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Do brand influencers matter on TikTok? A social influence theory perspective

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ABSTRACT

Businesses are advertising on TikTok by using brand influencers to create awareness, promote, and sell products. Using the lens of the social influence theory, this study investigated engagement, loyalty, and purchase likelihood as constructs that impact brand influencer advertising. Structural equation modeling was used to analyze data in this study. The findings showed that brand influencer impact was associated with previous engagement and purchase likelihood of TikTok users. Previous perceptions toward brand influencers did not moderate the impact of brand influencer advertising. Theoretical and managerial implications from the results are discussed, providing guidance for future research on TikTok advertising.

Introduction

TikTok is a video sharing social media platform that has been available since 2017 on mobile devices and computers. It is available in over 150 countries and features short-form videos in different categories (Kaye et al., 2021). Within a few years, TikTok has emerged as a marketing rival to large companies such as YouTube, Snapchat, and Facebook (Fannin, 2019). Businesses have recognized the popularity and potential of TikTok for marketing purposes, especially among Millennials and Generation Z users. As a marketing platform, TikTok has the highest social media engagement rates per post. In 2021, consumer spending on TikTok was \$2.3 billion. Due to exponential growth, TikTok's marketing effectiveness is growing among marketers compared to other social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram (Cyca, 2022).

Well-established platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook are now encouraging content creators to create content that is short duration, similar to what has been available on TikTok since its inception. Following the success of TikTok, YouTube introduced "YouTube Shorts," Instagram created "Instagram Stories," and Facebook launched "Facebook Reels" (Shah, 2021). This format cloning is a testament to TikTok's success. Google started indexing TikTok videos, which increases the visibility of TikTok as a marketing platform since it allows for keyword targeting, which attracts qualified traffic based on keyword data (Southern, 2021). There is a need to research whether different advertisements can impact constructs

such as purchase likelihood and the desire to share content with other users and engage with the content or the content creator, which capture brand influencer impact. Many theories have investigated personal interaction and technology-mediated social interaction in social media networks (Campos-Castillo & Hitlin, 2013). Further studies are needed to address consumers' social influence, interactions, and behaviors using specific social media platforms. This research investigated the perceptions and engagement of consumers when presented with various advertising scenarios within the TikTok platform by using brand influencers to promote products.

TikTok offers businesses many options and formats for displaying advertising to its users. Similar to other social media networks, advertisements on TikTok can be designed to launch a new product, direct sales to the existing consumer base, drive traffic to external websites, or create brand awareness. Although different advertising options are available to marketers, one popular type of marketing is the use of TikTok *brand influencers*. Brand influencers are TikTok celebrities with many followers and a high engagement rate (John et al., 2017). The use of brand influencers has been shown to affect view-through rates by 193%, 35% of users discover products and brands from influencers, and 65% of users interact with the content when influencers post about products and brands (Cyca, 2022). Since TikTok is a fun and engaging platform, marketers can find influencers relevant to their brand using the TikTok Creator Marketplace. The influence and reach

offered by brand influencers provide a high engagement opportunity with the target audience (Myers et al., 2022; Xue & Zhou, 2019). Creative content can be designed in collaboration with the influencers and displayed to followers in different types of promotions on behalf of the brand. Despite the popularity of brand influencers on TikTok, not much research has investigated the impact of TikTok brand influencers for promoting products.

The purpose of this research was to investigate the antecedents of brand influencer advertising on TikTok users based on constructs such as engagement, loyalty, and purchase likelihood. These constructs were selected because they have previously been shown to play a role in social media marketing in areas such as consumer behavior, brand management, consumer communities, and the development of marketing campaigns (Ebrahim, 2020; Jun & Yi, 2020; F. Li et al., 2021; Pan et al., 2019). The rationale for constructs chosen in this study becomes more relevant when taken together as TikTok has been gaining market share and attracting users from other larger, well-established social media platforms. The combination of constructs chosen for this study has not been empirically validated in any TikTok study. There is a knowledge gap since practices currently being used (such as brand influencer advertising) are not adequately verified by research. Understanding how TikTok users differ in attitude and behavior when consuming brand influencer-promoted video advertisements can provide deeper insights for designing effective social media marketing campaigns on TikTok. Using the framework of a relevant social behavior theory, this study can generate new insights and extend previous research for emerging digital social media platforms such as TikTok.

This study addressed the following research questions:

RQ1: Does the format of advertising shown on TikTok change brand influencer impact?

RQ2: Can existing engagement, loyalty, and purchase likelihood of TikTok users affect brand influencer impact?

This paper contributes to the existing literature in two ways. The study contributes to theoretical and practical application by providing information about constructs that impact brand influencer advertising effectiveness. The study provides empirical evidence on the significance of factors such as existing engagement, interaction, loyalty, and purchase likelihood of TikTok users. It then examines the combined influence of these factors

using structured equation modeling in a causal model. The paper is organized as follows: A review of literature, theoretical foundation, and justification for the constructs included and investigated in this study are presented first. The constructs include engagement, loyalty, and purchase likelihood of products marketed on TikTok. The sampling and research methodology are described next, followed by data analysis. The paper concludes with a discussion on academic, theoretical, and managerial implications, along with limitations of the study and future research direction.

Theoretical background

The theoretical lens used in this study was the social influence theory first proposed by Kelman (1958), who stated that individuals establish a salient relationship with others in the group to form a sense of identity within the group. Kelman added that behaviors of individuals are formed through processes of internalization (adopting the induced group behavior), identification (salient relationship with the communicator), and compliance (acceptance of influence). The central tenet of the social influence theory is focused on group environments (such as TikTok used in this study) and the attitude, actions, and behaviors of individuals' interactions within the group (Shen et al., 2011). Social influence can bring about changes in attitudes and behaviors, but this can occur at different levels based on processes through which users accept influence. N. Wang and Sun (2016) observed that although social influence factors, attitudes, and behaviors may impact social media use, the influential strengths can vary across different types of social media and need to be investigated further. The environment within which the behavior occurs can also shape individuals' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. TikTok users who follow brand influencers express their behavior by commenting, liking, or sharing posts in which brand influencers are featured. However, the levels of interaction for TikTok users by which they may accept influence have not been studied in-depth, and additional research is needed in this area.

