






“TikTok-based marketing communication and purchase decisions of Generation Z consumers: Evidence from Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam”

AUTHORS	Dinh Thi Mung   Ho Tran Quoc Hai  Tran Hoang Minh 
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Dinh Thi Mung, Lecturer at the Faculty of Business Administration, University of Labour and Social Affairs (Campus II), Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. (Corresponding author)

Ho Tran Quoc Hai, PhD, Lecturer at the Faculty of Management, Ho Chi Minh City University of Law, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

Tran Hoang Minh, PhD, Head of the Administration and Personnel Office, Lac Hong University, Dong Nai, Vietnam.

Dinh Thi Mung (Vietnam), Ho Tran Quoc Hai (Vietnam), Tran Hoang Minh (Vietnam)

TIKTOK-BASED MARKETING COMMUNICATION AND PURCHASE DECISIONS OF GENERATION Z CONSUMERS: EVIDENCE FROM HO CHI MINH CITY, VIETNAM

Abstract

TikTok has become an influential social commerce platform where marketing communication, user interaction, and purchasing activities increasingly intersect. Despite growing attention to TikTok marketing, existing studies have predominantly examined individual communication tools, offering limited understanding of how different communication activities collectively shape consumer responses.

This study examines the relationships between TikTok-based marketing communication activities, brand trust, and purchase decision among Generation Z consumers in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Data were collected from 290 TikTok users and analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM).

The results reveal that brand trust exerts a strong positive effect on purchase decision ($\beta = 0.745, p < 0.001$). Among the examined communication dimensions, public relations ($\beta = 0.384, p < 0.001$), event-related activities ($\beta = 0.158, p = 0.016$), and influencer communication ($\beta = 0.145, p = 0.038$) significantly enhance brand trust. In contrast, advertising, creative content, and livestreaming do not exhibit statistically significant direct effects on brand trust. Additional mediation analysis indicates that brand trust significantly mediates the effects of event marketing, influencer communication, and public relations on purchase decision.

The findings suggest that communication effectiveness on TikTok depends less on promotional exposure alone and more on consumers' perceptions of credibility, interaction quality, and relational trust. The study contributes to a better understanding of consumer behavior in short-video social commerce environments and offers practical implications for firms targeting Generation Z consumers.

Keywords TikTok marketing communication, brand trust, purchase decision, Generation Z, social commerce

JEL Classification M31, M37, M15

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the rapid expansion of the digital economy has substantially reshaped how consumers access information, interact with brands, and make purchasing decisions. Among emerging social media platforms, TikTok has attracted considerable attention due to its short-form video format, algorithm-driven content distribution, and highly interactive environment. These characteristics have not only transformed content consumption patterns but have also contributed to the platform's evolution into a space where entertainment, peer interaction, and commercial communication increasingly converge (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kaye et al., 2020).



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In Vietnam, this transformation appears particularly evident among Generation Z consumers. Having grown up in digitally connected environments, Gen Z users tend to prefer visual, fast-paced, and socially interactive content while relying heavily on experiential and peer-generated cues when evaluating brands and products (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2019). Consequently, TikTok is no longer used solely for entertainment purposes. It has increasingly become a platform through which trends are discovered, opinions are shaped, and consumption-related decisions are influenced. Recent industry evidence further suggests that a substantial proportion of young consumers have engaged in purchasing activities after interacting with TikTok-based content (DataReportal, 2024), highlighting the platform's growing relevance in contemporary consumer behavior.

From a marketing perspective, these developments raise important questions regarding how communication activities operate within social commerce environments. Unlike traditional communication settings, interactions on TikTok are continuously shaped by brands, content creators, platform algorithms, and users themselves. As a result, communication effectiveness may depend not only on message exposure but also on how consumers perceive credibility, authenticity, and social endorsement in a highly interactive digital context (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019).

Although scholarly interest in TikTok-related marketing has expanded rapidly, existing studies have predominantly examined specific communication practices, such as influencer marketing, user-generated content, or livestream commerce, as relatively separate phenomena (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020). While these studies have generated valuable insights, they provide only a partial understanding of how different communication activities collectively contribute to consumer responses within the same platform ecosystem.

Moreover, empirical evidence from emerging markets remains comparatively limited. Findings derived from other contexts may not fully capture how trust is developed and how purchasing decisions are formed among young consumers in rapidly evolving digital environments. This issue becomes particularly relevant in social commerce settings, where consumers frequently encounter large volumes of information and may rely on trust as a mechanism for evaluating credibility and reducing perceived uncertainty (Kim & Peterson, 2017). Despite growing attention to TikTok marketing, the processes through which communication activities influence purchase-related outcomes through trust remain insufficiently understood, particularly within the context of emerging economies.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

As TikTok continues to expand its influence among younger users, attention has increasingly shifted toward understanding how communication activities shape consumer responses within this distinctive digital environment. Marketing communication on digital platforms increasingly occurs through multiple communication touchpoints that connect brands and consumers in different ways (Kliatchko, 2008; Porcu et al., 2019). In contemporary digital environments, communication is no longer limited to firm-generated messages. Consumers are frequently exposed to content originating from brands, influencers, creators, and online communities, while simultane-

ously participating in interactions that shape their perceptions and evaluations (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Consequently, communication effectiveness may depend not only on message delivery but also on how consumers experience and interpret communication activities across the platform ecosystem (Kotler & Keller, 2016; Keller, 2022).

Within this context, customer engagement may involve cognitive, emotional, and behavioral interaction between consumers and brands (Brodie et al., 2011). At the same time, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) communication can shape how consumers interpret and respond to brand-related information through peer interaction and social validation (Chu & Kim, 2011). Consequently, communication effectiveness may depend not only on

isolated promotional activities but also on how different communication elements collectively interact within digital platforms.

