumption choices are closely tied to identity expression and peer alignment—identification reinforced through parasocial bonds is particularly salient. Influencers who successfully maintain a peer-like persona are therefore more effective in shaping preferences than those perceived as overtly commercial actors.

The Consumer-Based Brand Equity model conceptualizes brand equity as a function of consumer knowledge structures, encompassing brand awareness, brand associations, and resulting attitudinal and behavioral outcomes such as brand loyalty (Keller, 1993). Influencer-generated content contributes to these knowledge structures by repeatedly associating brands with specific lifestyles, values, and social identities. Through parasocial interaction, these associations are not merely observed but experienced relationally, enhancing their emotional resonance. Influencers thus act as symbolic carriers of brand meaning, transferring their perceived attributes to the brands they endorse and embedding them within consumers' self-concepts.

By situating influencer marketing at the intersection of Social Influence Theory, PSI Theory, and the CBBE model, this study conceptualizes influencer attributes not simply as promotional cues but as relational and symbolic mechanisms of brand equity formation. This perspective is particularly relevant for low-involvement, high-frequency consumption categories such as soft drinks, where functional differentiation is minimal and loyalty depends heavily on emotional attachment and identity congruence. The integrated framework explains how parasocial relationships enable identification-based influence, how such influence reshapes brand knowledge structures, and why these processes may—or may not—translate into durable brand loyalty among Generation Z consumers.

Together, these theories provide a coherent foundation for disaggregating influencer influence into specific attributes—relatability, authenticity, credibility, trustworthiness, and relevance—and for empirically examining their distinct effects on brand loyalty. By explicitly linking influence processes, relational dynamics, and brand equity outcomes, the study advances theoretical understanding of influencer marketing beyond generalized persuasion effects and situates digital influence within broader processes of social interaction, identity formation, and brand meaning in an emerging market context.

Empirical Review

Empirical research on social media influencer marketing has expanded rapidly over the past decade, reflecting the growing strategic importance of influencers in shaping consumer attitudes and behaviors. A substantial body of literature suggests that influencer marketing can positively affect brand-related outcomes, including brand awareness, purchase intention, engagement, and loyalty. However, the strength, direction, and mechanisms of this influence remain contested, particularly across different cultural contexts, product categories, and generational cohorts. Several studies report a positive and significant relationship between influencer marketing and brand loyalty, often mediated by factors such as credibility, authenticity, and electronic word-of-mouth. For instance, Jin and Ryu (2020), examining the beverage sector in South Korea, found that influencer trustworthiness and content enjoyment positively influenced consumer loyalty among university students. Similarly, Pinto and Paramita (2021) demonstrated that social media influencers significantly enhanced brand loyalty among Generation Z Instagram users in Indonesia, with purchase intention acting as a mediating variable. Evidence from African contexts largely supports these findings. Nkosi and Mahlangu (2021) reported that perceived authenticity and influencer–audience congruence were key determinants of FMCG brand loyalty among South African university students, while Olatunji and Amodu (2022) found that influencer credibility and engagement frequency positively affected beverage brand loyalty among youth in Lagos.

At the same time, the literature increasingly emphasizes that influencer effectiveness is subject to important boundary conditions, among which the Match-Up Hypothesis is particularly salient. Empirical endorsement research consistently demonstrates that persuasion and brand outcomes improve when there is high influencer–brand congruence (fit between the influencer’s identity/expertise and the product), and weaken when fit is low. In influencer settings, congruence shapes whether audiences interpret endorsements as credible and value-aligned or as purely transactional. This is especially relevant for authenticity, which is frequently treated as a direct predictor of loyalty but is, in practice, highly contingent on perceived fit. When endorsements appear inconsistent with an influencer’s established persona, for example, a fitness influencer promoting a high-sugar soda audiences may perceive hypocrisy or “selling out,” triggering skepticism and diminishing the very peer-like credibility that underpins authenticity-based influence. As such, the influencer’s authenticity may not merely decline; it may fail as a persuasive cue because the mismatch disrupts identification and weakens trust transfer to the brand. These insights imply that congruence functions as a moderator, conditioning whether influencer attributes (particularly authenticity and credibility) translate into brand equity and loyalty outcomes.