Since the time it was first introduced, the social influence theory has been used to support marketing studies that explore topics such as consumer behavior, social media and product sales (Huang et al., 2011), virtual communities (Dholakia et al., 2004), sharing travel experiences (Kang & Schuett, 2013), Facebook fan pages (Perez-Vega et al., 2016), buying behavior (Naeem & Ozuem, 2021), social media advertising (J. Lee & Hong, 2016), social commerce (Beyari & Abareshi, 2018; Yadav et al., 2013), sustainability (Goldsmith & Goldsmith, 2011), and internet banking (Matsuo et al., 2018). Social media marketing papers

and research using social influence theories (mentioned above) were utilized to identify constructs used in this study and develop a model for empirical analysis in the context of the TikTok social media platform.

Review of literature

The key to TikTok's success is an algorithm that learns users' preferences based on machine learning and curation of big data. The interaction with videos suggested by the algorithm provides additional input to recommend new videos that keep users engaged and endlessly scrolling through the app (Smith, 2021). The user interactions that drive the algorithm to recommend related content categories are based on the videos that are liked, commented on, and watched by the users. An important metric included in the calculation of recommended videos by the algorithm is the watch time of each video. The longer the watch time, the more information is collected and processed about user interaction and preferences and the personalization of content. Additional research into the duration of video advertisements can provide information on the impact of the advertisement, which can affect product sales. This study investigated different durations within short-form videos to gain insights into the impact caused by such advertisements.

Previous TikTok studies have looked at topics such as youth privacy (De Leyn et al., 2021), the psychology of TikTok use (Montag et al., 2021), personality traits and user motivation (Omar & Dequan, 2020), fan engagement and relationship marketing (Su et al., 2020), user experience and technology adoption (Y. Wang, 2020), and communicating COVID-19 information (F. Li et al., 2021). In the marketing domain, studies have also recognized the vast impact that TikTok is having on branding, promotion, advertising, and campaign strategy. While there have been some studies on TikTok marketing (Fortuna, 2022; Yang & Ha, 2021), researchers have called for a better understanding of consumer shopping insights related to promotion and advertising using options available within the TikTok platform (Guarda et al., 2021; Haenlein et al., 2020). The findings of such research could lead to more effective marketing campaigns that would affect branding, online community building, and direct marketing to consumers.

Brand Influencer Impact (BII)

The trend of using influencers for marketing on social media platforms has become popular in recent years. The influencer has a position of reverence earned due to their popularity on the platform (Uzunoglu & Kip,

2014). Social media influencers are users on social media platforms who have a large following of other users and bring credibility to the content shown in their videos. A more specific type of social media influencer category is brand influencers who partner with brands to advertise products or services. Influencers are considered to be credible intermediaries between the brand and the consumer. The advertisements created by brand influencers showcase original content and the use of products by the influencers. By providing video reviews and product descriptions, the content generates interest and purchase likelihood for the product (Jin et al., 2019). Brand influencers are considered opinion leaders and are held in high regard by their followers (Kolo & Haumer, 2018; Sharma & Bumb, 2022). Brand influencers can help impact engagement with content (likes, comments, and shares), extend the reach of content (accounts that see the video), and gain new TikTok followers. Younger consumers have different consumption patterns, and since they are more skeptical of traditional advertising, influencer marketing is more suited and accepted by younger social media users (Shao & Ross, 2015). The connection between the brand and the consumer on social media is considered credible because influencers speak with an authentic voice representing the brand (Childers et al., 2018). This study focused on assessing brand influencer impact, which has become increasingly common for promoting products by small and large businesses on TikTok.

Brands need to carefully consider the partnership with influencers because the most effective partnerships are the ones that establish congruency between the brand and the target audience being sought by the brand (Belanche et al., 2021). Influencer marketing on TikTok involves many steps that must be managed properly for a high return on investment. These steps include creating an influencer campaign strategy, influencer sourcing and contracting, content creation and scheduling, monitoring, measuring, and tracking results, and optimizing content based on results (Geysler, 2022). TikTok brand influencers are used in different types of promotions in various product categories. Haenlein et al. (2020) noted that despite its increasing popularity on TikTok and other social media platforms, marketers are either unfamiliar or less familiar with influencer marketing than with more traditional forms of communication such as television and magazine advertising.

The role of an influencer is to help develop a community around a brand, raise awareness about the brand, provide a call to action, and help develop loyalty in TikTok followers. TikTok users are accustomed to seeing brand influencers promote products.

Müller and Christandl (2019) observed that the content generated by brand influencers and the powers of persuasion due to the social relationship established with the followers significantly impact consumers' opinions. Other studies have also found the referent power of influencers has positive effects on consumers' attitudes and purchase likelihood (McCormick, 2016). Bognar et al. (2019) found a positive relationship between consumer perception of the product due to brand influencer impact. It was found that consumers react significantly to influencer recommendations provided in the advertisement. The impact of brand influencers is due to the affinity of TikTok followers toward brand influencers who have established credibility. Credibility has been shown to be an antecedent to advertising value in general (Pavlou & Stewart, 2000) and, more recently, social media platforms (Leite & Baptista, 2022).

Martínez-López et al. (2020) recognized influencer marketing as a way to foster positive attitudinal and behavioral responses in followers. Due to the recent surge in influencer advertising strategies on social networks, a better understanding of consumers' responses to influencer marketing actions is needed. This study collected data on consumers' perceptions of TikTok brand influencers as a result of using the platform. Videos featuring brand influencers were shown to participants (details of the video are explained later). After watching the video, an instrument was used to measure the impact of the brand influencers on consumers' likelihood of purchasing the product. This impact could be due to a combination of factors, such as the brand influencers featured in the video, the product features, or the call to action provided by the influencers in the video. For the purpose of this study, a brand influencer impact (BII) construct was developed as a measure of TikTok users' interest in the product after seeing the advertisements, engagement with the content shown by brand influencers in the advertisement, a desire to seek more information about the product, and the likelihood of purchasing the product as a result of the brand influencers' messaging. Additional details of the BII construct and its association with the social influence theory are provided later in the Instruments and Measures section. Another area that this study investigated was the impact of various lengths of video advertisements featuring products promoted by brand influencers on TikTok.

Length of videos

Researchers have investigated the comparison between shorter and longer advertisements on television and found that 30-second advertisements provide more

efficacy than shorter 15-second advertisements (Tomkovick et al., 2001). Also, television has been shown as a medium in which longer advertisements provide better recall and attitude toward the product. However, the interactive nature of social media, where the user has control over quickly skipping advertisements, requires additional research. Trivedi et al. (2020) investigated advertising on YouTube, another popular social media network, based on longer video content. They concluded that longer-duration advertisements increase engagement, leading to higher purchase likelihood. Since TikTok is also a video sharing platform but uses a different engagement feature, such as extensive use of brand influencers to promote products, similar effects can be expected when investigating whether the duration of advertisements would affect constructs such as brand influencer impact.

