

Soft Selling as an Influencer Marketing Communication Strategy in Shaping Gen-Z's Consumer Behavior

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ABSTRACT

The development of digital communication technology has transformed marketing communication practices, particularly through social media platforms that enable influencers to become strategic actors in delivering promotional messages. One widely implemented approach is soft selling, where promotional content is presented subtly through lifestyle representation, personal narratives, and authentic experiences. Previous studies have largely examined influencer marketing from the perspective of purchase intention, brand awareness, and consumer engagement, while limited attention has been given to how soft selling communication strategies construct lifestyle meanings and gradually shape consumptive tendencies among Generation Z. This study aims to analyze how influencers implement soft selling strategies and how these strategies influence the formation of Gen Z consumer behavior. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through interviews with five Gen Z informants aged 18–28 years and content analysis of influencer accounts on Instagram and TikTok. The findings reveal that soft selling strategies operate through impression management, consistent personal branding, and identity commodification, causing products to be perceived as part of an aspirational lifestyle. The novelty of this research lies in explaining soft selling not only as a marketing technique but also as a symbolic communication process that shapes consumption meanings. Theoretically, this study contributes to influencer marketing and communication studies by emphasizing the relationship between digital identity construction, lifestyle representation, and consumer behavior formation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of information and communication technology in the digital era has transformed marketing communication practices, particularly through social media as an interactive promotional medium (Lilik Sumarni et al., 2023). Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok are increasingly utilized by companies to promote products and services through more personal, creative, and engaging communication patterns (Sitanggang et al., 2024). In this context, influencers become important actors in digital marketing communication, not only as message distributors but also as opinion leaders who influence consumer perceptions and preferences through the content they create (Sangapan, 2025). Influencer marketing enables promotional messages to appear more personal and persuasive because they are delivered by individuals who are perceived as closer to audiences rather than directly from brands (Rahmawati et al., 2021). The growth of social media usage in Indonesia has strengthened the position of Gen Z as a strategic audience for influencer marketing. As a generation that grew up alongside digital technology, Gen Z actively uses social media for communication, information access, and self-representation (Gulo, 2025; Sengkey et al., 2025). Their interaction with digital content makes them more exposed to influencer messages and lifestyle representations. Therefore, marketing communication strategies need to consider audience characteristics and media selection to ensure effective message delivery, as explained through the Integrated Marketing Communications perspective (Safitri et al., 2022). Marketing strategies that were previously dominated by hard selling approaches are gradually shifting toward soft selling methods. Gen Z tends to avoid promotional content that is overly direct and sales-oriented, making soft selling a more relevant strategy for building relationships with audiences (Juliandri et al., 2025). Unlike hard selling, which emphasizes product features and direct

purchasing appeals, soft selling uses storytelling, personal experiences, and lifestyle narratives to promote products subtly (Setiawan & Liliyan, 2026). Through this approach, lifestyle influencers integrate products into their daily activities, allowing audiences to perceive promotional messages as part of authentic experiences rather than advertisements (Hasiani & Anggraeni, 2025).

Repeated exposure to influencer content may influence Gen Z's perceptions of trends, lifestyles, and consumption preferences. As individuals in the identity formation stage, Gen Z may construct meanings of consumption based on social recognition, emotional attachment, and lifestyle values presented through social media. This condition becomes significant because many Gen Z individuals are still developing financial independence, making them vulnerable to consumption patterns influenced by trends and social approval (Sabda Mu'min et al., 2026). Several previous studies have examined influencer marketing in relation to purchase intention, brand awareness, and consumer engagement (Sabda Mu'min & Cahyani, 2025; Puspita, 2025). However, these studies generally focus on the effectiveness of influencers as marketing tools rather than examining the communication process behind influencer content, particularly how soft selling strategies construct meanings of consumption. Limited attention has been given to how influencers transform promotional messages into lifestyle representations through personal narratives, visual identity, and everyday experiences. This gap is important because social media consumption among Generation Z is not only driven by functional needs but also by symbolic meanings related to products, lifestyles, and self-representation. Influencer content can shape perceptions of what is desirable, relevant, and socially valued. Therefore, this study examines soft selling strategies used by influencers and explores how these strategies contribute to shaping Gen Z consumer tendencies through the perspectives of impression management, personal branding, and identity commodification. This research aims to provide a deeper understanding of influencer marketing as a symbolic communication practice in the digital era.

2. METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of how Generation Z interprets soft selling strategies implemented by influencers and how these strategies contribute to shaping consumer behavior tendencies. The qualitative approach was selected because this research focuses on exploring meanings, experiences, and interpretations from the perspective of social media users rather than measuring statistical relationships between variables. The research subjects consisted of five informants categorized as Generation Z, aged 18–28 years. The informants were selected using purposive sampling based on specific criteria: (1) belonging to the Generation Z age category, (2) actively accessing Instagram or TikTok content from influencers, and (3) having experience interacting with or being interested in products promoted through soft selling strategies. The number of informants was determined based on the principle of data saturation, where data collection was stopped when additional interviews no longer produced new themes, meanings, or significant variations related to the research focus. After conducting interviews with the fifth informant, the researchers identified recurring patterns regarding influencer credibility, lifestyle representation, product interpretation, and purchasing considerations. Therefore, five informants were considered sufficient to represent the phenomenon explored in this qualitative study. The selection of five informants was also justified by the research objective, which does not aim to generalize consumer behavior statistically but to provide an in-depth understanding of how soft selling communication strategies are interpreted by Gen Z audiences. In qualitative research, the depth and relevance of information obtained from participants are prioritized over the number of respondents. Data collection techniques included observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and documentation studies. The interview process allowed informants to describe their experiences and perceptions regarding influencer content and consumption decisions. Data were analyzed using qualitative descriptive analysis through data reduction,

data presentation, and conclusion drawing. To ensure data credibility, this study applied source triangulation by comparing responses among informants to identify consistent patterns and themes (Sugiono, 2017).

Table 1. Research Informant Profile

No	Informant	Age	Gender	Social Media Used	Exposure to Influencer Content	Consumption Experience
1	I1	21	Female	Instagram, TikTok	Frequently follows lifestyle influencer content	Has interest in promoted products but considers needs and price
2	I2	22	Female	Instagram, TikTok	Follows fashion and beauty influencer content	Places promoted products as wishlist items
3	I3	23	Female	Instagram, TikTok	Uses influencer content as lifestyle inspiration	More focused on style references than purchasing
4	I4	24	Female	TikTok, Instagram	Has purchased products after influencer reviews	Has experience trying influencer-promoted skincare products
5	I5	22	Female	Instagram, TikTok	Interested in fashion content and product recommendations	Has purchased and repurchased products based on preferences

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Brief Profiles of Research Influencers

This study analyzed two influencer accounts on Instagram and TikTok, namely @sashfir and @maryamnurul, which were selected based on their relevance to lifestyle-based soft selling practices among Gen Z audiences. Both influencers consistently integrate product promotion into lifestyle content, personal experiences, and daily activities rather than presenting direct advertisements. The @sashfir account represents a soft selling approach through aesthetic lifestyle presentation, where products are naturally embedded into beauty, fashion, and daily routine content. Meanwhile, the @maryamnurul account demonstrates a more personal and narrative-based approach, where product recommendations are delivered through personal experiences, modest fashion content, and audience engagement. The selection of these two accounts is relevant because both influencers construct personal identities that function as communication strategies in promoting products. Their content demonstrates how lifestyle representation, personal branding, and emotional connection become important elements in implementing soft selling strategies.

