

Parasocial Relationships of Gen Z Users and Perceived Political Authenticity of TikTok Influencers: A Cross-Sectional Correlational Study

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Abstract. This cross-sectional correlational study examined the association between parasocial relationships with TikTok influencers and perceived political authenticity among Filipino Generation Z users. The study included 1,500 respondents aged 18–24 who had followed one of five selected political-content TikTok influencers for at least six months, with 300 respondents in each influencer stratum. Parasocial relationships were assessed in terms of interest, knowledge, identification, and interaction, while perceived political authenticity was assessed through ordinariness, consistency, and immediacy using a four-point Likert response format and previously validated survey measures. Data were summarized using means and standard deviations and analyzed using Spearman rank-order correlation and multiple regression. Respondents reported high levels of parasocial relationships ($M = 3.11$) and perceived political authenticity ($M = 3.14$). Interest was the highest-rated parasocial dimension ($M = 3.21$), while consistency and immediacy were the highest-rated authenticity dimensions ($M = 3.16$ each). Parasocial relationships were strongly and positively associated with perceived political authenticity (Spearman's $\rho = .797$, $p = .001$). The regression model explained 62.5% of the variance in perceived political authenticity ($R^2 = .625$; adjusted $R^2 = .624$), with identification emerging as the strongest standardized predictor ($\beta = .361$), followed by knowledge ($\beta = .262$), interest ($\beta = .170$), and interaction ($\beta = .149$), all $p < .001$. Because the data were cross-sectional, these findings indicate association and statistical prediction, not causation. The results underscore the importance of perceived similarity, familiarity, and relational closeness in how Gen Z audiences evaluate political authenticity on TikTok.

Keywords: parasocial relationships; perceived political authenticity; Generation Z; TikTok influencers; political communication

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Introduction

In the digital age, social media platforms have transformed how individuals engage with politics, culture, and social issues. TikTok, which attracts a substantial Generation Z audience, has become an important space for the rapid dissemination of political and social content. Its short-form, algorithmically distributed videos give influencers considerable visibility in political discourse. In this environment, parasocial relationships—one-sided emotional connections in which followers perceive media figures as familiar, relatable, or trustworthy despite limited reciprocity—provide a useful framework for understanding how political messages are received (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Parasocial relationships are especially relevant to political communication because influencers may seem more accessible and personally relatable than traditional political actors. Repeated exposure to personal narratives, opinions, and everyday content can foster perceived familiarity and trust. Political authenticity, in turn, refers to the degree to which political figures or communicators are perceived as genuine, truthful, consistent, relatable, and accessible. These judgments are consequential for young audiences navigating political discourse on social media (Boulianne, 2021; Luebke, 2020).

Generation Z users do not merely consume political content; they also evaluate the credibility and authenticity of the people communicating it. TikTok influencers who present themselves as transparent and genuine may therefore become important reference figures in political meaning-making. Parasocial closeness can make political messages feel more relatable and credible, although such associations do not by themselves demonstrate that influencer exposure causes political attitudes or behaviors (Lee et al., 2019).

Although research has examined social media influencers, political participation, and parasocial interaction, the relationship between parasocial relationships and perceived political authenticity on TikTok remains comparatively underexplored, particularly among Filipino Gen Z users. This study addresses that gap by examining whether stronger parasocial relationships are associated with stronger perceptions of political authenticity and by identifying which parasocial dimensions have the greatest statistical predictive value.

The study specifically sought to: (1) describe parasocial relationships in terms of interest, knowledge, identification, and interaction; (2) describe perceived political authenticity in terms of ordinariness, consistency, and immediacy; (3) determine whether parasocial relationships are significantly associated with perceived political authenticity; and (4) determine which parasocial relationship dimensions significantly predict perceived political authenticity. The null hypotheses tested at $\alpha = .05$ were that no significant association exists between the two constructs and that none of the parasocial relationship dimensions significantly predicts perceived political authenticity.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The study was anchored primarily in Parasocial Relationship Theory, which describes the perceived interpersonal bond audiences can develop with media personalities despite the fundamentally one-sided character of the relationship (Horton & Wohl, 1956). In social-media settings, repeated exposure, self-disclosure, perceived similarity, and interactive platform features can intensify the sense that an influencer is familiar and personally relevant.