Every video posted by a user stands a chance to go on other users' "For You" page, which is the first page displayed on the TikTok app. If the video does well and shows engagement by users (likes, shares, comments), the TikTok algorithm pushes the video to the "For You" pages of other users. Watch time is the primary metric that determines whether content does well and is pushed to other users. For the content to be considered successful and shown to other users, a video of 15 seconds or less should have 100% watch time; a video of 16–30 seconds should show a 75%+ watch time; and a video of 30+ seconds should have a 50%+ watch time (Su et al., 2020). There have been recommendations from creators on increasing watch time which can boost engagement metrics (Wyld, 2021). Some of these recommendations are to "niche down" by identifying specific categories and posting content in these niches. Another recommendation is to follow broad trends and niche-specific trends from the "Discover" page, where users can go to see trends. Other options include creating loop videos, telling a story, and including end-of-video surprises that pique users' curiosity. By following these suggestions, the content would be able to be noticed by the TikTok algorithm and shown to more users, thereby indicating the effectiveness of the marketing messages.

The most accessible engagement metric available to marketers and influencers to control the advertising message on TikTok is the length of the video. According to Cyca (2022), TikTok users were initially limited to 60 seconds for their videos. But in July 2021, TikTok allowed users to upload longer videos ranging from 15 seconds to ten minutes. It was reported that longer videos also showed higher engagement in the US, UK, and Brazil. It was also found that the highest performing videos were between 21 and 34 seconds (Cyca,

2022). Since no studies have investigated the relationship between the length of video and brand influencer impact on TikTok, this study created conditions by showing two scenarios. One set of participants in this study watched a shorter video (15 seconds duration), and the other participants watched a longer video (45 seconds duration). The 15- and 45-second durations were selected since they are the most commonly used segments for product advertisements. Both videos featured brand influencers advertising the same product. Related to the length of the videos, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1: Longer TikTok video advertisements will create a higher brand influencer impact.

H2: Longer TikTok video advertisements will create a higher brand influencer impact for users when controlling for previous perceptions of brand influencers.

Engagement

In marketing literature, engagement has been studied in relation to the platform (Voorveld et al., 2018), influencers (Bentley et al., 2021), as well as brands (Delbaere et al., 2021). Engagement on social media refers to using platform tools to engage in activities such as viewing, liking, sharing, subscribing, and commenting on content posted by other users (Khan, 2017). Social media algorithms promote content that users find engaging. As a result, the goal of content creation by brand influencers is to provide maximum engagement for users to enable sharing of content with other users. Engagement of users with brand influencers results in greater influence toward content posted by influencers and the platform (Argyris et al., 2020). Maintaining engagement on a platform can provide value-added benefits in the long run (Wiese & Akareem, 2020). To encourage users to remain on the platform, TikTok provides curated content based on user preferences, which increases the time spent on the platform. This high-value proposition leads users to share content on other social network platforms. Related to engagement, the social influence theory mentions identification (salient relationship with the communicator, i.e. the brand influencer) as one of its components. Brand influencers can shape consumer engagement with a brand and its products to develop lasting relationships.

In contrast to other social media platforms, TikTok encourages content creators to share videos on competing sites such as Facebook and Instagram. If a video goes

viral on other platforms, users can return to TikTok, promoting further engagement. Varnali (2021) noted that digital ad personalization increases relevance and revenue for advertisers looking to connect with consumers at a level relevant to their lifestyle and product affinity. Engagement is used by many digital analytics programs as a metric to determine the success of social media marketing campaigns (Garg et al., 2020). In this study, it was used as one of the constructs to determine brand influencer impact.

Shao and Ross (2015) recognized that maintaining users' engagement on a single platform is challenging because of the fragmented nature of social media platforms, varied platform features, and content saturation. As a result, users have a wider choice of ignoring content or becoming very selective in what they choose to view. Mortazavi et al. (2014) identified different social network attributes that can promote engagement. These features were social relationships, entertainment, information access, and ease of use. All of these attributes are present in TikTok, which has caused it to be so successful. Schultz and Peltier (2013) suggested that more research on consumer engagement on social media would increase our understanding of the consequences of engagement on social media platforms.

Social media users do not passively accept the social influences exerted by the environment, such as TikTok, but actively balance their personal preferences and social influences. For low-sociability social media platforms, where the social dependency among users is relatively weak, a user's behavior may be primarily determined by their personal preference or attitude (N. Wang & Sun, 2016). In contrast, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) argue that the higher the social presence, the larger the group members' social influence on each other's behavior. Social media managers can design more effective and targeted campaigns by better understanding user behavior and engagement (Khan, 2017).

In 2021, nine out of ten TikTok users used the app multiple times daily, 68% watched videos from other users, 63% liked videos from other users, 63% followed someone else's videos, 63% followed another user, 55% uploaded a video in the last month, 54% commented on a video, and 43% uploaded a "duet" video. The engagement rate for US influencers was 18% (Geyser, 2022). These statistics of active user engagement on the platform validate TikTok as a marketing platform where engagement plays a prominent role.

Barger et al. (2016) developed a framework for the antecedents and consequences of customer engagement on social media. The consequences of engagement that were mentioned in the framework included brand effects, product effects, consumer effects, content

effects, and market effects. As a result of the engagement, brand influencer impact could result in higher brand awareness, brand association, improved attitude toward the product, and re-sharing purchase intention. The social influence theory calls attention to the influence of others in the network by noting that the frequency of interaction and commenting on content generated by others (i.e. the engagement construct used in this study) reflects the social influence on consumers' purchase decisions (K. Z. Zhang & Benyoucef, 2016). There is a need to research if engagement results in brand influencer impact. As a result, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: When shown video advertisements featuring brand influencers, higher engagement of TikTok users will lead to positive brand influencer impact.