TikTok represents a distinctive short-video communication environment characterized by highly visual content, algorithm-based personalization, and continuous user interaction (Kaye et al., 2020). Commercial communication is frequently embedded within entertainment-oriented content, making promotional messages appear less formal and more socially integrated. For Generation Z consumers, who tend to value authenticity, experiential interaction, and peer endorsement, these communication dynamics appear particularly relevant (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). In this regard, communication credibility may depend less on direct persuasion and more on how consumers experience and interpret brand interaction within the platform environment.

Beyond communication exposure itself, growing attention has been directed toward the role of trust in shaping how consumers interpret and respond to brand-related information. Brand trust has long been recognized as an important factor influencing consumer behavior, particularly in situations characterized by uncertainty and limited product evaluation (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In digital environments, trust may function as a mechanism that helps consumers assess credibility and reduce perceived risk when interacting with brands online (Kim & Peterson, 2017). Accordingly, trust should not be viewed solely as an outcome of communication activities, but also as a factor influencing how consumers interpret subsequent brand-related information.

Within social commerce environments such as TikTok, trust formation appears to develop through continuous interaction, social endorsement, and perceived authenticity rather than through exposure alone (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kim & Peterson, 2017). Communication flows dynamically across users, influencers, and brands, making interaction and relational experience increasingly important in shaping consumer perception. In this context, advertising activities may enhance brand visibility and legitimacy, although excessive promotional content can also generate skepticism among users (G. Belch & M. Belch, 2021).

By contrast, creative content, influencer communication, livestreaming, and event-based interaction often operate through experiential and socially embedded mechanisms (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020). Previous studies indicate that authenticity, responsiveness, and interactive engagement may contribute positively to trust formation, particularly among Generation Z consumers who tend to value relatable and socially grounded communication experiences (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019; Men & Tsai, 2016). Nevertheless, prior findings remain fragmented regarding how different communication activities collectively shape trust within TikTok-based social commerce environments.

Rather than emerging in isolation, consumer responses may be shaped by a combination of communication activities that operate through different interactional and persuasive mechanisms. Advertising is frequently discussed as an important antecedent of brand trust. Advertising continues to function as a basic signal of brand presence and legitimacy in the marketplace (G. Belch & M. Belch, 2021). However, in digital environments, its effect on trust is unlikely to be straightforward. Users do not simply notice advertising; they interpret how it appears and whether it fits their expectations.

On TikTok, advertising is often embedded within the content stream rather than clearly separated. This integration may reduce resistance, especially when the content resembles native platform styles. At the same time, if advertising is perceived as overly intrusive or overly commercial, it may trigger skepticism. In this sense, advertising effectiveness may be conditional rather than universal, depending on how users interpret its intent within the platform context.

Trust formation on TikTok is often influenced not only by what brands communicate but also by how those messages are presented. Given the platform's strong emphasis on entertainment and user participation, creative content has emerged as a particularly visible component of brand communication. Rather than relying on conventional promotional appeals, TikTok content frequently combines storytelling, humor, visual effects, and everyday experiences to attract attention and sustain

user interest. This creative approach may encourage users to engage more actively with branded content and develop more favorable perceptions of the sponsoring brand. Prior research has likewise suggested that content creativity can stimulate emotional and experiential responses, thereby enhancing user engagement (Ashley & Tuten, 2015).

In social media contexts, engaging and interactive content can also encourage active participation and strengthen user involvement (Men & Tsai, 2016). For Generation Z users, who tend to value authenticity, this type of content may reduce psychological resistance and foster a sense of familiarity (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019).

When content appears spontaneous rather than strategically constructed, it may serve as an early signal of credibility, thereby contributing to trust formation in subtle ways (Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020). This suggests that content effectiveness may lie not in persuasion itself, but in the perception of authenticity and experiential relevance.

Participation has become a central feature of user behavior on TikTok, where audiences are not limited to consuming content but are also encouraged to create, share, and interact with it. Within this environment, event-based marketing provides brands with opportunities to engage users through collective and interactive experiences. Rather than relying solely on one-way promotional messages, TikTok campaigns frequently incorporate hashtag challenges, short-video contests, and community-driven activities that invite active user involvement (Men & Tsai, 2016). As a result, consumers may become part of the communication process itself, contributing to the creation and dissemination of brand-related content across the platform.

For Generation Z consumers, participation itself may carry social and symbolic meaning, particularly in environments where visibility and peer interaction are highly valued. Previous studies suggest that interactive event activities can strengthen emotional connection and enhance engagement through shared experiences and social validation (Porcu et al., 2019). Similarly, TikTok challenges may contribute to higher levels of brand interaction and viral dissemination when users perceive

the activities as enjoyable, inclusive, and socially relevant (Tan, 2024). In this sense, event marketing may influence trust not only through promotional exposure but also through the creation of participatory and socially embedded experiences.

Consumers increasingly rely on recommendations and experiences shared by other individuals when evaluating products and brands in digital environments. This tendency is particularly evident on TikTok, where users are frequently exposed to content created by influencers rather than traditional brand-generated messages. Because influencer communication is often embedded within everyday experiences, opinions, and personal narratives, audiences may perceive such messages as more authentic and relatable. Previous studies have suggested that influencers can be viewed as more credible sources than conventional advertising, especially when their communication appears genuine and experience-based (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). Within the TikTok context, therefore, the effectiveness of influencer communication may depend not only on popularity or celebrity status but also on perceived sincerity, interaction quality, and social closeness.

Micro-influencers, in particular, are often viewed as more approachable and trustworthy because their communication style resembles ordinary user interaction rather than formal brand endorsement (Abidin, 2021). Research by Lou and Yuan (2019) further suggests that perceived authenticity and informational value can positively shape audience trust toward influencer-generated content. However, when influencer communication becomes excessively commercialized or overly promotional, users may respond with skepticism, thereby weakening its persuasive effectiveness (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Consequently, the role of influencer communication in trust formation may depend on how audiences interpret the authenticity and credibility of the content being delivered.