For this study, parasocial relationship was operationalized through four dimensions—interest, knowledge, identification, and interaction—while perceived political authenticity was represented by ordinariness, consistency, and immediacy, consistent with the conceptual and measurement literature on parasocial interaction and political authenticity (Auter & Palmgreen, 2019; Luebke & Engelmann, 2023). Social Cognitive Theory further provides a broader explanatory lens for how observed communicators can become salient models when audiences perceive similarity, credibility, and relational closeness (Bandura, 2001). The framework is used here to interpret associations among measured variables, not to establish causal effects.

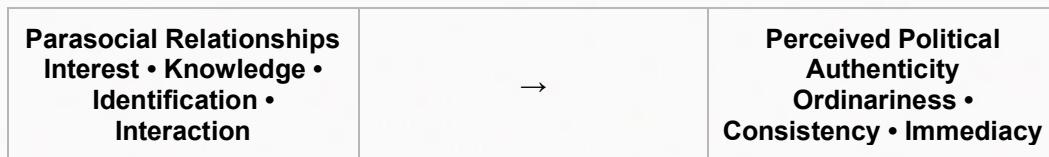


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study

Note. The arrow denotes the direction of the regression model (parasocial relationship dimensions as predictors of perceived political authenticity), not a causal pathway.

Parasocial Relationships

Parasocial relationships refer to perceived face-to-face or interpersonal connections between audiences and media personalities even though reciprocity is limited or absent (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Social platforms can intensify these bonds because influencers communicate frequently, share personal information, and invite audience engagement. Auter and Palmgreen (2019) describe multiple dimensions that help characterize the depth of these relationships, including interest, knowledge, identification, and interaction.

Interest

Interest reflects the attention and emotional investment that followers direct toward a media figure. Sustained interest encourages repeated exposure and continued attention to the influencer's content, strengthening the media personality's perceived importance and familiarity (Derrick et al., 2009; Perse & Rubin, 2020).

Knowledge

Knowledge refers to the follower's accumulated familiarity with an influencer's values, experiences, positions, and public persona. Repeated exposure to personal disclosures and issue-based content can create a sense of knowing the influencer, even without reciprocal interpersonal contact (Närvänen et al., 2020; Labrecque, 2018).

Identification

Identification describes the degree to which followers perceive similarity with an influencer's values, attitudes, experiences, or preferred actions. Identification can deepen emotional attachment and may be especially relevant in political contexts because perceived similarity can shape how audiences evaluate a communicator's sincerity and credibility (Cohen & Holbert, 2018; Lee & Watkins, 2016).

Interaction

Interaction captures the perceived relational quality produced by engaging with influencer content through viewing, liking, commenting, sharing, or imagining interpersonal closeness. Although such engagement is often not truly reciprocal, interactive features can strengthen the sense of connection and involvement characteristic of parasocial relationships (Nabi & Prestin, 2016; Rubin & McHugh, 2019).

Perceived Political Authenticity

Political authenticity concerns judgments that a political communicator is genuine, truthful, and true to their publicly expressed identity. Luebke (2020) and Luebke and Engelmann (2023) emphasize that audiences form authenticity as a perception rather than an objective personal trait. In this study, we examined perceived political authenticity through ordinarity, consistency, and immediacy.

Ordinarity

Ordinarity concerns how relatable, down-to-earth, and close to everyday life a political communicator appears. Presenting familiar language and personal experiences can reduce perceived social distance and make public figures seem more accessible (Stiers et al., 2019; Middleton & Randall, 2024).

Consistency

Consistency refers to perceived alignment between a communicator's stated beliefs, behavior, and public presentation over time. Stable messaging and congruence between words and actions can strengthen audience judgments that political communication is sincere rather than opportunistic (Breitenstein et al., 2025; Enli, 2024).