Loyalty

Szczepańska and Gawron (2011) defined loyalty as a constant and positive attitude toward an object, brand, or business enterprise. There are two types of loyalty which are classified as attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty. Attitudinal loyalty refers to the desire for customers to maintain a relationship with a specific product, brand, or supplier. In contrast, behavioral loyalty is the repeat patronage of a product, brand, or supplier (Czepiel & Gimore, 1987). Whereas attitudinal loyalty signifies emotional attachment, in the case of behavioral loyalty, the relationship between the consumer and the brand is more for convenience. Factors that affect loyalty can be economic, demographic, cultural, social, or psychological (Yim & Kannan, 1999). Specifically related to marketing and social media, Tsai and Men (2013) observed that social media platforms have transferred the power to shape brand content from marketers to consumers and online content creators. They further stated that social media characteristics, such as the value provided by showing entertaining content and the visual appeal of images, videos, and personalities, should not be ignored as these characteristics can influence loyalty.

Social media users have a choice of using many different social networking platforms. Each platform provides distinctive features that entice users and ensure their continued usage of the network. TikTok differentiates itself by providing short-form videos shown to its users based on preferences identified by the TikTok algorithm. This personalized content helps enhance loyalty toward the TikTok platform (M. Zhang & Liu, 2021). TikTok continues to attract

users from other social media platforms by understanding customer preferences and building new features in the platform to keep the content fresh, trendy, and relevant to its users. However, keeping users engaged with the content or other users may not create loyalty. It has been shown that the relationship between engagement, brand attachment, and loyalty on social media starts with building strong emotional connections (M. W. Li et al., 2020). Therefore, this study investigated if brand influencers could be the conduit to build an emotional connection with users, which would be reflected in the brand influencer impact outcome.

Hawkins and Vel (2013) suggested that the role of social media as an interactive medium that can impact brand interaction and create loyalty needs to be established using different environments. This study attempted to capture both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty to investigate why TikTok users continue to engage with content on TikTok. Continued use of a system maintains loyalty and would help explain why users engage with the content posted by other users, including products promoted by brand influencers. In previous literature, it has been found that loyalty can be considered an antecedent and a consequence. Specifically related to loyalty as an antecedent, Jai et al. (2022) identified eight interconnected categories of loyalty antecedents. These were, "brand characteristics, consumer characteristics, social media characteristics, consumer-brand relationship and engagement, social media marketing activities, social media engagement, online brand community and engagement, and perceived value and risks" (p. 42). This study investigated loyalty as an antecedent to brand influencer impact on TikTok, which has not been done in previous studies despite the popularity, use, and impact of brand influencers on TikTok. Researchers have explained loyalty as a psychological construct that can be an outcome of customers being guided by other members of the network to make repeat purchases (Blodgett et al., 1997). This is consistent with the compliance factor in the social influence theory (Kelman, 1958). As a result, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: When shown video advertisements featuring brand influencers, higher loyalty of users toward the TikTok platform will lead to positive brand influencer impact.

Purchase likelihood

In 2021, the annual sales of TikTok were \$4.6 billion, which was a 142% increase from the previous year. The

annual user growth from 2020 to 2021 was 300 million users (Cyca, 2022). Since users are comfortable with social commerce on other well-established platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, purchasing advertised products on TikTok is a seamless experience due to the electronic payment facility built into the app. DeCzynski (2020) reported that integration with third-party platforms such as Shopify and Square has allowed small businesses to advertise and sell directly to customers. These small businesses also use brand influencer advertising to create brand awareness and drive sales to the website. The personalized algorithm presents content to users based on their previous viewing preferences and engagement with the content. Similar to Facebook, businesses on TikTok can build audience personas for ad targeting that provide relevant engagement from audiences. Arora and Sanni (2019) call for a deeper look into marketing communication on social media that can be used to drive purchase likelihood based on segmentation.

Many studies have explored the construct of purchase likelihood and its antecedents. More than 80 variables have been identified as affecting purchase likelihood (Chang et al., 2005). Related to purchase likelihood on TikTok, it has also been found that social interaction with other users creates a positive attitude toward shopping, which increases the likelihood of purchase (Hutter et al., 2013; Yang & Ha, 2021). The nature of sales on TikTok relies on social commerce, defined as the involvement of online communities and user interactions with content to influence purchase decisions (Stephen & Toubia, 2010). As mentioned earlier, the social influence theory identifies compliance as one factor that affects an individual's attitudes and behaviors (Kelman, 1958). In social network platforms such as TikTok, brand influencers play a role in influencing their followers to purchase products.

With fun, engaging, and short-form video content that features familiar brand influencers, it is worth investigating if the likelihood of making a purchase is higher because of engagement with the content and other users and brand influencers. Karimi et al. (2015) stated that the intensity of the online purchase decision-making process is based on time duration, alternatives presented, decision-making skills, and product knowledge experienced by the viewer when watching the advertisement. Since TikTok videos are of short duration, the time to make a purchase decision has a small window, and more research is needed to determine the optimal messaging and the type of advertising that could impact TikTok users' purchase likelihood. Brand influencers can serve as enablers to facilitate the purchase decision process, which would

help companies planning to use TikTok as a marketing channel.

TikTok offers innovative features on its platform to help brands advertise and sell products. The advertising message, in most cases, is presented as entertainment to help users connect with the brand. Brand association has been shown to influence consumers' purchase likelihood since it affects their cognitive or affective response toward the brand (Danniswara et al., 2017; Mann & Ghuman, 2018). Since the brand influencer represents the brand, more research is needed to investigate the relationship between purchase likelihood and brand influencer impact. To engage users and increase purchase likelihood, trends on TikTok are sounds, challenges, or hashtags that users and influencers use in their content videos or advertisements to create buzz around a product (Wyld, 2021). This innovative form of promotion can give new life to products and increase purchase likelihood by using a trend that goes viral. J. Lee and Hong (2016) state that there are normative social influence situations such as identification, which, along with compliance, can cause a behavioral change in consumers' attitudes toward purchasing. Therefore, it can be seen that the construct of purchase likelihood on TikTok relates to the social influence theory.

This study investigated two types of purchase and brand influencer-related perceptions for TikTok users. Initially, participants were asked about their general perception of brand influencers on TikTok. In the model shown in Figure 1, this is designated as PBI (Perception of Brand Influencer). Following the product video that the participants watched that featured brand influencers, data about another construct, BII (Brand Influencer Impact), was collected. Since both scales included questions on brand influencers, PBI and BII can be considered to be related but distinct in nature.

The following hypotheses related to purchase likelihood are proposed:

H5: When shown video advertisements featuring brand influencers, a higher purchase likelihood of TikTok users will lead to a positive brand influencer impact.

H6: Perception of brand influencers has a significant positive moderating influence on the relationship between (a) engagement and brand influencer impact, (b) loyalty and brand influencer impact, and (c) purchase attitude and brand influencer impact.