Despite supportive evidence, a growing number of studies highlight inconsistencies in the influencer–loyalty relationship. Malmgren (2022), studying the Swedish retail fashion industry, found that although electronic word-of-mouth positively influenced brand loyalty, influencer marketing did not significantly strengthen this relationship. Similarly, Ahmed, Islam, and Ghaffar (2024) reported no significant relationship between social media influencers and brand loyalty among laptop consumers across generational cohorts in Pakistan. These mixed findings suggest that influencer marketing does not uniformly translate into loyalty and that its effectiveness may

depend on contextual factors such as product involvement, market maturity, audience skepticism, and crucially, influencer–brand congruence.

A notable limitation in much of the existing literature is the tendency to conceptualize influencer marketing as a single, aggregate construct. This approach obscures the possibility that distinct influencer attributes may exert differential and in some cases opposing effects on brand loyalty. While some studies emphasize trustworthiness as a central driver of loyalty (Jin & Ryu, 2020), others foreground authenticity and relatability as more influential, particularly among Generation Z consumers who exhibit heightened skepticism toward overtly commercial messaging (Nkosi & Mahlangu, 2021; Ebulueme & Vijayakumar, 2024). Importantly, integrating the Match-Up Hypothesis suggests that even highly “authentic” influencers may be ineffective if endorsements violate perceived identity consistency. Thus, the literature increasingly points to a more conditional model in which influencer attributes affect loyalty through context-sensitive mechanisms, moderated by fit and credibility judgments.

Furthermore, empirical research remains heavily skewed toward Western and Asian markets, with relatively limited evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa. Studies conducted in Kenya and neighboring contexts have primarily focused on influencer marketing outcomes at an aggregate level or across broad consumer groups. For example, Kiarie (2023) found that influencer marketing positively influenced customer loyalty to fast-moving consumer goods among Nairobi residents, while Omani (2023) reported a significant relationship between influencer marketing and brand loyalty among small and medium enterprises in Nairobi City County. However, these studies do not explicitly examine Generation Z consumers, rarely incorporate platform-specific influencer dynamics, and do not systematically evaluate the relative influence of specific influencer attributes under varying levels of influencer–brand congruence.

From the empirical review, several gaps warrant future research. First, there remains insufficient consensus on which influencer attributes most strongly drive brand loyalty among Generation Z, and little agreement on whether authenticity, credibility, trustworthiness, or relatability dominates across categories and contexts. Second, despite growing reference to “fit,” there is limited empirical testing of influencer–brand congruence as a moderating variable, particularly its capacity to weaken or negate authenticity effects under mismatch conditions. Third, there is a need for more research in low-involvement, low switching-cost categories such as soft drinks, where loyalty is structurally difficult to sustain and influencer effects may be stronger for short-term trial than durable commitment. Fourth, Sub-Saharan African evidence remains limited, and Kenyan studies in particular seldom isolate Generation Z or compare how different platforms shape persuasion processes. Finally, few studies integrate empirical findings explicitly with established theories of social influence and brand equity in a way that specifies the mechanisms linking influencer attributes to brand knowledge structures and loyalty outcomes—especially under conditional effects such as congruence and sponsorship skepticism.

This study addresses these gaps by empirically examining the effects of distinct social media influencer attributes relevance, trustworthiness, authenticity, credibility, and relatability on soft drink brand loyalty among Generation Z consumers in Kenya, while explicitly recognizing influencer–brand congruence as a key boundary condition shaping the effectiveness of authenticity-based influence. By focusing on a highly competitive, low-differentiation product

category and a digitally immersed youth cohort, the study extends existing empirical work and contributes to a more mechanism-based understanding of influencer-driven brand loyalty in emerging markets, while also generating a foundation for future research on congruence, platform effects, and the durability of loyalty under rapid content cycles.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive cross-sectional research design to examine the relationship between social media influencer attributes and brand loyalty among Generation Z consumers. A cross-sectional design is appropriate for capturing perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions at a specific point in time, particularly in digital marketing contexts where consumer evaluations are dynamic and socially mediated. The design enables the systematic analysis of associations between influencer-related constructs and brand loyalty without manipulating the study environment, thereby aligning with the study's explanatory objectives.