Immediacy

Immediacy refers to perceived accessibility, openness, responsiveness, and emotional availability. In digitally mediated political communication, frequent and timely communication, self-disclosure, and the appearance of direct engagement can contribute to judgments of authenticity (Jones, 2020; Zeller, 2017).

Methodology

Research Design

The study employed a quantitative cross-sectional correlational design. The study collected data on parasocial relationships and perceived political authenticity at a single point in time and analyzed them using descriptive statistics, Spearman rank-order correlation, and multiple regression. The design permits assessment of associations and statistical prediction among the measured variables but does not establish temporal order or causation.

Respondents and Sampling Procedure

The respondents were 1,500 Filipino Generation Z TikTok users aged 18–24 who regularly followed political content and actively followed one of five selected TikTok influencers. The source study selected the influencers based on substantial reach and active participation in political or civic discourse. Eligibility required respondents to be Filipino citizens or residents, to reside in the Philippines or to have lived in the country for at least the preceding 12 months, to communicate in Filipino or English, and to have followed the selected influencer for at least six months.

The sampling procedure was described as stratified random sampling. The sample was organized into five influencer strata, with 300 respondents in each stratum, for a total sample of 1,500. Respondents were also categorized according to self-reported engagement level—high, medium, or low—based on behaviors such as liking, commenting, sharing, creating political content, or joining online political discussions. These procedures were intended to capture variation in exposure and engagement within the target population.

Research Instrument

Data were collected using a structured survey questionnaire with a four-point Likert response format (4 = Strongly Agree, 3 = Agree, 2 = Disagree, 1 = Strongly Disagree). Parasocial relationships were measured through items representing interest, knowledge, identification, and interaction. The questionnaire drew on the Parasocial Interaction Scale attributed in the submitted manuscript to Derrick, Gabriel, and Hugenberg (2009) and on related parasocial measurement literature. We measured perceived political authenticity using dimensions derived from the Perceived Political Authenticity Scale developed by Luebke and Engelmann (2023), particularly ordinariness, consistency, and immediacy.

Validity and Reliability

The parasocial and political-authenticity measures were drawn from previously validated instruments and used a consistent four-point response format. Study-specific internal-consistency coefficients (e.g., Cronbach's alpha or McDonald's omega) were not available for reporting. Consider this absence when interpreting the measurement results, and future applications of the instrument should report reliability estimates for the analytic sample.

Data Collection Procedure

Before data collection, the researcher's institution issued a formal approval letter confirming ethical compliance, and the researcher sought permission from relevant academic institutions for on-site survey administration. Participants received an explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, voluntary nature, and their rights before completing the survey. Informed consent was obtained before participation. Survey data were gathered through online distribution to eligible TikTok users and through face-to-face survey administration in public or academic locations. This analysis included only the survey-based procedures and statistical analyses reported in the results.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, summarized parasocial relationship and perceived political authenticity scores. We used Spearman rank-order correlation to test the association between the overall constructs. Multiple regression was used to determine the statistical predictive contribution of interest, knowledge, identification, and interaction to perceived political authenticity. We evaluated statistical significance at $\alpha = .05$. Regression coefficients are interpreted as predictive associations within the cross-sectional dataset, not as causal effects.

Ethical Considerations

All participants were adults aged 18–24, and participation was voluntary. Before completing the questionnaire, respondents were informed of the study's objectives, procedures, expected participation, and their right to decline or withdraw without penalty, and they provided informed consent. The study documentation states that institutional approval for ethical compliance was obtained before data collection and that permissions were requested from participating academic institutions where face-to-face recruitment occurred. Participant profiles and responses were kept anonymous in reporting; identifying information was not publicly disclosed, and collected data were used only for the stated research purpose unless additional consent was obtained.

Results and Discussion

Parasocial Relationships

Table 1.

Overall Parasocial Relationship Scores of Gen Z TikTok Users

Indicator	Mean	Standard Deviation	Descriptive Level
Interest	3.21	0.47	High
Knowledge	3.10	0.48	High
Identification	3.07	0.48	High
Interaction	3.05	0.57	High
Overall	3.11	0.41	High

Note. Scale: 3.50–4.00 = Very High; 2.50–3.49 = High; 1.50–2.49 = Low; 1.00–1.49 = Very Low.