The research model used in this study using the constructs of engagement, loyalty, and purchase likelihood

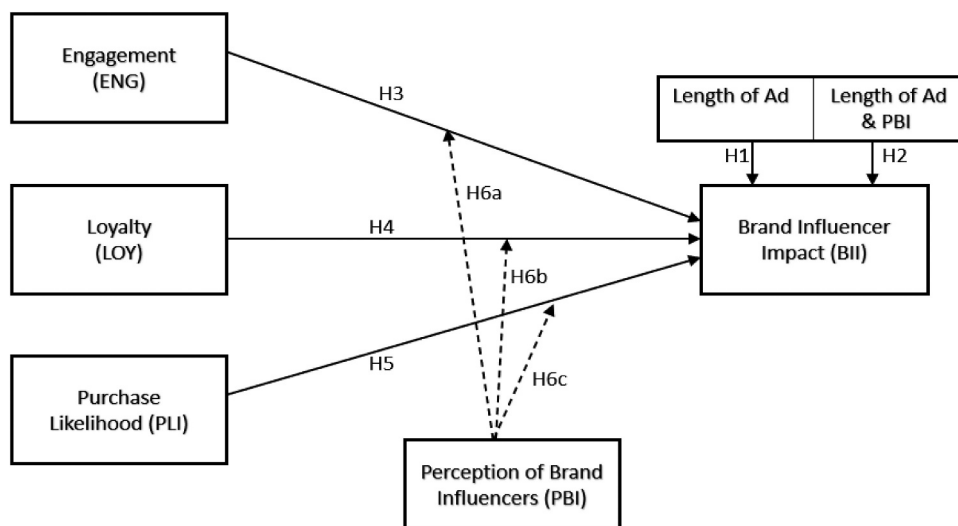


Figure 1. Research model.

that causes a change in brand influencer impact as a result of watching two types of advertisements is shown below:

Research methodology

Although the literature review showed that studies exist on the constructs of engagement, loyalty, and purchase likelihood, there was limited research that investigated the impact of these factors on brand influencers' role in the specific context of the TikTok social networking environment. This section provides a summary of the demographic breakdown of the data and the method used to collect the data.

Demographic information

The recommendation of 95% confidence level, a standard deviation of 0.5, and $\pm 1\%$ margin of error (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970; Westland, 2010) was used to determine the sample size. Based on these parameters and using the statistical power of 0.80, the minimum required sample size was recommended to be 384 cases. The sample size used in this study was 425 cases from the United States. A pilot test was conducted following approval from the university's Institutional Research Board. Qualtrics survey platform was used to administer the survey online to participants selected from all over the United States. Qualtrics, a marketing research company, has a national database of users from which participants are selected based on required criteria. Qualtrics offers the most representative sample compared to other survey platforms, which comes closest to a national probability sample on most variables (Boas

et al., 2020). Since most TikTok users are between the ages of 18 and 40, which includes Generation Y (millennials) and Generation Z users (Statista, 2022), only participants in that age range were selected for the study. Other screening requirements were that the participant had an active TikTok account, had used the TikTok platform for at least six months, and was using TikTok at least twice a week. Informed consent was provided to participants who met the criteria and agreed to complete the survey. The average time to complete the survey was fourteen minutes. Table 1 shows the demographic profile of participants who completed the survey.

The data collection methodology shown in this section led to the scale development and testing of the hypotheses shown in the following sections.

Instrument and measures

The latent constructs in this study were adapted from previous literature. Most items could not be directly used because they were not developed for the TikTok social platform. The engagement construct was used to assess the interest, importance, and relevance of TikTok content. Indicator items were adapted from Taheri et al. (2014), Baldus et al. (2015), and Paruthi and Kaur (2017). The loyalty construct included indicator items that asked about preference for using TikTok over other social media platforms, continued interest, the value of seeing new content at each visit, and the degree of loss if TikTok was shut down, as was done a few years ago. These items were modified for the TikTok context from McMullan and Gilmore (2003), McAlexander et al. (2003), J. S. Lim et al. (2015), Ismail (2017), and

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

	Items	n	%
Age Category	18–24 (Gen. Z)	213	50.3
	25–40 (Gen. Y)	212	49.6
Gender	Males	208	49.9
	Females	217	50.1
Frequency of TikTok Use	2–3 times per week	45	10.3
	4–5 times per week	75	17.2
	>6 times per week	317	72.5
TikTok session time	<30 minutes	14	3.2
	30–60 minutes	131	30.0
	1–2 hours	145	33.2
	2–3 hours	81	18.5
	>3 hours	66	15.1
TikTok products purchased	None	137	31.4
	1–5	204	46.6
	>5	96	22.0

Ceyhan (2019). The purchase likelihood construct captured user attitudes about interest in purchasing products on TikTok, the usefulness of products that lead to purchase likelihood, helpful user comments that can lead to making purchase decisions, and the urge to buy products seen on TikTok. Items were adapted from Whitlark et al. (1993), Lusk et al. (2007), Wright and MacRae (2007), Prasad et al. (2019), and Nasir et al. (2021). The brand influencer perception (pre-video) and brand influencer impact (post-video) refer to affinity and attitude toward brand influencers, the likelihood of purchase due to brand influencers, and engagement with brand influencers.

Since brand influencer impact measured participants' perceptions of several sub-dimensions as a result of seeing the product videos, this was identified as a multidimensional construct (as defined by Wong et al., 2008). Since no previous literature was available to directly measure this construct for TikTok brand influencers, using guidelines from C. Zhang and Laroche (2020), who had developed a multidimensional branding-related construct for marketing, items relevant to brand influencer impact were adapted from previous literature. These include X. J. Lim et al. (2017), who investigated credibility, attitude, and purchase intention; Lê Giang Nam (2018), who reported on the quality of content, influencer trust, and involvement; Breves et al. (2019) studied influencer effectiveness, expertise, and trust; Giakoumaki and Krepapa (2020) focused on consumer and brand engagement; Martínez-López et al. (2020) reported on influencer content and congruence with the product; Ibáñez-Sánchez et al. (2021) examined consumer attitudes toward brand influencer messaging; and Campagna et al. (2021), who had explored brand authenticity on social media and scale development. The items included in the final BII construct were also consistent with components of the social influence theory, which

mentions identification (salient relationship with the communicator, i.e. the brand influencer), internalization (adopting the induced group behavior of increased purchase likelihood as a result of positive comments about products), and compliance (acceptance of the influence of the brand influencer). Factor analysis was conducted, and reliability, as well as convergent and discriminant validity analysis, were performed for the constructs used in this study.