The study was conducted at the University of Nairobi, Lower Kabete Campus, a major academic institution hosting a large concentration of Generation Z students. The campus has an estimated population of approximately 12,000 undergraduate students (University of Nairobi Student Handbook, 2020), the majority of whom fall within the Generation Z age cohort and exhibit high levels of social media engagement. This context provides an analytically relevant setting for examining influencer-driven brand loyalty within a youth-dominated, digitally active consumption environment.

The target population comprised all undergraduate students enrolled at the campus. This population was deemed appropriate given their frequent exposure to influencer-generated content, regular consumption of soft drink products, and active participation in online brand-related discourse. Sample size determination followed the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sampling framework, yielding a target sample of 373 respondents. Primary data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire designed to capture perceptions of social media influencer attributes and brand loyalty outcomes.

Data analysis proceeded in two stages. First, descriptive statistics—including means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages—were used to summarize respondent characteristics and key study variables. Second, multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the influence of social media influencer attributes on brand loyalty.

The regression model used in the analysis is stated as:

$$Y = \alpha + \beta X_1 + e$$

Where:

Y = Brand Loyalty

α = Constant

β = Regression Coefficient

X_1 = Social Media Influencer (Relevance, Trustworthiness, Authenticity, Credibility, Relatability)

e = Error Term

Statistical significance was assessed at the 95% confidence level. This analytical approach enabled the estimation of both the overall explanatory power of influencer attributes and the relative contribution of each attribute to brand loyalty outcomes.

FINDINGS

This section presents and interprets the empirical findings arising from the analysis of the data collected. Descriptive statistics are first used to summarize respondent characteristics and key study variables, followed by multiple regression analysis to assess the magnitude, direction, and statistical significance of relationships between influencer attributes and brand loyalty.

The interpretation of findings emphasizes explanatory insight rather than statistical reporting alone, highlighting how specific influencer attributes contribute to loyalty formation among Generation Z consumers. Particular attention is given to the relative strength of individual influencer attributes and the extent to which the results corroborate or diverge from prior empirical evidence. Where relevant, the findings are situated within the broader literature on influencer marketing and digital consumer behavior, allowing for theoretical reflection and contextual comparison.

Social Media Platforms

This section examines the distribution of social media platform usage among Generation Z respondents to provide contextual insight into the digital environments in which influencer exposure and brand-related interactions primarily occur. Understanding platform preference is essential, as platform affordances shape content formats, influencer–audience engagement, and the effectiveness of influencer marketing strategies. The analysis therefore situates subsequent findings on influencer attributes and brand loyalty within the specific social media ecosystems most salient to the study population.