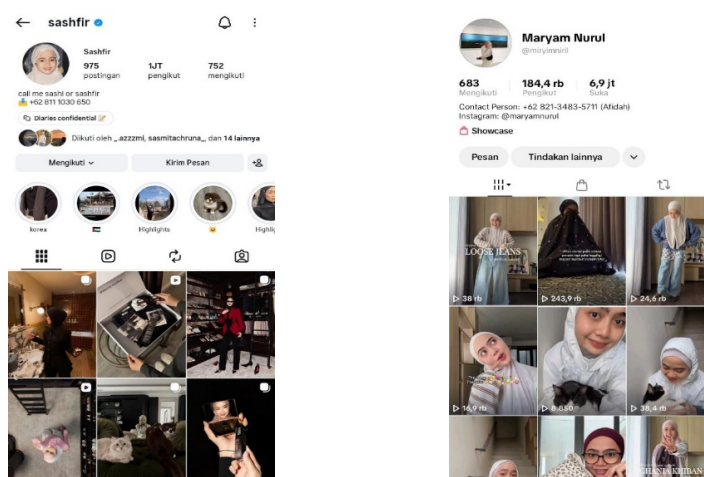


Figure 1. Documentation of Influencer Social Media Accounts

Source: Influencer social media documentation, 2026

3.2 Influencer Soft Selling Strategies Through Image Management and Identity Commodification

In the realm of social media, soft selling strategies function not only as product promotion but also as a way to build emotional connections between influencers and followers. Promotional messages are commonly integrated into daily activities, personal experiences, and lifestyle representations, making them appear natural rather than direct advertisements. Therefore, influencers do not merely provide product information but also represent certain lifestyles that become part of their persuasive power (Gulo, 2025). The content analysis of two influencer figures in this study shows that soft selling strategies are developed through continuous impression management practices. Goffman’s impression management theory (1959; Hoffmann & Lutz, 2025 in Fauzan et al., 2026) explains that individuals consciously manage their appearance and behavior to create specific perceptions among audiences. On social media, this practice is reflected through visual curation, consistent aesthetics, feed arrangement, and personal narratives that build emotional closeness with followers. The two influencers demonstrate different approaches in constructing their digital personas. Influencer @sashfir presents an image associated with elegance, calmness, and inspiration through a carefully curated visual style. The promoted products are positioned as supporting elements within daily lifestyle narratives rather than the main focus of content. Meanwhile, influencer @maryamnurul presents a more expressive and dynamic persona, where products appear more clearly but remain connected to personal experiences and daily routines. These differences indicate that identity construction remains the central element in influencer marketing communication. The findings show that soft selling practices are closely related to personal branding strategies. Personal branding involves creating a consistent and recognizable self-image through visual style, communication patterns, and lifestyle positioning. According to Khedher (in Lestari & Gusti, 2025), effective personal branding is built through authenticity, differentiation, consistency, and credibility. In this process, products become extensions of the influencer’s identity, where audiences are not only attracted to the product itself but also to the symbolic meanings attached to the influencer’s persona.

However, the use of personal identity in marketing practices also raises ethical considerations. In the context of the creative economy, soft selling can be accepted as a communication strategy as long as it does not involve manipulation or exploitation. Problems may emerge when personal identity and symbolic values are transformed into commercial commodities (Penangsang, 2025). Thus, influencer soft selling practices represent an intersection between marketing logic, self-representation, cultural values, and identity construction. Overall, this study identifies three main mechanisms of influencer soft selling strategies: (1) impression management to build credibility and aspirational images, (2) personal branding to create identity differentiation, and (3) identity commodification through the integration of products into lifestyle representations. These mechanisms demonstrate that soft selling operates not only as a marketing strategy but also as a symbolic communication practice that shapes how audiences interpret consumption.

3.3 Psychological & Emotional Responses of Gen Z and the Formation of Consumptive Tendencies

Interview results revealed that the soft-selling strategies used by influencers elicited different psychological and emotional responses in each informant, encompassing a range of psychological responses ranging from brand awareness, initial interest, lifestyle aspirations, to actual consumption decisions. To clarify the data analysis process, the researchers presented a matrix of the results of the manual coding of the interview data. This matrix shows the stages of data reduction, coding, categorization, and the extraction of themes from each informant's statements.

Tabel 1. Matriks analisis data wawancara informan

No	Informant	Question Quote	Code	Category	Theme	Interpretation
1	I1	“I don't buy it straight away, I buy it when I need it.”	Product warranties	Rational response	The influence of soft selling on consumer awareness	Soft selling increases awareness without directly encouraging purchases.