One of the persistent challenges in online shopping is the limited ability of consumers to directly examine products before making a purchase decision. As digital commerce continues to evolve, interactive communication formats have become increasingly important in reducing this constraint. TikTok livestreams provide a setting in which con-

sumers can observe product demonstrations, ask questions, and receive immediate feedback from sellers or content creators. Through these real-time interactions, users may obtain richer product information and develop a clearer understanding of product attributes. Previous research suggests that livestreaming can reduce informational uncertainty and enhance consumers' confidence during the evaluation process (Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020). Compared with static promotional content, livestreaming may also foster stronger perceptions of transparency, immediacy, and interpersonal connection.

Nevertheless, the trust-building effect of livestreaming may not occur automatically. Previous studies suggest that younger consumers tend to evaluate livestream content based on perceived authenticity rather than mere promotional intensity (Sun et al., 2019). When livestream sessions appear excessively scripted, exaggerated, or sales-oriented, users may become skeptical regarding the credibility of the information presented. In contrast, natural interaction, spontaneous communication, and responsive engagement may contribute more positively to trust formation. Therefore, the effectiveness of livestreaming may depend not only on technological interactivity but also on how consumers interpret the sincerity and transparency of the communication process.

Establishing trust has become increasingly challenging in digital environments where consumers are exposed to large volumes of information from diverse sources. Under such conditions, brands are often expected to demonstrate not only product quality but also openness, responsiveness, and genuine concern for stakeholder interests. Public relations activities can contribute to this process by facilitating ongoing communication and fostering meaningful relationships with consumers. On social media platforms such as TikTok, these efforts are frequently reflected through everyday interactions, community engagement, and value-oriented communication rather than through formal corporate messages alone (Men & Tsai, 2016; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

On TikTok, trust may be shaped by how brands respond to user comments, handle feedback, and participate in ongoing conversations. Such inter-

actions can make the brand appear more human and approachable. Previous research suggests that transparent and responsive communication may enhance trust more effectively than purely promotional messages (Men & Tsai, 2016). Over time, such interactions may accumulate, gradually shaping a more stable perception of brand trustworthiness.

Making purchase decisions in digital environments often involves a certain degree of uncertainty. Consumers are frequently required to evaluate products without direct physical inspection and must rely on information provided through online interactions, reviews, and platform-based communication. Under these circumstances, trust becomes an important mechanism that helps individuals reduce perceived risk and make decisions with greater confidence. Previous studies suggest that consumers who trust a brand are generally more willing to rely on its claims and maintain positive expectations regarding future performance (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Kim & Peterson, 2017). Within social media settings, these evaluations may also be influenced by eWOM, as interactions among users can shape how brand-related information is interpreted and acted upon (Chu & Kim, 2011).

Building on this, prior research suggests that higher levels of trust tend to increase the likelihood that consumers move from evaluation to actual purchase behavior (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). However, the process of trust formation remains subject to debate, particularly regarding the relative importance of repeated exposure versus socially embedded interactions. For Generation Z users on TikTok, however, trust formation may not occur instantly but instead develops gradually through repeated exposure to content, influencer communication, and observable brand behavior. Once formed, this trust may enhance consumers' willingness to engage in purchase decisions, particularly within social commerce environments where transactions can be completed directly on the platform (Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020). In this sense, trust can be interpreted as a bridging mechanism that connects communication exposure with subsequent behavioral outcomes.

Consumers are exposed to a wide range of communication activities while using TikTok, yet exposure itself does not necessarily translate into

behavioral responses. A promotional message may attract attention, an influencer may generate interest, or a livestream may provide useful information; however, these experiences are unlikely to influence purchase decisions unless they foster favorable evaluations of the brand. In other words, consumers often respond not only to communication activities themselves but also to the meanings and impressions derived from those interactions. This perspective aligns with integrated marketing communication research, which emphasizes that communication effectiveness emerges through the combined influence of multiple touchpoints and the way consumers interpret those experiences over time (Kliatchko, 2008; Porcu et al., 2019).

In social commerce environments, consumers are continuously exposed to a mixture of commercial content, peer-generated information, and creator-led recommendations. Such conditions often create informational complexity rather than certainty. As a result, consumers may rely on trust as a means of assessing credibility and reducing perceived risk before committing to a purchase decision (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Kim & Peterson, 2017). In this sense, communication activities are unlikely to affect purchase behavior solely because they attract attention; their influence may emerge when they contribute to the development of favorable trust-related evaluations.

Previous studies have shown that authenticity, responsiveness, social endorsement, and meaningful interaction can strengthen consumer trust in digital environments (Chu & Kim, 2011; Men & Tsai, 2016; Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). Similar arguments have been advanced in the influencer marketing and social commerce literature, where consumers frequently rely on recommendations, interactions, and observable experiences when evaluating brands and products (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020). Once trust has been established, consumers generally become more willing to move beyond information evaluation and engage in actual purchasing behavior (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

Viewed collectively, these arguments suggest that brand trust occupies a central position in the relationship between TikTok-based communication activities and purchase decision. Rather than rep-

resenting merely an outcome of communication efforts, trust may serve as the mechanism through which communication experiences are translated into behavioral responses. This reasoning provides the theoretical foundation for examining the mediating role of brand trust in the proposed research model.

Viewed collectively, the current body of evidence leaves several questions unresolved, particularly regarding the combined influence of communication activities and the role of trust in emerging social commerce settings. Although prior studies have increasingly emphasized the growing role of TikTok in digital marketing communication, several issues remain insufficiently clarified. Existing research has largely focused on individual communication tools rather than examining how multiple communication activities collectively shape consumer responses within short-video platform environments. Besides, empirical evidence regarding the mediating role of brand trust among Generation Z consumers in emerging markets such as Vietnam remains relatively limited. These gaps provide the foundation for the present study.