Table 1 shows a high overall level of parasocial relationship ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 0.41$). Interest was the highest-rated dimension ($M = 3.21$), followed by knowledge ($M = 3.10$), identification ($M = 3.07$), and interaction ($M = 3.05$). The pattern indicates that respondents were strongly attentive to and familiar with the influencers they followed, while the more interaction-oriented dimension was comparatively lower. This pattern is consistent with research suggesting that perceived expertise, similarity, trustworthiness, and platform engagement can strengthen parasocial bonds among Gen Z audiences (Cheng et al., 2023).

Interest

Table 1.1.

Parasocial Relationship in Terms of Interest

Statement	Mean	Level
I hope the TikTok influencer achieves their goals as a political or social advocate.	3.28	High
I look forward to seeing the TikTok influencer's political content.	3.27	High
I am interested in what the TikTok influencer has to say about political topics.	3.26	High
I like to see content where the TikTok influencer appears, even if it is not made by them.	3.23	High
I like to see content created by the TikTok influencer related to politics or social issues.	3.23	High
I would follow the TikTok influencer on another platform if they created an account there.	3.12	High
I care about what happens to the influencer in their personal and professional life.	3.07	High
Overall	3.21	High

Note. Item means are presented on the four-point scale; the overall standard deviation for Interest was 0.47.

Respondents reported high parasocial interest ($M = 3.21$). The highest-rated statements concerned hoping that the influencer succeeds as a political or social advocate ($M = 3.28$), looking forward to political content ($M = 3.27$), and interest in the influencer's political views ($M = 3.26$). These findings are consistent with the view that sustained attention and repeated exposure help maintain parasocial involvement (Auter, 2019; Perse & Rubin, 2020).

Knowledge

Table 1.2.

Parasocial Relationship in Terms of Knowledge

Statement	Mean	Level
When I see political content about the TikTok influencer, I search to learn more about them.	3.12	High
I am aware of the personal values and life experiences the influencer shares online.	3.12	High
I actively seek more information about the influencer and their advocacies.	3.10	High
Knowing more about the TikTok influencer is important to me.	3.09	High
If I saw a news story about the TikTok influencer, I would read or watch it.	3.06	High
Overall	3.10	High

Knowledge was also high ($M = 3.10$), indicating sustained familiarity with influencers' values, experiences, and advocacies. The strongest items involved searching for more information after exposure to political content and awareness of personal values or life experiences shared online (both $M = 3.12$). Repeated exposure and accumulated knowledge can strengthen perceived familiarity even when the relationship remains one-sided (Närvänen et al., 2020; Labrecque, 2018).

Identification

Table 1.3.

Parasocial Relationship in Terms of Identification

Statement	Mean	Level
I admire how the TikTok influencer responds to social or political problems.	3.14	High
I can relate to the TikTok influencer's political views and attitudes.	3.13	High
I share many of the same beliefs or values as the TikTok influencer.	3.05	High
I often agree with the influencer's views on social and political issues.	3.04	High
I would likely make similar decisions as the influencer in political matters.	3.04	High
I have similar political opinions to the TikTok influencer.	3.03	High
Overall	3.07	High

Identification was high ($M = 3.07$). Respondents most strongly endorsed admiration for how influencers respond to social or political issues ($M = 3.14$) and relatability of political views and attitudes ($M = 3.13$). The result supports the importance of perceived similarity in parasocial relationships and is consistent with work linking identification with stronger emotional attachment and perceived authenticity (Cohen & Holbert, 2018; Lee & Watkins, 2016).

Interaction

Table 1.4.

Parasocial Relationship in Terms of Interaction

Statement	Mean	Level
Watching the influencer's political content makes me feel less alone in my opinions.	3.10	High
The influencer makes me feel like I am interacting with a friend when I watch their content.	3.10	High
The influencer seems to understand what kind of political content I care about.	3.05	High
I can imagine myself having a real-life friendship with the TikTok influencer.	2.96	High
Overall	3.05	High

Note. Item means are presented on the four-point scale; the overall standard deviation for Interaction was 0.57.