2	I2	“ it’s still just a wishlist if it’s not student-friendly.”	Consumption aspirations	Aspirational responses	Symbolic consumption	Soft selling creates a delayed desire to consume.
3	I3	“ more about mix-and-match inspiration, not buying.	Lifestyle inspiration	Symbolic response	Lifestyle identification	Influencer become lifestyle referances, not just promotions.
4	I4	“I once bought skincare that was reviewed by an influencer.”	Trial purchase	Impulsive response	Consumptive behavior	<i>Soft selling</i> encourages initial purchases.
5	I4	“no repurchase due to lack of suitability.”	Product evaluation	Rational response	Consumer decisions	User experience determines subsequent decisions.
6	I5	“ I buy because I like the mix and match.”	Visual appeal	Impulsive response	Consumptive behavior	Visual appeal triggers purchasing decisions.
7	I5	“ I bought it again it felt good	repurchase	Initial loyalty	Repeated use	Satisfaction drives repeat purchases.

Based on the table above, each informant’s statement was analyzed through a systematic coding process and categorized into three response patterns: rational, impulsive, and aspirational. These categories were developed to identify how soft-selling strategies influence Gen Z consumer behavior.

3.4 Rational Response: Awareness without Impulsivity

Some informants demonstrated a selective cognitive response, where influencer content increased product awareness but did not immediately lead to purchasing decisions. One informant stated: *"I don't buy right away. Usually, I just get to know the product first. If I really need it and the price is right, then I buy it."* This statement indicates that soft selling effectively builds product awareness, while consumers still consider their needs and financial conditions before purchasing. A similar response was shown by an informant who followed influencers because of their “clean” lifestyle but did not purchase all promoted products: *"Specifically, products from Sashfir or other items that aren't student-friendly are still on my wishlist."* This statement reflects that soft selling creates consumption aspirations, where products are positioned as desires rather than immediate needs. Influencer content also functions as aesthetic inspiration rather than direct purchase motivation. Another informant stated: *"The main thing that attracts me is their creativity in styling. I see their content as a walking art gallery. It's not just the clothes they wear, but how they explore color, texture, and silhouettes."* The informant further explained that influencer content influences perspectives toward fashion trends rather than directly changing consumption behavior: *"The influence is more on perspective, not consumption patterns. I've become more aware of viral fashion trends. But knowing a trend doesn't mean you have to own it."* These findings show that soft selling shapes awareness, preferences, and lifestyle perceptions, but does not always result in immediate consumption.

3.5 Impulsive Responses: The Effects of Repetition and Emotional Attachment

In contrast to rational responses, two informants showed a more consumptive response after being exposed to influencer content. Influencer reviews not only increased product interest but also encouraged purchasing decisions. One informant stated: *"I once bought skincare products reviewed by Sashfir, namely SKIN1004 Madagascar Centella Toning Toner and Hyalu-Cica Water-Fit Sun Serum."*

The purchase was supported by documentation of products bought after exposure to influencer reviews on TikTok. However, continued consumption was influenced by personal experience with the product. The informant stated: *"I won't repurchase the sun serum, because it sometimes causes a burning sensation on my skin."* This indicates that soft selling can encourage trial purchases, but repurchase decisions depend on product suitability and consumer experience. Similar patterns were found in fashion consumption. One informant stated: *"Initially, I watched their fashion content and liked the way they mixed and matched. From there, I became interested in buying the shirts and pants they were wearing. I even bought them again because I thought the styles looked good on me."* This shows that soft selling may lead not only to initial purchases but also repeat purchases when products are considered suitable with consumers' preferences and personal style.

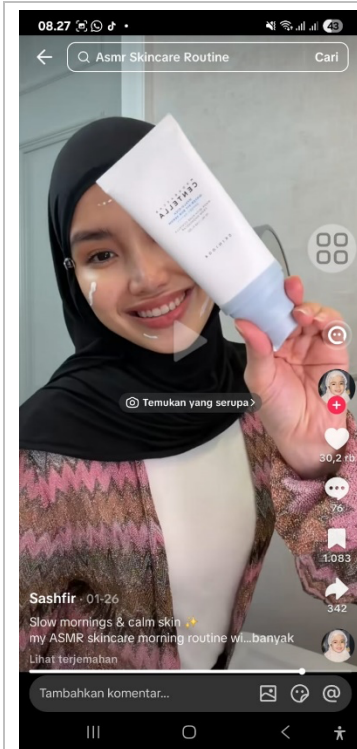


Figure 1. Skincare products purchased by informants after seeing influencer reviews.
 Documentation of research informants, 2026