To explore these relationships more comprehensively, the present study develops a research framework linking communication activities, brand trust, and purchase decision within the TikTok context.

This study aims to examine how TikTok-based marketing communication activities influence purchase decision among Generation Z consumers in Vietnam through the mediating role of brand trust. Besides, the study seeks to clarify whether different communication dimensions contribute differently to trust formation and subsequent consumer behavioral responses within TikTok-based social commerce environments.

Drawing on the theoretical arguments and empirical evidence discussed above, the study proposes the following hypotheses:

- H1: Advertising on TikTok positively influences brand trust.*
- H2: Creative content on TikTok positively influences brand trust.*

- H3: *Event marketing and promotions on TikTok positively influence brand trust.*
- H4: *Influencer/KOL communication on TikTok positively influences brand trust.*
- H5: *Livestreaming on TikTok positively influences brand trust.*
- H6: *Public relations activities on TikTok positively influence brand trust.*
- H7: *Brand trust positively influences purchase decision.*

The preceding discussion suggests that consumers' purchase decisions on TikTok may be shaped by multiple forms of communication encountered during their platform experience. However, the influence of these communication activities is unlikely to occur directly in all cases. Rather, consumers often interpret and evaluate brand-related information before translating those evaluations into behavioral responses. From this perspective, brand trust may serve as an important mechanism through which advertising, creative content, influencer communication, livestreaming, event marketing, and public relations activities contribute to purchase decision formation. To examine these relationships, a conceptual model is devel-

oped that links TikTok communication activities to purchase decisions through the mediating role of brand trust. The proposed research framework is presented in Figure 1.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Examining the interplay among communication activities, brand trust, and purchase decision requires an analytical approach capable of capturing multiple relationships within a unified framework. This study adopts a quantitative design to examine how TikTok-based marketing communication activities are associated with brand trust and purchase decision among Generation Z consumers. Rather than isolating a single causal relationship, the analysis considers how multiple constructs interact within a broader structural configuration, thereby reflecting the complexity of communication processes in digital environments. Accordingly, the study examines the simultaneous relationships among multiple latent constructs within the proposed framework.

Given the presence of multiple latent variables and the possibility of indirect relationships, Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed as the primary analytical technique. This approach is widely used

Source: Developed by the authors.

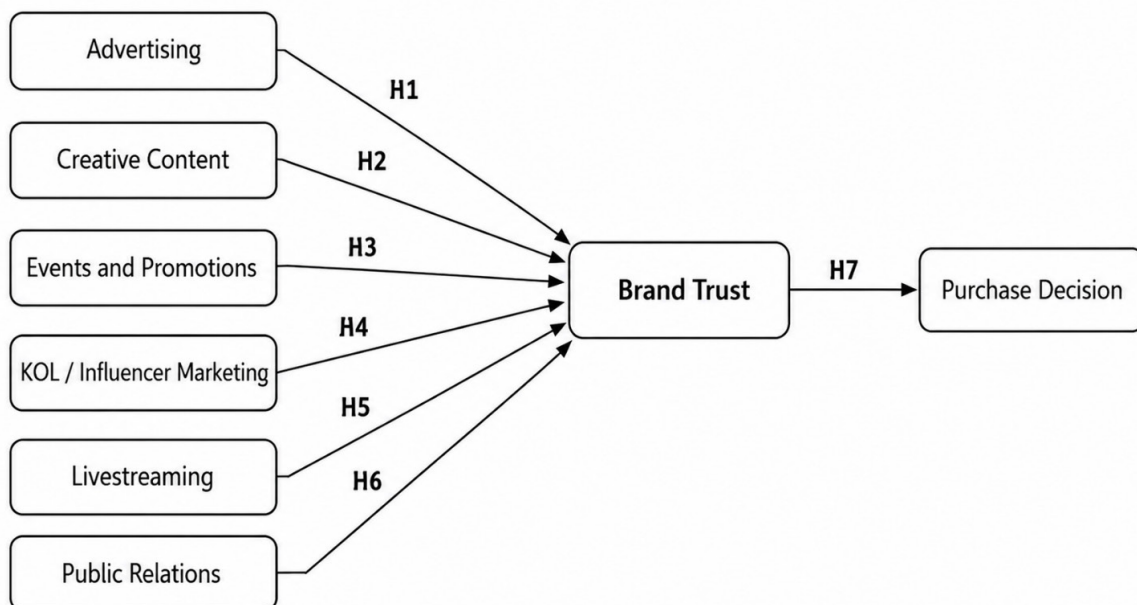


Figure 1. Research model of TikTok-based marketing communication activities

in marketing research when the objective is to explain variance in key outcomes and to model relatively complex interdependencies among constructs (Hair et al., 2021). In addition, PLS-SEM may be particularly appropriate in prediction-oriented settings, where theoretical relationships are still evolving and not yet fully stabilized, thereby allowing for greater flexibility in modeling emergent patterns within the data.

The study is situated within a rapidly developing digital environment. TikTok-based social commerce, while growing quickly, remains an emerging phenomenon in which user behavior may vary across contexts rather than follow stable patterns. Therefore, a prediction-oriented analytical approach was considered appropriate for the present study.

The empirical setting is Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, where TikTok usage among young consumers is widespread and increasingly embedded in everyday consumption practices. This context provides a relevant setting for examining how communication activities operate within a social commerce environment characterized by high user engagement and continuous content interaction. Data were collected between September and November 2025 through a structured questionnaire administered to Generation Z TikTok users in Ho Chi Minh City.

To operationalize the proposed constructs, the study drew upon established measurement scales while considering the distinctive features of the TikTok environment. The measurement items were derived from prior studies on digital marketing communication, brand trust, and online purchasing behavior. Rather than adopting these scales without modification, they were modestly adapted to better reflect the specific characteristics of the TikTok environment, including short-form video content, livestream interactions, influencer engagement, and in-platform promotional activities. In this sense, the adaptation process may help ensure that the constructs are contextually relevant rather than mechanically transferred from prior settings.