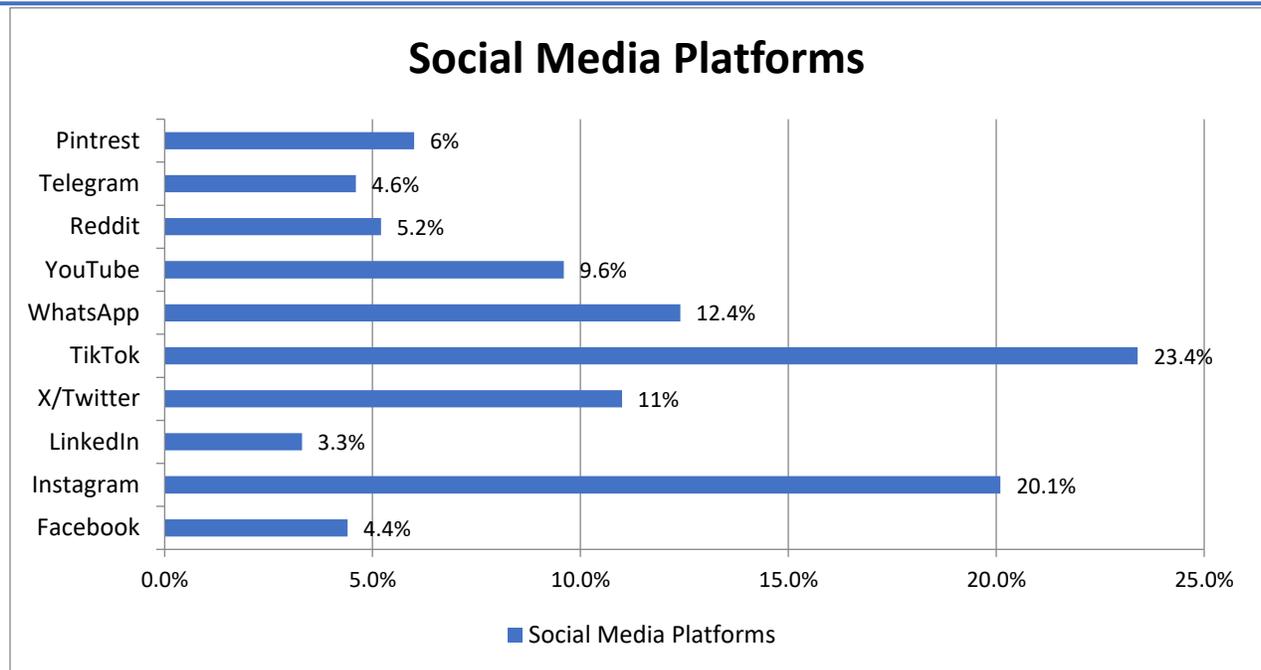


Figure 1: Social Media Platforms

According to Figure 1, 23.4% of Gen Z students at UON, LKC spent most of their time on TikTok and 20.1% spent most of their time on Instagram. The third most utilized social media platform was WhatsApp with 12.4% followed by X/Twitter at 11%. The research found that 9.6% of Gen Z spent most of their time on YouTube, 6% spent most of their time in Pinterest, 5.2% on Reddit, 4.6% on Telegram and 4.4% on Facebook. The least time among Gen Z students was on LinkedIn as only 3.3% of students spent most of their time on the social media platform. The results indicate that short-form video and high resolution image sharing sites were the most preferred among Gen Z UON, LKC students. The results suggest that interactive content is highly attractive to students in the Gen Z category.

Favorite Soft Drink among Gen Z

This section presents an analysis of respondents' preferred soft drink brands to establish the consumption landscape within which influencer marketing and brand loyalty dynamics operate. Examining brand preference patterns among Generation Z provides important context for interpreting loyalty outcomes, particularly in a highly competitive beverage market characterized by low functional differentiation and fragmented brand allegiance. The findings offer a baseline against which the influence of social media influencers on brand loyalty can be more meaningfully assessed.