Interaction was the lowest-rated parasocial dimension but remained high overall ($M = 3.05$). Respondents most strongly endorsed feeling less alone in their opinions and experiencing the influencer as friend-like while watching political content (both $M = 3.10$). These results reflect the characteristic illusion of interpersonal engagement that can emerge through social-media interaction even without genuine reciprocity (Boyd et al., 2022; Rubin & McHugh, 2019).

Perceived Political Authenticity

Table 2.

Overall Perceived Political Authenticity of TikTok Influencers

Indicator	Mean	Standard Deviation	Descriptive Level
Ordinariness	3.12	0.61	High
Consistency	3.16	0.46	High
Immediacy	3.16	0.60	High
Overall	3.14	0.56	High

Note. Scale: 3.50–4.00 = Very High; 2.50–3.49 = High; 1.50–2.49 = Low; 1.00–1.49 = Very Low.

Table 2 indicates a high overall level of perceived political authenticity ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 0.56$). Consistency and immediacy were jointly the highest-rated dimensions ($M = 3.16$ each), followed by ordinariness ($M = 3.12$). The pattern suggests that respondents valued coherent political positioning and perceived openness or accessibility, while also rating relatability positively (Harff & Schmuck, 2024; Rinaudo, 2023).

Ordinariness

Table 2.1.

Perceived Political Authenticity in Terms of Ordinariness

Statement	Mean	Level
The influencer does not act superior or distant from regular people.	3.18	High
The influencer talks in a way that feels familiar to me.	3.15	High
The influencer seems like someone I might meet in everyday life.	3.11	High
The influencer seems down-to-earth when discussing political or social issues.	3.02	High
Overall	3.12	High

Ordinariness was rated high ($M = 3.12$). Respondents most strongly perceived influencers as not acting superior or distant ($M = 3.18$) and as communicating in a familiar manner ($M = 3.15$). These findings are consistent with the role of relatability and ordinary self-presentation in reducing perceived distance between public communicators and audiences (Maloney Yorganci & McMurtry, 2024; Middleton & Randall, 2024).

Consistency

Table 2.2.

Perceived Political Authenticity in Terms of Consistency

Statement	Mean	Level
The influencer sticks to their opinions even if it might hurt their image or following.	3.21	High
The influencer stays true to themselves even when it is unpopular.	3.20	High
The influencer presents views consistent with what they truly believe.	3.12	High
The influencer stays consistent in expressing their real political beliefs.	3.22	High
Overall	3.16	High

Consistency was rated high ($M = 3.16$), with the strongest item referring to consistent expression of real political beliefs ($M = 3.22$). Stable political messaging can strengthen perceptions that communicators are principled and credible. This interpretation aligns with research linking consistent self-presentation and authenticity to trust and engagement (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019; Karimi & Fox, 2023).

Immediacy

Table 2.3.

Perceived Political Authenticity in Terms of Immediacy

Statement	Mean	Level
The influencer speaks openly and honestly about personal experiences.	3.20	High
The influencer shares private thoughts or feelings related to political or civic issues.	3.16	High
The influencer sometimes expresses themselves emotionally and unfiltered.	3.15	High
The influencer allows followers to see aspects of their personal life beyond curated content.	3.12	High
Overall	3.16	High

Immediacy was likewise high ($M = 3.16$). Respondents particularly valued open and honest discussion of personal experiences ($M = 3.20$), followed by the sharing of private thoughts related to political or civic issues ($M = 3.16$). Self-disclosure and perceived emotional accessibility can deepen a sense of intimacy and trust in parasocial relationships (Chung & Cho, 2017; Lacap et al., 2024).

Association Between Parasocial Relationships and Perceived Political Authenticity

Table 3.

Spearman Rank-Order Correlation Between Parasocial Relationships and Perceived Political Authenticity

Variables	Spearman's ρ	Strength/Direction	p	Decision
Parasocial relationship and perceived political authenticity	.797	High positive	.001	Reject H_{01}

Note. Significant at $\alpha = .05$. Because Spearman rank-order correlation was used, the coefficient is reported as ρ rather than Pearson's r .