The study examines several communication activities commonly observed on TikTok, namely advertising, creative content, influencer/KOL communication, livestreaming, event-based cam-

paigns, and public relations. Although these activities coexist within the same platform environment, they may influence consumers in different ways. Brand trust and purchase decision are therefore treated as separate constructs reflecting consumers' evaluations and subsequent behavioral responses.

All measurement items were assessed using a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." This response format is widely adopted in behavioral and survey-based research for capturing individual attitudes and perceptions (Likert, 1932). Besides, it may be particularly suitable for studies involving younger respondents, as its concise and intuitive structure facilitates efficient evaluation without imposing excessive cognitive burden.

Before the main data collection, the questionnaire was reviewed by academic experts and pre-tested with a small group of TikTok users. Based on the feedback obtained, minor refinements were introduced to improve clarity and reduce potential ambiguity in item wording. This step may contribute to enhancing content validity and ensuring that respondents interpret the items in a consistent manner.

With the measurement framework in place, the study proceeded to obtain empirical evidence from Generation Z consumers actively engaged with TikTok. The dataset for this study was obtained through an online survey disseminated across social media channels and student communities in Ho Chi Minh City. This approach may be considered appropriate given the digital nature of the research context, where target respondents are actively engaged on online platforms. A non-probability convenience sampling approach was employed due to the accessibility of respondents within online environments. To maintain alignment with the research objectives, only individuals who identified as Generation Z and reported prior TikTok usage were retained in the final sample. Prior to analysis, the raw data underwent several screening procedures. Responses that were duplicated, incomplete, or submitted within an unusually short time frame were excluded to improve data reliability. After this process, 290 valid observations remained.

Table 1. Sample characteristics of respondents (n = 290)

Source: The authors' compilation.

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	63	21.7
	Female	227	78.3
Age	Below 18	9	3.1
	18–22	274	94.5
	23–26	6	2.1
	Above 26	1	0.3
Education	High school	6	2.1
	Undergraduate	280	96.6
	Postgraduate	4	1.4
Monthly income	< 5 million VND	228	78.6
	5–10 million VND	47	16.2
	> 10 million VND	15	5.1
TikTok purchase experience	Yes	283	97.6
	No	7	2.4

Most respondents were female and aged between 18 and 22. Besides, a substantial proportion reported prior purchasing experience on TikTok and frequent platform usage, suggesting that the sample reflects active engagement in TikTok-based social commerce activities.

To derive meaningful insights from the collected responses, several analytical techniques were employed to examine the reliability, validity, and relationships among the study constructs. The data analysis procedure was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, descriptive statistics were produced using SPSS to summarize respondent characteristics and general response patterns. This step provided an initial overview of the dataset prior to structural model evaluation.

In the second stage, the proposed model was analyzed using SmartPLS 4.1.1. The evaluation followed the standard procedures commonly applied in PLS-SEM analysis. The measurement model was first assessed by examining indicator reliability, internal consistency, convergent validity, and discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2021; Henseler et al., 2015). Indicators that did not meet the recommended thresholds were excluded to improve measurement quality.

Subsequently, the structural model was evaluated through Variance Inflation Factors (VIF), coefficients of determination (R^2), and bootstrapping procedures with 5,000 subsamples. Indirect effects were also examined to assess the mediating role of

brand trust within the proposed framework. This procedure provides a basis for evaluating the proposed relationships within the research model.

Beyond methodological rigor, the study also sought to ensure that participant rights and data confidentiality were appropriately protected throughout the research process. Participation in the survey was voluntary, and respondents were informed that their answers would be used exclusively for academic purposes. No personally identifiable information was collected at any stage of the study.

All responses were handled with strict confidentiality, and data anonymity was maintained throughout the research process. Participants were also free to withdraw from the survey at any point, thereby ensuring that the data collection process adhered to basic ethical principles.

3. RESULTS

An initial evaluation was conducted to verify the adequacy of the measurement model before proceeding to the assessment of the proposed structural relationships. A preliminary assessment of the measurement model was carried out to verify whether the proposed constructs achieved acceptable levels of reliability and validity. Outer loadings, internal consistency indicators, and convergent validity measures were examined prior to testing the structural model. The results of this assessment are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Indicator outer loadings

Source: The authors' compilation.

Construct	Item	Loading
Advertising	AD1	0.771
	AD2	0.816
	AD3	0.795
	AD4	0.859
	AD5	0.85
Brand Trust	BT1	0.892
	BT2	0.877
	BT3	0.888
	BT4	0.837
Creative Content	CC1	0.832
	CC2	0.849
	CC3	0.817
	CC4	0.786
Event Marketing	EV1	0.79
	EV2	0.84
	EV3	0.85
	EV4	0.857
Influencer/KOL	KOL1	0.901
	KOL2	0.897
	KOL3	0.832
	KOL4	0.856
	KOL5	0.853
Livestream	LS1	0.824
	LS2	0.903
	LS3	0.819
	LS4	0.832
Purchase Decision	PD1	0.851
	PD2	0.843
	PD3	0.804
	PD4	0.839
Public Relations	PR1	0.85
	PR2	0.853
	PR3	0.847
	PR4	0.845

Note: Item CC5 was removed due to low loading (< 0.70).

The measurement model was first assessed by examining indicator reliability through outer loadings. As shown in Table 2, one item (CC5) did not meet the recommended threshold and was therefore removed from further analysis. Following this adjustment, all remaining indicators exhibited loadings above the recommended threshold of 0.70, suggesting that they are adequately associated with their respective latent constructs.

These results indicate that the measurement items provide a reliable representation of the underlying dimensions of TikTok-based marketing communication activities, brand trust, and purchase decision.