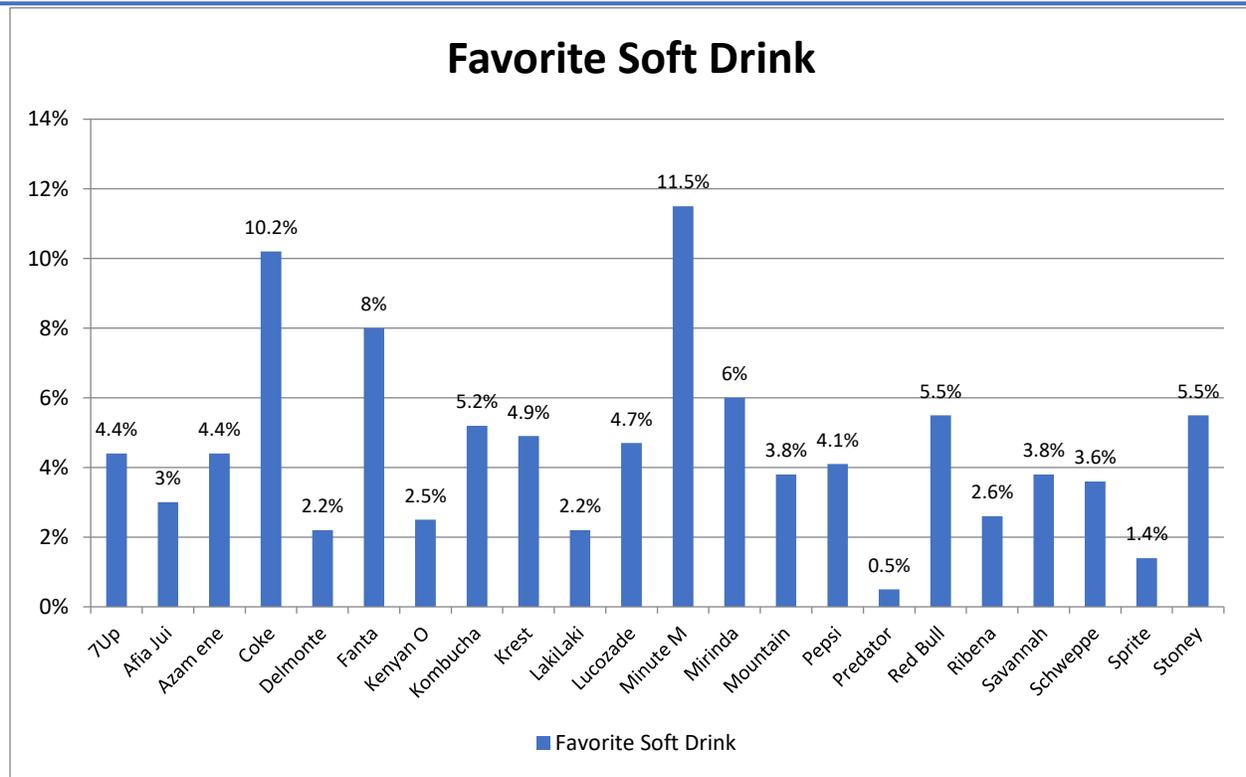


Figure 2: Favorite Soft Drink

Figure 2 provides that the Minute Maid was favoured the most as 11.5% of Gen Z students from Lower Kabete indicated they most enjoyed consuming the soft drink. Coke was second most consumed soft drink for 10.2% of respondents while 8% selected Fanta, 6% selected Miranda, 5.5% selected Stoney, 5.5% selected Red Bull and 5.2% selected Kombucha as their favourite soft drink. The study found that 4.9% preferred Krest, 4.4% preferred Lucozade, 4.4% preferred 7UP and 4.4% preferred Azam energy drinks. Further, 4.1% preferred Pepsi, 3.8% preferred mountain dew, 3.8% preferred Savannah, 3.6% enjoyed Schweppes, 3% preferred Afia Juice, 2.6% preferred Ribenna, 2.5% preferred Kenya Originals(KO), 2.2% showed a preference to Delmonte and LakiLaki. 1.4% of respondents consumed sprite the most while the least consumed soft drink was predator among 0.5% of the respondents. The results indicate that brand loyalty was split among different soft drink brands as none of the soft drinks had an enjoyment rate that was more than a quarter of the study sample size.

Best Social Media Influencer Campaigns

This section analyzes respondents’ perceptions of soft drink brands with the most effective social media influencer campaigns. Identifying brands perceived to excel in influencer marketing provides insight into the visibility, resonance, and perceived effectiveness of influencer-led strategies within the Generation Z segment. The analysis offers contextual grounding for subsequent interpretations of how influencer attributes translate into brand loyalty outcomes in a competitive beverage market.