After the initial portion of the survey, the screening questions (mentioned earlier) were presented to participants after informed consent was provided. Participants who failed the screening criteria were exited from the survey. For participants who qualified, the initial set of questions were demographic in nature. The next set of questions asked participants to indicate their interaction and behavior with TikTok and other social networks. Using the scale items mentioned above, information was collected about TikTok engagement, loyalty, and purchase likelihood. The indicator items of constructs were presented in random order to prevent the chances of patterned responses. The product chosen for the videos that the brand influencers would showcase next was the Lull mattress. Participants were randomly assigned to two groups. One group was presented with the 15-second duration video, and the other group saw the 45-second video. Both videos used the same product. Lull is a company that sells mattresses directly to consumers (<https://lull.com>).

The choice of a gender-neutral product was made intentionally to minimize any bias for products chosen that would favor being given different preferences by either males or females. To mitigate any bias toward the gender of the brand influencer, a brand influencer couple (male and female) with a high follower count was used. Recognizing that TikTok has more than 50,000 brand influencers and respondents may not be familiar with the influencers showcased in the video,

information about popularity was emphasized in the instructions by providing metrics about influencers' follower count and credibility to promote brands from other videos on the influencers' channel. In each video, the brand influencer couple shared information about the features of the mattress and engaged in a conversational dialog extolling the mattress's comfort. Music was playing in the background, which is common in all TikTok videos. The username of the influencers and hashtags for the company were also shown in the video. The start of the clip showed the mattress, and then the clip zoomed in to show details. The clips ended with a call to action to purchase the mattress. After watching the video, each participant's reaction to the video was measured as brand influencer impact using scale items presented to participants.

Data analysis and results

The Partial Least Square Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) technique (Smart-PLS 3) was used to analyze the data. PLS-SEM has been widely used in social sciences, including marketing, management, accounting, and information systems (Hair et al., 2019). PLS-SEM uses a causal-predictive approach to identify relationships between constructs (Wold, 1982). The measurement model in this study was evaluated for validity and reliability of measures, and then the hypothesized relationships were tested for the structural model shown in Figure 1. Using exploratory factor analysis, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure was found to be 0.95, which exceeded the threshold value of 0.7 for obtaining reliable factors (Kline, 2013). Bartlett's test of sphericity showed a significant relationship between variables ($p < .001$). The scales used in the study were checked for reliability and are shown in Table 2. For each construct used in the study, the threshold reliability coefficient (α) was found to be higher than 0.7, which met the recommendations by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994). Convergent validity was established for the constructs by verifying that the average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR) met minimum threshold requirements (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The factor loadings, Cronbach alpha, AVE, and CR values of the main constructs in the model are shown in Table 2.

The discriminant validity of the constructs was assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion, in which the off-diagonal correlations of indicator items were compared with the square root of the AVE (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). As shown in Table 3, the diagonal value was higher than the corresponding correlations in corresponding rows and columns, verifying the constructs' discriminant validity.

Table 4 shows the cross-loadings of indicator items in each construct. It can be seen that all items of constructs had high loadings in their own construct compared to other constructs. Therefore, construct validity was established.

Since there was a possibility that the correlation between variables was artificially inflated due to survey data collection, common method bias was also checked. The *a priori* marker variable, "attitudes toward the color blue" (Miller, 2021; Simmering et al., 2015), was used to check for common method bias. The blue attitude scale, which was part of the survey, had four items not theoretically related to the other constructs in the study. A high correlation between the marker variable and other constructs could indicate the presence of common method bias. There was no evidence of multicollinearity between the marker blue-attitude marker variable and other constructs. Therefore, it was determined that common method bias was not an issue in the data used in this study.

Hypothesis testing

For H1, a one-way ANOVA was calculated to examine the direct effect of the length of video advertisement (45 seconds vs. 15 seconds) on brand influencer impact. No significant effect was found ($F(1, 422) = 5.151, p = .329$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.002$). The length of the advertisement watched did not impact the brand influencer impact for TikTok users. Therefore, H1 was not supported.

For H2, after verifying the assumptions of independence of observations, normality, homogeneity of variances, linear relationship between the covariate and the dependent variable, and homogeneity of regression slopes (Glass et al., 1972), a one-way ANCOVA was calculated to examine the effect of length of video advertisement (45 seconds vs. 15 seconds) on brand influencer impact when controlling for existing perception toward brand influencers. A significant effect was found as the covariate of existing perception toward brand influencers affected the brand influencer impact for TikTok users ($F(1, 422) = 5.151, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.12$). The 45-second advertisement performed much higher for brand influencer impact ($m = 3.45, sd = 1.04$) as compared to the 15-second advertisement ($m = 3.34, sd = 1.13$).

H3 evaluated if the engagement of users on the TikTok platform will have a positive effect on brand influencer impact. The results showed that engagement significantly affected brand influencer impact ($\beta = 0.235, t = 2.955, p < .001$). Therefore, H3 was supported.

H4 evaluated whether the loyalty of TikTok users will have a positive effect on brand influencer impact. It was

Table 2. Scale constructs, indicator items, factor loadings, and reliability coefficients.

	Factor Loadings	Cronbach Alpha	AVE	CR
ENGAGEMENT		0.842	0.511	0.879
EN1 I have a strong interest in using TikTok	0.614			
EN2 TikTok is very important to me	0.785			
EN3 TikTok matters a lot to me	0.813			
EN4 TikTok is very relevant to my life	0.761			
EN5 I am satisfied with the features provided on TikTok	0.627			
EN6 Losing TikTok forever would upset me	0.653			
EN7 Watching TikTok videos is a good use of my time	0.724			
LOYALTY		0.854	0.561	0.884
LO1 I have encouraged people I know to use TikTok	0.789			
LO2 TikTok is one of my favorite social media sites	0.718			
LO3 I don't want TikTok to be shut down by the government	0.702			
LO4 I will continue using TikTok as the videos on it are interesting	0.711			
LO5 I have said positive things about TikTok to people I know	0.825			
LO6 TikTok is one of the most interesting social media sites that I use	0.743			
PURCHASE LIKELIHOOD (PLI)		0.876	0.618	0.906
PI1 Seeing videos on TikTok helps me make product purchase decisions	0.774			
PI2 I am likely to buy products that I see mentioned on TikTok	0.810			
PI3 TikTok is very relevant to my life	0.757			
PI4 TikTok can share my data with advertisers to show me relevant product videos	0.747			
PI5 TikTok videos show useful products that I would be interested in purchasing	0.793			
PI6 I intend to purchase products shown on TikTok	0.830			
BRAND INFLUENCER IMPACT (BII)		0.937	0.798	0.952
BII1 As a result of watching the video, it is likely that I will engage with the content	0.885			
BII2 As a result of watching the video, I am interested in learning more about this product	0.899			
BII3 As a result of this video content, I am interested in purchasing this product	0.902			
BII4 The brand influencers played a role in my desire to learn more about the product	0.876			
BII5 The brand influencers played a role in my desire to purchase the product	0.903			

found that loyalty did not have a significant effect on brand influencer impact ($\beta = -0.12$, $t = 1.775$, $p = .076$). Therefore, H4 was not supported.

