

**TikTok Shop Advertising: The Effects of Sponsorship Disclosure and Affordances
on Consumer Trust and Purchase Intention**

Erin Burroughs

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Megan A. Duncan Chair, Ph.D

Matthew H. Zimmerman, Ph.D

Justin R. Combs, Ph.D

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ACADEMIC ABSTRACT

There is little to no literature surrounding the influence that disclosure methods on TikTok Shop advertisements have on the platform's main audience, Generation Z. This thesis used the Elaboration Likelihood Model and Affordances Theory to measure Gen Z's elaboration likelihood, trust, and purchase intention when they watch a TikTok ad that clearly discloses a sponsorship with TikTok Shop, versus when they watch a TikTok with no clear disclosure. The hypotheses of this study predict that Gen Z will view ads with clear disclosure as more trustworthy and transparent and will take central routes of elaboration to evaluate the ad, leading to higher purchase intention. On the other hand, it predicts that Gen Z will view ads with no clear disclosure as less trustworthy and transparent and will take peripheral routes of elaboration to evaluate the ad. I administered an online survey-embedded experiment using a convenience sample of 143 (N=143) individuals who are from Gen Z. The results showed that disclosure had no effect on Gen Z's elaboration likelihood, trust in the brand, or perception of brand transparency. Engaging with TikTok ad affordances also did not affect Gen Z's trust. However, the results showed that engaging with ad affordances increased their purchase intention. The discussion includes implications on theory and practice with suggestions for marketers, advertisers, and social media content creators. Future research could expand this study by using Friestad & Wrights' (1994) Persuasion Knowledge Theory to investigate Generation Z further.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

When scrolling on TikTok, TikTok Shop advertisements often blend in with regular entertaining content on the app. Some TikTok ads clearly disclose that it is a paid sponsorship, while others are disguised as a normal unpaid video. It is unknown how this element of deception affects TikTok's main audience, Generation Z, and their levels of trust and willingness to buy the advertised product. To investigate this, I distributed a survey to individuals in Gen Z and found that sponsorship disclosure in TikTok Shop ads did not influence their perception of the ad's trustworthiness and transparency. Results also showed that Gen Z does not rely on app features such as likes, comments, saves or shares to analyze the ad. Instead, the results found that engaging with these features and with the in-app product page increases their intentions to buy the product from the ad. The discussion expands on these findings and provides suggestions for advertisers and social media content creators who partner with TikTok Shop.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Lori and Scott. Thank you for always setting high standards for me and supporting me in everything I do. You both inspired me to further my education and always strive for higher. It has always been my dream to be a Hokie like you two. Graduate school would not have been possible without you and your unfailing love and support.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Background of TikTok Shop.....	4
Literature Review	6
Elaboration Likelihood Model	6
Trust.....	7
Deception.....	7
ELM Moderators	8
Reviews	8
Involvement.....	9
Credibility	9
Familiarity	10
Instagram.....	10
TikTok.....	11
ELM Hypotheses and Rationale.....	12
Affordances Theory	13
AT and Media	14
AT and Social Media.....	15
AT and Social Media Advertising	16
AT Hypotheses and Rationale.....	17
Methodology	17
Participants	18
Participant Demographics	18
Table 1.....	19
Procedure	19
Table 2.....	20
Table 3.....	20
Variable Construction.....	21
IV: Elaboration.....	21
DV: Elaboration	21
DV: Transparency and Trust	22
DV: Purchase Intention	23
Results	23

ELM Hypotheses	23
Affordances Theory Hypotheses	25
Table 4.....	28
<i>Discussion.....</i>	<i>29</i>
ELM Hypotheses (H1-H2).....	29
Affordances Theory Hypotheses (H3-H4)	31
Limitations and Future Research	34
<i>Conclusions</i>	<i>35</i>
<i>References</i>	<i>37</i>
<i>Appendix A</i>	<i>44</i>
<i>Appendix B</i>	<i>47</i>

Introduction

The social media platform, TikTok, was the most downloaded app in 2024, reaching 825 million downloads globally (Statista, 2025A). TikTok is a video sharing app where users can scroll entertaining videos for hours and content creators can make a living working full time.