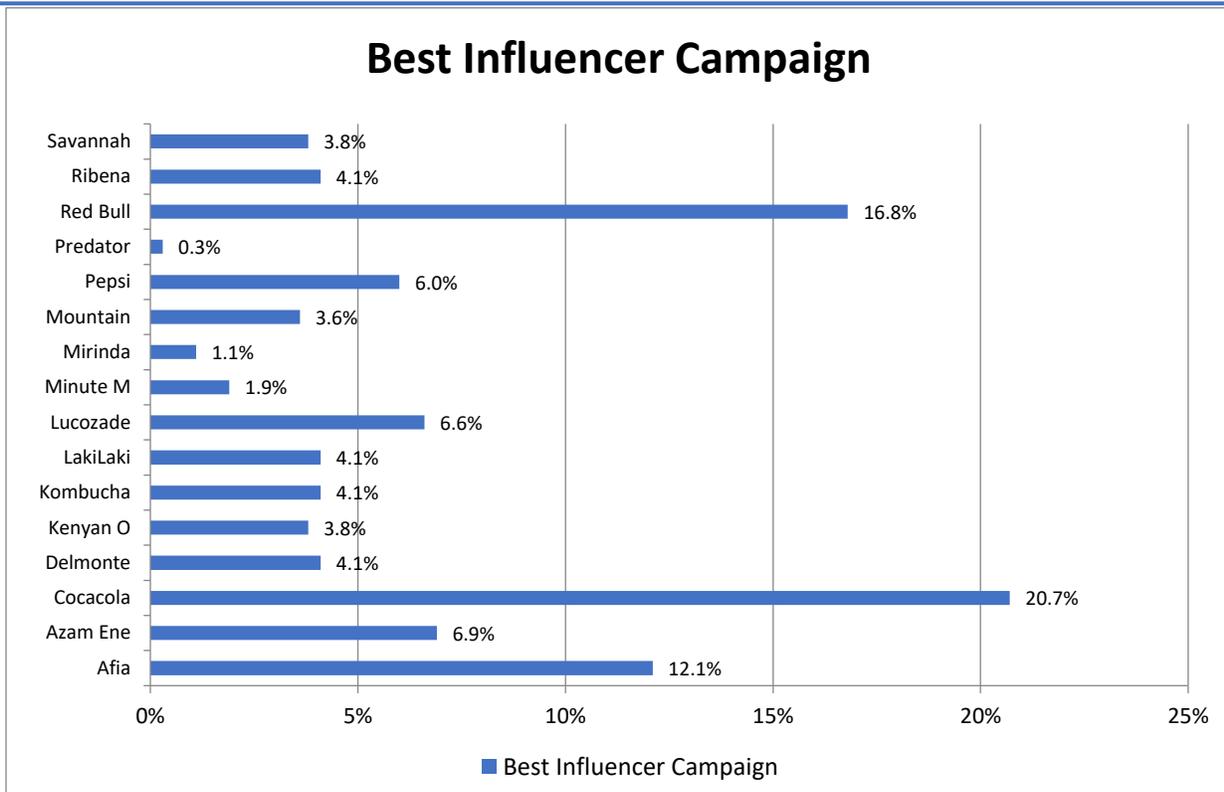


Figure 3: Best Social Media Influencer Campaigns

According to Figure 3, 20.7% of respondents indicated that CocaCola had the best influencer campaign among soft drink brands. Red Bull was selected by 16.8% of respondents as having the best influencer campaign followed by Afia Juice as indicated by 12.1% of respondents. Further, Azam energy at 6.9%, Lucozade at 6.6%, Pepsi at 6% were identified as having better influencer campaigns than Delmonte at 4.1%, Ribena at 4.1%, LakiLaki at 4.1%, Kombucha at 4.1%, Savannah at 3.8%, Kenya Originals (KO) at 3.8%, Mountain Dew at 3.6%, Minute Maid at 1.9%, Mirinda at 1.1% and Predator at 0.3%. The findings indicate that multinational soft drinks brands CocaCola and Red Bull had the greatest visibility due to their influencer marketing strategies. Afia Juice, which is produced by Kevian Kenya Ltd, was the highest Kenyan made soft drink brand as brands such as Lucozade, Azam and Pepsi are also foreign owned.

Brand Loyalty

This section examines the level and dimensions of brand loyalty among Generation Z respondents with respect to soft drink consumption. The analysis focuses on both behavioral and attitudinal indicators of loyalty, providing insight into the extent of repeat purchase intention, brand advocacy, resistance to switching, and trust. Establishing the baseline level of brand loyalty is essential for interpreting the subsequent regression results and for understanding how influencer attributes contribute to loyalty formation in a highly competitive and low-differentiation product category.