Convergent validity was further evaluated using Composite Reliability (CR) And Average Variance Extracted (AVE), following established SEM guidelines (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). As reported in Table 3, all CR values exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70, while AVE values are above 0.50. This pattern suggests that each construct explains a substantial proportion of the variance in its indicators and demonstrates adequate internal consistency. Collectively, these findings support the convergent validity of the measurement model.

Table 3. Reliability and convergent validity

Source: The authors' compilation.

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
AD	0.876	0.91	0.67
BT	0.897	0.928	0.763
CC	0.84	0.892	0.674
EV	0.855	0.902	0.697
KOL	0.918	0.939	0.754
LS	0.866	0.909	0.714
PD	0.855	0.902	0.696
PR	0.871	0.911	0.72

As presented in Table 3, all constructs demonstrate satisfactory levels of internal consistency and convergent validity. Cronbach's Alpha values range from 0.840 to 0.918, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. Similarly, composite reliability values are above 0.70, indicating adequate reliability across all constructs. Besides, all Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values exceed the minimum threshold of 0.50, suggesting adequate convergent validity. These findings indicate that the measurement model satisfies the recommended reliability and validity criteria for subsequent structural analysis.

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio, which provides a more stringent assessment of construct distinctiveness (Henseler et al., 2015). As reported in Table 4, all HTMT values remain within the recommended threshold, indicating adequate discriminant validity among the constructs.

It is worth noting that some HTMT values involving conceptually related constructs, particularly Brand Trust and Purchase Decision, approach this threshold. This pattern is not unexpected, as these constructs are theoretically linked within the con-

text of social commerce, where trust formation often precedes and informs purchasing behavior. In this sense, the relatively high HTMT values may reflect conceptual proximity rather than a lack of discriminant validity.

Overall, the results suggest that discriminant validity is adequately established, and the constructs capture distinct yet theoretically related dimensions within the proposed model.

Table 4. HTMT discriminant validity matrix

Source: The authors' compilation.

	AD	CC	EV	KOL	LS	BT	PD
AD	–						
CC	0.716	–					
EV	0.771	0.597	–				
KOL	0.665	0.601	0.717	–			
LS	0.695	0.579	0.825	0.729	–		
BT	0.683	0.615	0.765	0.68	0.734	–	
PD	0.696	0.694	0.782	0.71	0.85	0.846	–

Viewed collectively, the results obtained from Tables 2–4 provide confidence in the adequacy of the measurement model. The observed reliability and validity indicators suggest that the constructs capture their intended concepts while remaining empirically distinguishable from one another. On this basis, the analysis can proceed to the examination of the structural relationships proposed in the research model.

With the model demonstrating acceptable explanatory power, the focus shifted to examining how the proposed relationships were reflected in the empirical results. Collinearity among predictor constructs was assessed using Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values. As reported in Table 5, all VIF values are well below commonly accepted thresholds, indicating that multicollinearity is not a concern in the proposed model.

More specifically, VIF values range from 1.941 to 2.819 for the relationships predicting Brand Trust, while the value for the path from Brand Trust to Purchase Decision is equal to 1. These values suggest that the predictor constructs do not exhibit problematic levels of intercorrelation.

In this sense, the estimated path coefficients are unlikely to be biased by collinearity effects, thereby providing a reliable basis for interpreting the structural relationships in subsequent analyses.

Table 5. Collinearity assessment (VIF values)

Source: The authors' compilation.

Structural path	VIF
AD → BT	2.332
CC → BT	1.941
EV → BT	2.819
KOL → BT	2.157
LS → BT	2.604
PR → BT	2.475
BT → PD	1

The explanatory power of the structural model was evaluated using the coefficient of determination (R^2). As shown in Table 6, the R^2 value for Brand Trust is 0.627, indicating that TikTok-based communication activities explain a substantial proportion of variance in trust perceptions.

For Purchase Decision, the R^2 value is 0.554, suggesting that Brand Trust accounts for a meaningful share of variance in purchasing behavior among respondents. While these values do not indicate complete explanatory coverage, they may be considered moderate to relatively strong in the context of behavioral research, where consumer responses are often influenced by multiple external factors.

Besides, the small differences between R^2 and adjusted R^2 values suggest that the model is not overly complex and does not suffer from substantial overfitting. Taken together, these findings indicate that the proposed model demonstrates satisfactory explanatory power, thereby providing a reasonable basis for subsequent hypothesis testing and interpretation of structural relationships.

Table 6. Coefficient of determination (R^2)

Source: The authors' compilation.

Endogenous construct	R^2	Adjusted R^2
Brand Trust (BT)	0.627	0.62
Purchase Decision (PD)	0.554	0.553

The resulting path estimates offer a clearer picture of how the proposed relationships operate within the context of TikTok-based social commerce. The findings indicate that not all communication activities contribute equally to the formation of Brand Trust. Event Marketing ($\beta = 0.158$, $p = 0.016$) and Influencer/KOL communication ($\beta = 0.145$, $p = 0.038$) exhibit statistically significant

positive effects, suggesting that interaction-based and socially embedded communication activities play a meaningful role in shaping trust perceptions. Notably, Public Relations demonstrates the strongest positive association with Brand Trust ($\beta = 0.384, p < 0.001$), indicating that ongoing communication, responsiveness, and perceived transparency may be particularly influential in the TikTok environment. This finding extends prior research by emphasizing the cumulative and relational nature of trust formation in interactive digital environments (Men & Tsai, 2016).

By contrast, Advertising ($\beta = 0.109, p = 0.196$), Creative Content ($\beta = 0.033, p = 0.626$), and Livestreaming ($\beta = 0.105, p = 0.121$) do not exhibit statistically significant direct effects on Brand Trust. This pattern suggests that exposure-oriented or content-driven formats may not be sufficient, on their own, to foster trust among Generation Z users, particularly in highly interactive social media contexts.