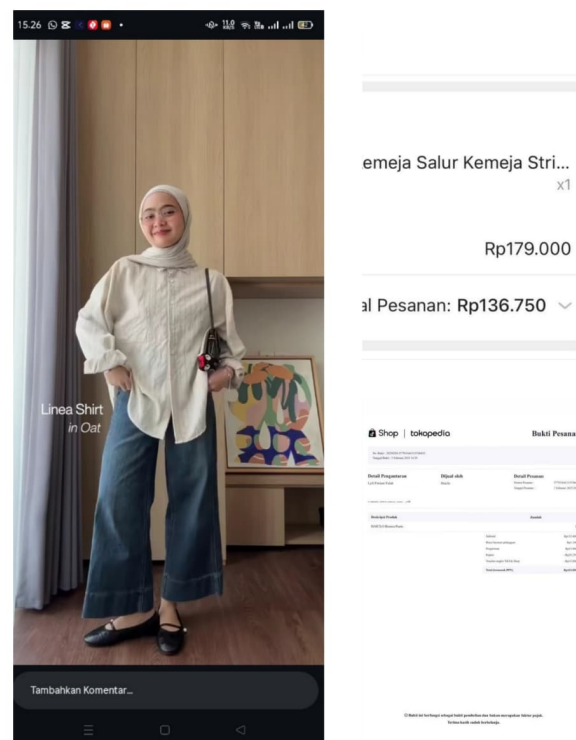


Figure 2. Influencer's Instagram feed and evidence of fashion product purchases by informants.
 Documentation of research informants, 2026

3.6 Aspirational Responses: Wishlists and Symbolic Identification

Three other informants did not make direct purchases but expressed emotional interest in influencer lifestyles. One informant stated: *"I never buy from fashion reviews, but I use them as inspiration for mix-and-matching and looking for similar items."* Another informant explained: *"Initially, I liked the clean lifestyle... if the products aren't student-friendly, they're still on my wishlist."* These statements demonstrate that products are not interpreted merely as functional objects but also as symbols of lifestyle and identity. In this context, soft selling operates symbolically by creating aspirational desires that may not immediately result in ownership due to economic limitations. Therefore, the influence of soft selling cannot only be measured through purchase decisions but also through changes in audience perceptions, preferences, and lifestyle orientations.

3.7 Theoretical Analysis

Analytically, these findings indicate that soft selling works through two main mechanisms: **Impression Management:** Influencers manage their own image as authentic, relatable, and aesthetically pleasing figures. This creates an emotional connection, making it easier for audiences to accept product recommendations as part of their daily lives, rather than promotions. **Identity Commodification:** Everyday life, personal experiences, and lifestyle are packaged into a narrative with marketable value. Products appear as a natural element in the influencer's life story, blurring the lines between consumption and identity.

3.8 Synthesis of Findings

Of the five informants, two made purchases after exposure to influencer content, and three only reached the preference and wishlist stage due to price considerations. All informants demonstrated a symbolic interest in the influencer's lifestyle. Thus, soft-selling strategies are not always effective in generating instant transactions, but they are effective in symbolically and gradually shaping aspirations, preferences, and consumer tendencies. For Gen Z, consumption is not only an economic activity but also a process of self-identification and social affiliation

3.8 Evaluation of Soft Selling Influencers from the Perspective of Islamic Values in Consumption

From an Islamic perspective, consumption is not only an economic activity but also a moral and spiritual practice involving responsibility before Allah. Islamic consumption principles emphasize balance (wasathiyah), avoiding excess (israf), and preventing waste (tabdzir) (QS. Al-A'raf 7:31).