Table 1: Brand Loyalty

Brand Loyalty Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation
Associating the soft drink with the social media influencer	2.901	0.963
Re-purchasing the soft drink even when other options are cheaper	3.181	0.976
Recommending the soft drink to others	3.099	0.937
Not having any intentions of switching from the soft drink to another	2.956	0.932
Keeping upto date with information about the soft drink	3.080	0.972
Trusting the contents of the soft drink	3.022	0.936
Overall Mean and Standard Deviation	3.040	0.952

Table 1 indicates associating the soft drink with the social media influencer was done at a small extent by respondents (Mean=2.901, STD=0.963). Further, re-purchasing soft drinks even when other options are cheaper was moderately done (Mean=3.181, STD=0.976). Respondents moderately recommended soft drinks to others (Mean=3.099, STD=0.937). Not having any intentions of switching from the soft drink to another was done at a small extent by respondents (Mean=2.956, STD=0.932). On the other hand, respondents kept upto date with information about soft drinks (Mean=3.080, STD=0.972). Respondents moderately trusted the contents of the soft drinks (Mean=3.022, STD=0.936). The overall mean of brand loyalty among Gen Z Lower Kabete Students was above 3.0 while the standard deviation suggests small deviations around the mean (Mean=3.040, STD=0.952). The results imply that the brand loyalty of Gen Z Lower Kabete students to soft drink brands was moderate.

Regression Analysis

This section presents the results of the multiple regression analysis conducted to examine the influence of social media influencer attributes on soft drink brand loyalty among Generation Z consumers. The analysis assesses the overall explanatory power of the model and evaluates the magnitude, direction, and statistical significance of each influencer attribute. The findings provide empirical evidence on the relative importance of specific influencer characteristics in predicting brand loyalty, thereby addressing the study's core research objective and theoretical propositions.

Table 2: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.623 ^a	.388	.379	.43282
a. Predictors: (Constant), Relatability, Relevance, Authenticity, Trustworthiness, Credibility				

According to Table 2, the model's coefficient of correlation is above 0.5 ($R=0.623 > 0.5$) which suggests that social media influencers have a strong and positive correlation with brand loyalty of soft drinks among the Gen Z at the UON, LKC. The model's coefficient of determination ($R^2=0.388$) implies that 38.8% of variations in the brand loyalty of the Gen Z to soft drinks is due to the influence of social media influencers. However, 61.2% of variations in soft drinks brand loyalty among the Gen Z are due to other factors not included in the model.

Table 3: Analysis of Variance

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	42.497	5	8.499	45.372	.000 ^b
	Residual	67.064	358	.187		
	Total	109.561	363			
a. Dependent Variable: Brand Loyalty						
b. Predictors: (Constant), Relatability, Relevance, Authenticity, Trustworthiness, Credibility						

Table 3 indicates that the model applied by the study to investigate the influence of social media influencers on brand loyalty was significant at a 95% confidence level ($0.05 > p = 0.000$). The results imply that the role of social media influencers on brand loyalty is significant and can be concluded as not being due to chance.

Table 4: Coefficient Analysis

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.115	.133		8.363	.000
	Relevance	.137	.039	.170	3.520	.000
	Trustworthiness	-.024	.040	-.034	-.604	.546
	Authenticity	.149	.046	.192	3.259	.001
	Credibility	.099	.044	.130	2.256	.025
	Relatability	.267	.037	.350	7.215	.000
a. Dependent Variable: Brand Loyalty						

The analytical model below is derived from the results presented in Table 4:

$$\text{Brand Loyalty} = 1.115 + 0.137 \text{relevance} - 0.024 \text{ trustworthiness} + 0.149 \text{ authenticity} + 0.099 \text{ credibility} + 0.267 \text{ relatability} + e$$

According to the analytical model's constant term, when all factors are kept constant, brand loyalty is predicted to be equal to 1.115 units. The model shows that social media influencer's relevance plays a positive and significant role on brand loyalty (Beta=0.137, $0.05 > p = 0.000$). Increasing the relevance of social media influencers is predicted to significantly increase the brand loyalty of soft drinks among the Gen Z by 0.137 units. The model indicates that social media influencer's trustworthiness plays a negative and insignificant role on brand loyalty (Beta=-0.024, $0.05 < p = 0.546$). Increasing the social media influencer trustworthiness is predicted to non-significantly reduce brand loyalty of soft drinks among the Gen Z.