Brand Trust, in turn, demonstrates a strong and statistically significant effect on Purchase Decision ($\beta = 0.745, p < 0.001$). This finding indicates that higher levels of trust are associated with an increased likelihood of purchasing behavior, reinforcing the role of trust as a central mechanism linking communication activities to consumer responses.

Overall, the results support *H3, H4, H6, and H7*, while *H1, H2, and H5* are not supported.

A further question concerns whether the effects of communication activities are transmitted through brand trust before being reflected in purchase-related outcomes. Beyond the direct relationships reported above, the study further examined whether Brand Trust functions as a mechanism through which TikTok-based marketing communication activities shape consumers' purchase decisions. The mediation analysis was performed using the bootstrapping procedure in SmartPLS 4.1.1, and the results are presented in Table 8.

The findings reveal that the indirect effects are not uniform across the examined communication dimensions. Event Marketing ($\beta = 0.117, p = 0.018$), Influencer/KOL Communication ($\beta = 0.108, p = 0.039$), and Public Relations ($\beta = 0.286, p < 0.001$) exhibit statistically significant indirect effects on Purchase Decision through Brand Trust. These results suggest that trust plays a meaningful role in translating certain communication activities into consumer behavioral responses.

Among the examined dimensions, Public Relations demonstrates the strongest indirect effect. A possible explanation is that transparent communication, responsiveness, and ongoing in-

Table 7. Structural path coefficients

Source: The authors' compilation.

Hypothesis	Path	β	p-value	Result
<i>H1</i>	AD → BT	0.109	0.196	Rejected
<i>H2</i>	CC → BT	0.033	0.626	Rejected
<i>H3</i>	EV → BT	0.158	0.016	Supported
<i>H4</i>	KOL → BT	0.145	0.038	Supported
<i>H5</i>	LS → BT	0.105	0.121	Rejected
<i>H6</i>	PR → BT	0.384	<0.001	Strongly supported
<i>H7</i>	BT → PD	0.745	<0.001	Strongly supported

Table 8. Indirect effects through brand trust

Source: The authors' compilation.

Indirect path	Indirect effect (β)	p-value	Mediation result
AD → BT → PD	0.082	0.193	Not supported
CC → BT → PD	0.024	0.626	Not supported
EV → BT → PD	0.117	0.018	Supported
KOL → BT → PD	0.108	0.039	Supported
LS → BT → PD	0.078	0.129	Not supported
PR → BT → PD	0.286	<0.001	Strongly supported

teraction may gradually strengthen perceptions of credibility, which subsequently increase consumers' willingness to purchase. Event-related activities and influencer communication also appear to contribute to purchasing behavior indirectly by reinforcing trust, although their effects are comparatively more modest.

By contrast, the indirect effects associated with Advertising, Creative Content, and Livestreaming are not statistically significant. While these activities may attract attention and generate engagement, the findings suggest that they do not necessarily foster the level of trust required to influence purchase decision indirectly within the present context.

Overall, the results indicate that Brand Trust operates as an important explanatory mechanism linking selected communication activities with consumer purchase decision in TikTok-based social commerce environments.

4. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Several noteworthy patterns emerge from the empirical findings. This study examined the relationships between TikTok-based marketing communication activities, brand trust, and purchase decision among Generation Z consumers. The findings provide several insights into how communication practices operate within a social commerce environment that is inherently dynamic and interaction-driven. More importantly, they suggest that consumer responses may not be determined by isolated communication exposures, but rather by how these experiences are interpreted over time.

A consistent result concerns the strong relationship between brand trust and purchase decision. This finding indicates that, within the TikTok context, purchasing behavior may not be driven solely by exposure to content, but instead emerges from evaluative processes through which users assess credibility and reliability (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). This result is broadly consistent with prior research emphasizing the central role of trust in shaping purchasing behavior in digital environments. In digital environments characterized by

high information uncertainty, trust appears to function as a cognitive mechanism that reduces perceived risk and facilitates decision-making (Kim & Peterson, 2017). In this sense, trust may act as a necessary condition that bridges communication exposure and behavioral response.

At the same time, the results indicate that not all communication activities contribute equally to trust formation. Event marketing, influencer/KOL communication, and public relations exhibit statistically significant positive effects on brand trust. This pattern may reflect the importance of participation and social interaction in shaping trust-related perceptions. Interactive campaigns and influencer-generated content often create a sense of proximity, relatability, and social validation, which may enhance perceived authenticity, an important driver of trust among younger users (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). This result is consistent with prior research suggesting that socially embedded and interactive communication formats are particularly effective in fostering trust among younger consumers. Thus, communication effectiveness may depend less on message delivery and more on the experiential and social context in which the message is embedded.

By contrast, advertising, creative content, and livestreaming do not show statistically significant direct effects on brand trust. This partially supports prior research on livestreaming, but also suggests that its effectiveness may be more context-dependent than previously assumed (Sun et al., 2019). This finding suggests that exposure-oriented or content-driven formats may not be sufficient, on their own, to foster trust in the TikTok environment. This finding contrasts with traditional advertising literature, where exposure is often assumed to positively influence consumer trust. Given the high frequency of commercial content on the platform, users may develop a degree of resistance or selective attention, thereby reducing the marginal impact of such formats. In particular, livestreaming, although interactive in form, may in some cases be perceived as overly sales-oriented, which could undermine its ability to strengthen trust. This implies that interactivity alone does not guarantee credibility; perceived intent remains a critical factor.

The mediation results offer a clearer view of how communication activities are translated into purchasing behavior. Only event marketing, influencer/KOL communication, and public relations exhibit significant indirect effects on purchase decision through brand trust, with public relations showing the strongest influence. This pattern suggests that trust formation may be a cumulative and process-based outcome, shaped by consistent communication and observable brand behavior over time rather than by isolated promotional efforts. In this sense, public relations activities may play a stabilizing role in reinforcing long-term credibility.