TikTok includes an in-app shopping feature called TikTok Shop, where users can buy thousands of products ranging from beauty products to furniture. The first thing users see when they open TikTok is the “For You” page. While users are scrolling through the For You page or video feed, there are endless TikTok Shop advertisements in the form of short-form videos being added to the mix of the regular entertaining short-form videos. TikTok Shop is accessible straight from entertaining ads and even livestreams on the For You page. Key features of TikTok Shop advertising often include an add-to-cart button, called the “Yellow Basket” button, a comment section, and other engaging features. Through these features, brands using TikTok Shop have experienced success with 11% of U.S. households having purchased through TikTok Shop (Hubschmid, 2024). Additionally, 71.2% of respondents of a survey reported they often scroll through TikTok Shops after viewing their feed, stories, or live streams related to certain products (Statista, 2022).

In 2016 TikTok was launched by ByteDance in China as “Douyin” and quickly became China’s most popular app (Wade & Shan, 2019). In 2017 ByteDance acquired another Chinese app, music.ly, whose audience was primarily in the US (Wade & Shan, 2019). Music.ly became TikTok in 2018 and TikTok Shop was not launched until September 2023 (TikTok, 2023). TikTok Shop has experienced success, but little is known about why it is so successful.

TikTok is a unique platform because of its main audience, Generation Z, a young and highly impressionable group born between 1997-2012 (Dimock, 2019). Gen Z makes up 60% of

TikTok users (Putri, 2023) and 60% of Gen Z uses TikTok at least once a month (Dias, 2023). TikTok allows brands to reach and engage with Gen Z, which is now the largest cohort in the consumer world (Silveira et al., 2023). Gen Z is disinterested in traditional marketing tactics that rely on one-way communication (Putri et al., 2023). When making purchase decisions on TikTok, Generation Z values their sense of trust and authenticity (Putri et al., 2023). TikTok enables businesses to use two-way communication with users through ad comment sections, which can reduce consumer skepticism and build trust.

TikTok is also a unique platform for advertising because ads on TikTok often blend in with the regular For You page content. Ads on TikTok make up approximately 31% of content on the For You page (Getahun & Cahill, 2023), while ads on Instagram make up approximately 22% of the Instagram Reels feed (Amra & Elma, 2025). Although TikTok is aggressive with advertising, 15% of users struggle to distinguish between normal entertaining content and advertisements (Shepherd, 2025). TikTok ads are disguised as regular content because users often do not view them as ads. 83% of TikTok users find the ads to be entertaining (Hubschmid, 2024). The TikTok algorithm is another contributing factor to how TikTok ads blend in. The algorithm personalizes each user's For You page based on the content and ads they have previously liked or engaged with. The algorithm connects content with the right audience and is highly personalized, allowing for high levels of engagement (Dias, 2023). When scrolling on the For You page, users often do not know they are watching an ad unless the ad clearly states or discloses that it is a paid partnership, which adds an element of deception to the ad. It is unknown how this element of disclosure affects the purchase behaviors of TikTok's main audience, Gen Z, and how they perceive the trustworthiness of these types of ads.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) can be used to examine this theoretical question. Developed by Petty and Cacioppo, the ELM is a theoretical framework used to determine the effectiveness of persuasive methods of communication (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The effectiveness is measured by examining how individuals process information (Thomas et al., 2019). ELM suggests that there are two routes of thinking, which can be differentiated by the amount of processing of information or “elaboration” that the individual undergoes (Lee, 2009). The central route is characterized by higher levels of cognitive processing and elaboration, whereas the peripheral route is characterized by lower levels of cognitive effort and elaboration (Lee, 2009).