يٰۤاَيُّهَا اٰدَمُ خُذْ زِينَتَكَ عِنْدَ كُلِّ مَسْجِدٍ وَكُلْ وَاشْرَبْ وَلَا تُسْرِفْ ۗ اِنَّهُ لَا يُحِبُّ الْمُسْرِفِيْنَ

"O children of Adam! Wear your beautiful clothing at every mosque, and eat and drink, but do not be excessive. Indeed, Allah does not love those who waste." The verse explains that Islam does not prohibit consumption or worldly enjoyment, but encourages moderation and self-control so that consumption remains within the limits of need and benefit. The findings show that influencer soft-selling strategies through image management and identity commodification can shape symbolic consumption orientations among Gen Z. Products are no longer perceived only through their functional value but also through the lifestyle meanings attached to influencer identities. As a result, consumption may become a form of social affiliation and self-expression rather than solely fulfilling practical needs. However, trend-driven purchases, FOMO, and the desire to imitate influencer lifestyles may encourage consumption that is not based on primary needs or long-term benefits (Anggriani et al., 2024). This condition relates to the Islamic prohibition of wasteful behavior as stated in (QS. Al-Isra' 17:27)

اِنَّ الْمُبَدِّرِيْنَ كَانُوْا اِخْوَانَ الشَّيْطٰنِ ۗ وَكَانَ الشَّيْطٰنُ لِرَبِّهٖ كَفُوْرًا

"Indeed, the wasteful are the brothers of Satan, and Satan is ungrateful to his Lord." which emphasizes that excessive use of wealth without consideration of benefits is discouraged. Nevertheless, the findings also reveal value resistance among some informants. They continued to consider price, needs, and economic conditions before purchasing products. This reflects self-control (mujahadah an-nafs) and responsible consumption, which align with the principle of moderation described in (QS. Al-Furqan 25:67) , where Muslims are encouraged to avoid both excess and stinginess.

وَالَّذِينَ إِذَا أَنْفَقُوا لَمْ يُسْرِفُوا وَلَمْ يَقْتُرُوا وَكَانَ بَيْنَ ذَلِكَ قَوَامًا

"And (including the servants of the Most Gracious) those who, when they give (of their wealth), are neither excessive nor stingy, doing both in moderation." Therefore, influencer soft-selling strategies have the potential to shape symbolic consumption among Gen Z through emotional attachment, identity, and lifestyle aspirations. However, their influence is not absolute because consumption decisions are still mediated by individual awareness, economic literacy, and internalization of Islamic values.

4. CONCLUSION

This study shows that the soft-selling strategy used by influencers on social media works through impression management, consistent personal branding, and identity commodification. Influencers not only promote products but also construct aspirational lifestyle representations, so that products are perceived as part of their identity. Among Gen Z, this strategy effectively shapes awareness, preferences, and symbolic consumption orientation gradually, although it does not always result in impulse purchases. Of the five informants, two made purchases after being exposed to influencer content, while the other three only reached the wishlist stage due to economic considerations. From an Islamic perspective, the tendency towards symbol-based consumption has the potential to lead to excessive behavior (*israf*) if not accompanied by self-control. However, the findings also indicate value resistance in some informants through rational consideration before purchasing. Thus, the impact of soft-selling is not deterministic, but rather influenced by economic literacy, psychological maturity, and the internalization of an individual's religious values. This study has several limitations that need to be considered. First, the number of informants involved was limited to five Generation Z participants, so the findings represent specific experiences and interpretations rather than general representations of all Gen Z consumers. Second, this research focused on two influencer accounts on Instagram and TikTok, meaning that the findings may not fully describe soft selling practices across different types of influencers, platforms, or product categories. Third, this study relied on qualitative interviews and content analysis, so the interpretation of consumer responses was based on subjective experiences and meanings constructed by informants. Future research is recommended to involve a larger number of participants with more diverse backgrounds to gain broader perspectives regarding influencer marketing and consumer behavior. Further studies may also apply a mixed-method approach by combining qualitative exploration with quantitative measurement to examine the relationship between soft selling exposure and consumer behavior more comprehensively. In addition, future research can explore other dimensions of influencer communication, such as audience trust, authenticity perception, algorithmic influence, or ethical aspects of digital marketing from different cultural and religious perspectives.

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