H5 evaluated if the purchase attitude of users on the TikTok platform will have a positive effect on brand influencer impact. The results showed that purchase attitude significantly affected brand influencer impact

($\beta = 0.540$, $t = 10.782$, $p < .001$). Therefore, H5 was supported. The R^2 value for brand influencer impact in the model was .414. This value indicates that 41.4% of the variance in brand influencer impact can be attributed to purchase likelihood, loyalty, and engagement.

H6 evaluated the moderation impact of the perception of brand influencers on each of the relationships between engagement, loyalty, and purchase attitude to brand influencer impact. Moderation analysis was performed to evaluate the moderating role of PBI. There was no moderation influence of PBI between (a) ENG and BII ($\beta = -0.015$, $t = 0.114$, $p = 0.885$), (b) LOY and BII ($\beta = -0.023$, $t = 0.302$, $p = 0.762$), and (c) PI and BII ($\beta = -0.001$, $t = 0.004$, $p = 0.997$). Implications of these findings where users' attitudes of brand influencers encountered in other videos when using TikTok did not affect brand influencer impact following exposure to the advertisement are discussed later. Therefore, H6 was not supported (Table 5).

Discussion and implications

The purpose of this study was to investigate the antecedents of brand influencer advertising impact on TikTok users based on constructs such as engagement, loyalty, and purchase likelihood. Su et al. (2020) noted that while much research has been done on larger, well-established social media networks such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat, the potential of TikTok as a marketing communication tool warrants more examination. This study focused on TikTok since it has been recognized as a more effective medium to attract younger users as compared to other more prominent social media platforms (J. A. Lee & Eastin, 2020). Creating content on TikTok is easier than creating content on other video platforms because TikTok has an extensive library of special effects, providing the opportunity to be creative in an easier-to-use interface (Kemp, 2022). The influence of the duration of ads on brand influencer impact was also studied. Since TikTok offers videos of short duration, advertisers have only a few seconds to be creative and develop video content that engages the user. The findings of this study assessed the value of TikTok advertising by using brand influencers to deliver marketing content.

Social media platforms allow advertisers to track and personalize digital advertisements based on demographic and psychographic characteristics (Sinclair, 2016; Tran et al., 2022). The results of various types of advertisements allow marketers to instantaneously see results to determine the effectiveness of the displayed advertisement. For example, by using various duration of advertisements on YouTube, Trivedi et al. (2020)

Table 3. Discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker criterion).

	BII	Engagement	Loyalty	PI
Brand Infl. Impact (BII)	0.893			
Engagement	0.482	0.715		
Loyalty	0.350	0.690	0.749	
Purchase Likelihood (PLI)	0.629	0.618	0.508	0.786

Values on the diagonal (in bold) are the square root of AVE. Off-diagonals are correlations..

Table 4. Cross loadings.

	EN	LO	PI	BII
EN1	0.614	0.620	0.355	0.190
EN2	0.785	0.580	0.410	0.347
EN3	0.813	0.600	0.519	0.422
EN4	0.761	0.603	0.483	0.354
EN5	0.627	0.577	0.420	0.306
EN6	0.653	0.594	0.353	0.217
EN7	0.724	0.489	0.494	0.446
LO1	0.617	0.789	0.502	0.382
LO2	0.604	0.718	0.291	0.171
LO3	0.531	0.702	0.288	0.162
LO4	0.529	0.711	0.308	0.114
LO5	0.657	0.825	0.432	0.320
LO6	0.594	0.743	0.319	0.227
PI1	0.426	0.377	0.774	0.513
PI2	0.490	0.368	0.810	0.474
PI3	0.497	0.421	0.757	0.432
PI4	0.477	0.395	0.747	0.437
PI5	0.560	0.496	0.793	0.465
PI6	0.480	0.360	0.830	0.609
BII1	0.373	0.243	0.539	0.885
BII2	0.438	0.344	0.546	0.899
BII3	0.415	0.268	0.586	0.902
BII4	0.478	0.368	0.549	0.876
BII5	0.440	0.331	0.586	0.903

Table 5. Summary of hypotheses.

		β Coefficient	T Statistics	p Values
H3	ENG -> BII	0.235	2.955	.003
H4	LOY -> BII	-0.112	1.775	.076
H5	PLI -> BII	0.540	10.782	.000
H6a	Mod PBI -> ENG -> BII	-0.015	0.114	.885
H6b	Mod PBI -> LOY -> BII	-0.023	0.302	.762
H6c	Mod PBI -> PI -> BII	-0.001	0.004	.997

observed that longer-duration advertisements increased engagement. Tsen and Cheng (2021) examined the factors used by young consumers to evaluate online influencers and reported that perceptions toward brand influencers could affect their impact. In this study, the length of advertisements was varied to investigate brand influencer impact. Longer advertisements did not create a higher brand influencer impact. However, a significant effect was found when controlling for the previous perception of users toward brand influencers. The 45-second ads performed better on TikTok. This finding has implications for marketers who develop different types of ads. The longer ads can be used for users who follow the brand influencers. This finding can help advertised content perform effectively by leveraging the power of influencer marketing to increase engagement and build social proof for the brand. The TikTok

algorithm recognizes engagement with new content as an important factor in determining what content to show to users. Content that receives high levels of engagement is more likely to be promoted to a broader audience, allowing it to gain more views and engagement.

TikTok analytics can be used by advertisers to present different forms of messaging (e.g. stories, loop videos, or trends) to users based on previous engagement shown by users toward brand influencers. This study extends the findings of previous studies on social media platform engagement by being more specific in identifying TikTok engagement of users based on not only the duration of the advertisement but also the use of brand influencers. In addition, user perception toward brand influencers was also included as a variable in the model. When perceptions of the

TikTok users were controlled in our study, the relationship between the video length and brand influencer impact emerged.