A strong positive association was observed between parasocial relationships and perceived political authenticity ($\rho = .797$, $p = .001$). Thus, respondents reporting stronger parasocial relationships also tended to rate TikTok influencers as more politically authentic. The finding supports rejection of the first null hypothesis. Consistent with the cross-sectional design, the association should not be interpreted as evidence that parasocial relationships cause authenticity perceptions. Rather, it indicates substantial covariation between the two constructs within the surveyed sample (Cohen & Holbert, 2021; Vu et al., 2024).

Parasocial Relationship Dimensions as Predictors of Perceived Political Authenticity

Table 4.

Multiple Regression Predicting Perceived Political Authenticity from Parasocial Relationship Dimensions

Predictor	Unstandardized B	Standardized β	t	p
Constant	.769	—	15.392	< .001
Interest	.143	.170	8.844	< .001
Knowledge	.217	.262	10.619	< .001
Identification	.301	.361	15.412	< .001
Interaction	.104	.149	6.868	< .001

Note. Model summary: $R = .790$; $R^2 = .625$; adjusted $R^2 = .624$; $F = 621.027$, $p < .001$. Standardized coefficients (β) are reported from the regression coefficient table.

The multiple regression model was statistically significant and explained 62.5% of the variance in perceived political authenticity ($R^2 = .625$; adjusted $R^2 = .624$). All four parasocial dimensions were significant positive predictors. Identification was the strongest standardized predictor ($\beta = .361$), followed by knowledge ($\beta = .262$), interest ($\beta = .170$), and interaction ($\beta = .149$), all $p < .001$.

The strength of identification suggests that perceived similarity and shared values are especially important in how respondents evaluate the authenticity of political-content influencers. Knowledge, interest, and interaction also contributed independently, indicating that familiarity, sustained attention, and perceived relational engagement each add explanatory value. These results are consistent with research emphasizing the importance of identification and perceived closeness in parasocial evaluations of political and media figures (Cohen & Holbert, 2021; Rubin & McHugh, 2019). The model remains predictive rather than causal because all variables were measured cross-sectionally.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered. First, the cross-sectional design does not establish temporal order and cannot support causal claims. Second, the study relied on self-reported survey responses and may therefore be affected by recall, social-desirability, and common-method biases. Third, the sample was limited to Filipino Gen Z TikTok users who followed five selected political-content influencers for at least six months, which may limit generalizability to other age groups, platforms, or influencer types. Fourth, the study did not report internal-consistency coefficients for the scales, limiting evaluation of measurement reliability in this sample. Finally, the reported analyses were limited to descriptive statistics, Spearman correlation, and multiple regression; conclusions should therefore be confined to those analyses.

Conclusion

The study found high levels of both parasocial relationships and perceived political authenticity among the surveyed Filipino Gen Z TikTok users. Interest was the strongest descriptive parasocial dimension, while consistency and immediacy were the highest-rated dimensions of perceived political authenticity. Parasocial relationships were strongly and positively associated with perceived political authenticity, and the regression model showed that identification was the strongest statistical predictor, followed by knowledge, interest, and interaction.

These results suggest that perceived similarity, familiarity, and relational closeness are important correlates of how Gen Z users judge political authenticity on TikTok. The findings do not establish that parasocial relationships cause authenticity perceptions, but they indicate that the two constructs are closely linked within the surveyed population. Political communicators and civic organizations should therefore emphasize transparent, consistent, and responsible communication rather than relying on relational appeal alone. Educators may use the findings to strengthen media and digital literacy programs that help young people critically evaluate political messages, influencer credibility, and the difference between perceived familiarity and evidence-based trust.

Future studies should use longitudinal, experimental, or panel designs if causal inference is a goal; report study-specific reliability coefficients and complete sampling-frame procedures; compare influencer and platform types; and consider mixed-method approaches that explore how followers interpret authenticity in greater depth.

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