It is important to know how elements of disclosure in TikTok ads affect users’ elaboration likelihood when viewing ads because central routes of elaboration increase purchase intention and create lasting behavior changes (Lee, 2009). It is also important to know how elements of disclosure affect user’s levels of trust in the seller because trust also increases purchase intention and creates lasting behavior change (Putri et al., 2023). The results of this research will generate insights into how the element of disclosure in short-form video advertisements affects users’ elaboration likelihood and perceived trust in the seller. To gain insights to this theoretical question, I conducted an experiment where half the participants viewed a TikTok style ad where the video clearly reveals that it is a paid advertisement and the other half of participants viewed a TikTok style ad where the video does not reveal that it is a paid advertisement. After watching the video, each participant answered a questionnaire about their trust or perceptions of credibility in the ad and about their elaboration of the ad. By using the ELM, this study can contribute to existing literature surrounding TikTok advertising and

communication by examining how Gen Z is affected by the element of disclosure that exists on TikTok.

Background of TikTok Shop

TikTok Shop was launched on the app in September 2023 (TikTok, 2023). In the span of a little over a year, TikTok Shop became the second most used social commerce platform in the U.S., behind Facebook, surpassing Instagram (Statista, 2025B). Additionally, TikTok Shops globally generated \$33 billion in sales in 2024, and \$9 billion came from the U.S, which made TikTok Shop's largest source of revenue the U.S. (Statista, 2025C). TikTok Shop has experienced rapid growth, but researchers are still figuring out what to attribute to its success.

Any business, large or small, can open a TikTok Shop. TikTok Shop Academy is an online guide available to the public that outlines the process of opening a TikTok Shop, step by step. To market a TikTok Shop, businesses can upload their advertising videos on the official TikTok for Business website and pay based on the campaign objective, impressions, and conversions they want to achieve (TikTok For Business, n.d.). Ads on TikTok consist of both TikTok Shop ads and sponsored ads. Users can buy TikTok Shop products straight from the app via official TikTok Shop ads. Sponsored ads promote products that users must enter another site to buy. Sponsored ads contain a label on the ad that reads "sponsored," and TikTok Shop ads contain a label that reads, "creator earns commission" or no label at all. See Figures 1-3. The "creator earns commission" label indicates that the creator who posted the ad will earn a percentage of the sales generated from that ad, which is determined by the number of conversions through their unique affiliate link (Fresh Pies, n.d.). Creators can join the TikTok Affiliate program online via the official TikTok Shop website and start making partnerships with brands. The amount of money an affiliate creator earns depends on their agreed commission rate.

TikTok Shop businesses can set a commission rate from 1% to 80% (TikTok for Business, 2025). A small content creator on TikTok, Lori Ballen, started affiliate marketing on TikTok for makeup and clothing products and earned \$8,300 in one month and \$60,000 in the span of a few months (Ballen, 2024).

To ensure that users are aware they are viewing commercial content, the US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) requires social media creators to clearly disclose paid partnerships in advertisements (FTC, n.d.). The FTC clarifies that disclosing the paid partnership in the text description of the video ad is not clear enough to meet the guidelines (FTC, n.d.). The FTC does not clarify if the “Yellow Basket” button featured on TikTok Shop ads is sufficient disclosure that the video is an ad. This button contains a shopping cart icon and is clearly visible at the bottom of every TikTok shop ad. See Figure 4. When users click this button, it takes them to the product’s main page within TikTok, where users can buy the product within seconds. This feature is what sets TikTok Shop ads apart from Instagram Reels ads. Instagram Reels are like TikTok because it also adds short-form video ads to the mix of regular short-form video content. The product page on TikTok includes quick information about the product with the option to keep clicking through the page for more information. See Figure 5. The product page features product photos, the price, a short description of the product, a 1–5-star rating with customer reviews, information about shipping, the TikTok Shop protections, information about the shop or seller, and more in-depth product descriptions. TikTok Shop protections include secure payments, money-back guarantees, lost/damaged auto-refund, 24/7 support, and data privacy. TikTok claims it is “committed to providing a safe and secure online environment” for their users (TikTok, n.d.).