Overall, the results suggest that consumer behavior on TikTok involves a multi-stage process. This pattern is consistent with contemporary views that emphasize the experiential nature of brand value formation (Keller, 2022). At the same time, the results also suggest that not all communication formats operate in line with traditional assumptions, highlighting the need to reconsider the role of exposure in trust formation. Communication activities may initially attract attention; however, trust-related evaluations appear to play a central role before purchase decisions are made. This process-oriented perspective highlights the importance of considering not only what communication tools are used, but also how they interact in shaping user perception and behavior.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest several considerations for firms seeking to engage Generation Z consumers through TikTok. First, brand trust should be approached as a strategic outcome of communication activities rather than an automatic consequence of exposure. The findings suggest that consistency, responsiveness, and transparency may contribute more substantially to trust formation than the mere frequency of content delivery. In this sense, managers may need to prioritize the quality and coherence of communication over volume alone.

Second, event-based marketing appears to be particularly effective in fostering trust within the TikTok environment. Interactive campaigns that encourage user participation may strengthen engagement and gradually build familiarity with the brand. However, the effectiveness of such activi-

ties may depend on how authentically participation is facilitated, rather than on the scale of the campaign itself.

Third, influencer strategies may benefit from prioritizing perceived authenticity over reach. Collaborations with content creators who are relatable and contextually aligned with the target audience may generate stronger trust effects than partnerships driven primarily by visibility metrics. This suggests that influencer credibility may be more important than audience size in shaping consumer perceptions.

Fourth, public relations activities play a critical role in shaping trust perceptions. The way brands respond to user feedback, manage conversations, and demonstrate transparency may signal credibility more effectively than traditional promotional messages. Over time, such interactions may accumulate and contribute to a more stable and enduring perception of trustworthiness.

Finally, advertising and livestreaming should be approached with caution. While these formats can increase visibility and engagement, excessive or overly scripted content may reduce perceived authenticity, particularly among Generation Z users. This implies that communication effectiveness may depend not only on format, but also on how users interpret the underlying intent of the message.

At the same time, the scope and design of the study leave opportunities for future research to extend and refine the current understanding of the phenomenon. Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the sample focuses on Generation Z users in Ho Chi Minh City, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other demographic or geographical contexts. Consumer responses in social commerce environments are likely to vary across age groups, cultural settings, and levels of digital maturity.

Second, the use of a cross-sectional design captures perceptions at a single point in time and therefore does not fully reflect how trust may evolve through repeated interactions. Given that trust formation is often a cumulative process, the observed relationships may represent only a partial view of underlying dynamics.

These limitations provide several avenues for future research. Subsequent studies may extend this work by examining other demographic segments or by conducting cross-cultural comparisons to explore contextual differences in communication effectiveness. Besides, longitudinal designs may offer deeper insights into how trust develops and stabilizes over time in response to ongoing communication exposure.

Further research may also incorporate additional variables, such as perceived authenticity, perceived credibility, or prior negative experiences, to better capture the complexity of consumer decision-making in TikTok-based social commerce environments. Such extensions may contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how communication strategies translate into behavioral outcomes under varying conditions.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how TikTok-based marketing communication activities influence brand trust and purchase decision among Generation Z consumers in Vietnam. By focusing on a short-video platform environment, the study also sought to clarify how different communication dimensions contribute to consumer behavioral responses within an increasingly interactive and socially embedded digital context.

The findings suggest that brand trust plays an important role in shaping purchase decision within TikTok-based social commerce environments. More specifically, event marketing, influencer/KOL communication, and public relations demonstrate significant positive effects on brand trust, whereas advertising, creative content, and livestreaming do not exhibit statistically significant direct effects within the proposed model. The mediation analysis further indicates that brand trust functions as an important mechanism linking communication activities with consumer behavioral responses. These results imply that communication effectiveness on TikTok may depend less on exposure intensity alone and more on perceived authenticity, interaction quality, and relational credibility.

From a broader perspective, the study highlights that communication activities on TikTok do not appear to operate as isolated promotional tools, but rather as interconnected experiences through which users gradually evaluate brand credibility before making purchasing decisions. Accordingly, firms targeting Generation Z consumers may benefit from prioritizing trust-oriented and interaction-driven communication strategies rather than relying primarily on promotional visibility or repetitive exposure.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI IN THE WRITING PROCESS

The authors used Grammarly to support language refinement, sentence restructuring, and improvement of academic writing clarity during the manuscript preparation process. All conceptual development, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and final revisions were conducted and verified entirely by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization: Dinh Thi Mung, Ho Tran Quoc Hai, Tran Hoang Minh.

Data curation: Dinh Thi Mung, Ho Tran Quoc Hai, Tran Hoang Minh.

Formal analysis: Dinh Thi Mung, Ho Tran Quoc Hai, Tran Hoang Minh.

Funding acquisition: Dinh Thi Mung.

Investigation: Dinh Thi Mung, Ho Tran Quoc Hai.

Methodology: Dinh Thi Mung, Ho Tran Quoc Hai, Tran Hoang Minh.

Project administration: Dinh Thi Mung, Tran Hoang Minh.

Resources: Dinh Thi Mung, Ho Tran Quoc Hai.

Software: Dinh Thi Mung, Ho Tran Quoc Hai.

Supervision: Dinh Thi Mung, Tran Hoang Minh.

Validation: Dinh Thi Mung, Ho Tran Quoc Hai.

Visualization: Dinh Thi Mung, Hoang Minh Tran.

Writing – original draft: Dinh Thi Mung, Ho Tran Quoc Hai, Tran Hoang Minh.

Writing – review & editing: Dinh Thi Mung, Ho Tran Quoc Hai, Tran Hoang Minh.

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