According to the study's analytical model, social media influencer's authenticity plays a positive and significant influence on the brand loyalty of soft drinks among the Gen Z (Beta=0.149, $0.05 > p = 0.000$). Therefore, an increase of social media influencer authenticity by one unit results in brand loyalty of soft drinks among the Gen Z increasing by 0.149 units. The model indicates that social media influencer credibility plays a positive and significant role on brand loyalty of soft drinks among the Gen Z (Beta=0.099, $0.05 > p = 0.025$). Thus, increasing social media influencers' credibility by one unit is predicated to result in brand loyalty of soft drinks among the Gen Z

increasing by 0.099 units. The analytical model provides that social media influencer's relatability plays a positive and significant role on the brand loyalty of soft drinks among the Gen Z (Beta=0.267, $0.05 > p = 0.000$). This finding suggests that increasing social media relatability by one unit is predicted to cause a 0.267-unit increase in the brand loyalty of soft drinks among the Gen Z.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how social media influencer attributes shape soft drink brand loyalty among Generation Z consumers in an emerging market context. Drawing on Social Influence Theory and the Consumer-Based Brand Equity framework, the study provides empirical evidence that social media influencers exert a statistically significant and substantively meaningful influence on brand loyalty. Collectively, influencer attributes explain a considerable proportion of variance in loyalty outcomes, underscoring the strategic relevance of influencer marketing in youth-oriented consumer markets.

The findings demonstrate that influencer relatability, authenticity, relevance, and credibility positively and significantly contribute to brand loyalty, with relatability emerging as the strongest predictor. This suggests that identification-based influence mechanisms—where consumers perceive influencers as socially similar, aspirational, or aligned with their lifestyles—play a dominant role in shaping loyalty among Generation Z. In contrast, trustworthiness was found to be statistically insignificant, indicating that traditional trust cues may be less salient for digitally sophisticated consumers who are aware of sponsorship arrangements and commercial intent.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings extend Social Influence Theory by highlighting the primacy of identification over compliance and internalization mechanisms in digitally mediated influence contexts. The results further enrich the Consumer-Based Brand Equity literature by demonstrating how influencer attributes function as antecedents of brand loyalty through symbolic and affective brand associations rather than purely informational persuasion. Together, the findings suggest that influencer marketing effectiveness among Generation Z is driven more by perceived social congruence and authenticity than by conventional credibility signals.

Recommendations and Implications

Managerial Implications

For practitioners in the soft drink and broader fast-moving consumer goods sectors, the findings indicate that influencer marketing strategies should prioritize relatability and authenticity over follower size or perceived authority. Brands targeting Generation Z are likely to achieve stronger loyalty outcomes by collaborating with influencers whose lifestyles, values, and communication styles align closely with those of their audiences. Emphasis should be placed on influencer-brand congruence and narrative coherence rather than overt promotional messaging.

Additionally, the weak role of trustworthiness suggests that transparency alone may be insufficient to drive loyalty. Instead, brands should focus on sustained influencer partnerships that enable repeated exposure, identity reinforcement, and emotional resonance. Data-driven influencer selection tools, including social analytics and artificial intelligence-based audience matching, may further enhance the effectiveness of such strategies.

Policy and Governance Implications

From a policy standpoint, the findings underscore the importance of strengthening digital marketing governance frameworks, particularly those related to influencer disclosure and ethical advertising targeting young consumers. While trustworthiness was not a significant predictor of loyalty, maintaining transparent and standardized disclosure practices remains essential for protecting consumer autonomy and sustaining long-term confidence in digital marketing ecosystems. Regulatory bodies and industry associations should therefore balance enforcement with adaptive guidelines that reflect evolving consumer perceptions and digital literacy levels among Generation Z.

Research Implications

The study highlights the need for future research to move beyond aggregate assessments of influencer marketing and toward more granular, theory-driven analyses of influence mechanisms. Longitudinal designs could provide deeper insight into how influencer-driven loyalty evolves over time, while comparative studies across generational cohorts and product categories may further clarify boundary conditions. Incorporating qualitative or experimental approaches may also enrich understanding of how authenticity and relatability are constructed and interpreted in influencer–follower relationships.

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