The results of this study also showed a significant effect on brand influencer impact from engagement and purchase likelihood in video advertisements that used brand influencers. This is in contrast to the findings of Lou and Yuan (2019), who speculated that followers may be skeptical about influencers' motives when forming purchase related decisions. No significant effect was found for loyalty. Sands et al. (2022) noted that social distance mediates the relationship between influencer type and outcomes. Thus, in addition to the power of social distance, past actions and perceptions that may form loyalty may be overshadowed by the effects of the group environment, especially the dynamic changing environment on TikTok. This may possibly render the relationship between loyalty and brand influencer impact non-significant. With unlimited content of relevant short videos being curated on TikTok and new videos just a swipe away, it may be challenging to maintain the loyalty of TikTok users.

The finding that previous perceptions toward brand influencers did not moderate the impact of brand influencer advertising suggests that consumers may be more focused on the specific product or service being advertised rather than the identity of the influencer promoting it. As influencer marketing becomes more prevalent, consumers may become more accustomed to seeing influencers promoting products and services and may be less swayed by their previous perceptions of the influencer. Marketers should focus on creating effective influencer marketing strategies that emphasize the quality and relevance of content to maximize the impact of influencer marketing and overcome any preconceived notions that consumers may have about brand influencers. Users on TikTok may follow brand influencers because of entertainment value, which is more a trait of behavioral loyalty rather than showing an affinity toward a particular brand or product, which are characteristics of attitudinal loyalty (Czepiel & Gimore, 1987). Since each social media platform has unique characteristics that make it successful and attractive to users, marketers should focus on identifying which factors of the platform would work best and align the messaging based on the strongest characteristics of that platform.

In contrast to loyalty, which did not show a significant effect, engagement and purchase likelihood showed a significant effect. Tafesse and Wien (2018) observed that messaging strategy can shape consumer engagement in the social media context. The TikTok algorithm learns from user preferences and serves the

most relevant content, which can include videos using brand influencer advertising. Since engagement with social media content has been shown to drive consumers to like, share, and comment on posts (Maslowska et al., 2021), brand influencers play an important role in keeping users engaged, which will result in the TikTok algorithm showing the posts on the pages of other TikTok users. For TikTok users who may be familiar with a product, brand influencers can influence conversion, so the user will either have a desire to learn more about the product or be convinced by the brand influencer to purchase the product. This study showed that higher purchase likelihood results in higher brand influencer impact. By encouraging other users to leave comments on the video, the conversion rate from purchase likelihood to purchase behavior can be increased (Prasad et al., 2019). Brand influencers can also use a call to action in their TikTok videos, which has been shown to motivate users to take action and make purchases on other social media platforms as well as TikTok (Boon & Golloub, 2021; Handayani et al., 2018).

Campagna et al. (2021) called for research that identifies antecedents to brand influence that marketing managers can control. The results of this study can provide a better theoretical and practical understanding of the role and impact of brand influencers for promotion. Using the lens of the social influence theory, this study investigated antecedents of brand influencer impact on TikTok by considering engagement, loyalty, and purchase likelihood as constructs that influence brand influencer advertising. The results of this study supported the prediction that users' engagement would lead to higher brand influencer impact. These results are consistent with the findings of Argyris et al. (2020). They reported a positive relationship between user engagement and content posted by brand influencers and the platform on which it was posted. The social influence theory explains these results so that when the user engages with brand influencer content positively by interacting with posts on a platform, it not only affects brand influencer impact but shapes consumer purchase decisions as well (K. Z. Zhang & Benyoucef, 2016). This study validated the use of social influence theory by contextualizing it in the TikTok environment. Social influence theory was used as a lens to explain and support the perceptions and impact of users toward TikTok brand influencers. Social influence theory is crucial in marketing since it aids companies in understanding how customers are affected by other people's presence and behavior. By recognizing these impacts, businesses can create more effective marketing strategies and reach their target audience. Since TikTok provides an enormous marketing opportunity for small and large

businesses, this study will be relevant to marketing professionals and offers support for how the social influence theory can be extended and applied to the TikTok social media platform. Building on other research that has previously used social influence theory with technology-mediated communication, the findings of this study offer a better understanding of the role of brand influencers in engaging TikTok users in creating brand awareness and increasing sales of products marketed on TikTok. Brand influencers on TikTok can provide authentic brand narratives valued by other users (Su et al., 2020). Another implication of this study is that it provides guidance to marketing managers seeking to hire brand influencers to reach the target audience.

Partnerships with brand influencers who can provide fresh and engaging content using popular TikTok trends are essential for marketers who aim to project an image of their product's relevance in the TikTok ecosystem. Marketers must realize that TikTok users expect fun and exciting content that caters to their entertainment and affective needs. According to the results of a recent study, partnering with influencers on TikTok can significantly increase the impact of a brand and boost the likelihood of purchases. Therefore, to succeed in the TikTok environment, marketers should focus on collaborating with influencers who can create captivating and relevant content for their followers. Content creators should build unique campaigns with brand influencers. They should eschew intrusive advertising and instead focus on messaging that informs users about the product and inspires users to co-create new original and authentic content, which has the potential to increase brand influencer impact. This study showed that the unique nature of TikTok and its popularity with users could help marketers integrate the TikTok platform as a crucial component of marketing campaigns. TikTok is constantly testing and adding new innovative features, which keeps users returning to the platform for content consumption. The authentic and novel approach keeps users engaged. This study provided a better understanding of the impact of brand influencers which will be helpful to marketers in developing an effective TikTok marketing strategy.

Limitations and recommendations

This study used a mattress brand on TikTok that was promoted by the brand influencers using two forms of advertisements. Other products and categories could be used in future studies. Results should be compared, which will provide additional insights into the similarities and differences between categories of products.

Future research could also be conducted to include control variables with other types of branding in advertisements to compare whether the effects found are associated with the presence of digital influencers. Experimental studies can also be conducted using different types of brand influencers (such as nano, micro, macro, and mega influencers), which will help marketers assess brand influencer impact for different types of influencers. This will help optimize the marketing and social media budget and content creation by selecting the type of influencer best suited for the brand. Since brand influencer impact is a new concept on social media, future research could build upon the brand influencer impact scale used in this study and possibly expand it to include a greater variety of motives for engaging with brand influencers.

Disclosure statement

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