Along with the Yellow Basket button, there are other features that users can engage with on TikTok Shop video ads, such as the “Like” button, the comment section, the “Save for Later” button, and the “Share” button. These features are the white icons on the right-hand side of Figures 1-4. Just like any other video on the For You page, TikTok Shop ads include the same features as regular content, adding to the element of disguise. Through these features, TikTok users can like ads, comment on ads, save ads to view later, and share ads with their friends on any platform. All these features allow users to engage with the ad, which gives the algorithm more information about what ads to remind users of and other types of ads to show them in the future. The TikTok features discussed were examined through a media affordances theory lens, which assesses how different features of a medium affect user behavior.

Literature Review

Elaboration Likelihood Model

Developed by Petty and Cacioppo, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) is a theoretical framework used to determine the effectiveness of persuasive methods of communication (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Effectiveness is measured by examining how individuals process information (Thomas et al., 2019) and depends on the individual's motivation to elaborate on the topic (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). ELM suggests that there are two routes of thinking, which can be differentiated by the amount of processing of information or “elaboration” that the individual undergoes (Lee, 2009). The central route of elaboration is characterized by higher levels of cognitive processing, logical reasoning, and evaluation, whereas the peripheral route of elaboration is characterized by lower levels of cognitive processing and evaluation (Lee, 2009).

The routes of elaboration also depend on the individual's level of motivation to evaluate and critically process the information (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Consumers are more likely to adopt a simpler processing strategy, the peripheral route, when they are less engaged in the content, and a more in-depth processing strategy when more engaged and motivated to view the content (Zhang et al., 2025). Both routes of thinking can cause an attitude change in the individual, but the central route can cause more long-term change (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Trust

Gen Z greatly values their sense of trust and authenticity when making purchase decisions on TikTok (Putri et al., 2023), which is something that content creators and brands have the ability to establish through TikTok affordances. Trust is known as the cornerstone of credibility that mitigates the risk and uncertainty associated with purchasing something and is positively associated with purchase intention (Shamim & Azam, 2024).

TikTok enables influencers on the app to use two-way communication with viewers when promoting brands that they are in partnership with, which reduces skepticism. Creators and brands can reply to specific comments on videos and imply shared complicity when doing so (Meza et al., 2023). Direct communication with their audiences not only helps creators and brands reduce skepticism, but also helps build trust and lasting relationships.

Deception

When scrolling on the For You page, users often do not know they are watching an ad because it is disguised as regular content. Unless the ad clearly states that it is sponsored or a paid partnership, there is an added element of deception to the ad. To ensure that users are aware when they are viewing commercial content, the US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) requires social media creators to clearly disclose paid partnerships in advertisements (FTC, n.d.). Any

content that conceals its commercial nature is considered deceptive and misleading to the consumer (Mathur et al., 2018). There are unfavorable consumer attitudes in reaction to deception such as resistance-induced counterarguing and negative perceptions of the publisher (Amazeen & Wojdyski, 2018). Counterarguing entails arguing against claims made by the ad, complaining about the ad format, and speaking out against the brand itself (Amazeen & Wojdyski, 2018). Additionally, deception can cause other negative consumer reactions such as skepticism, irritation, and avoidance of the brand and content (Han et al., 2018). When the commercial nature of content is made clear, consumers are more receptive to the brand and the content (Amazeen & Wojdyski, 2018).

Although clear disclosure is a requirement, many ads on social media do not adhere to it. On YouTube and Pinterest, there are low prevalences of any forms of disclosure on affiliate marketing posts (Mathur et al., 2018). Sponsored content should be visually distinguishable from other content which includes labeling ads with large text size, colors, and a high contrast from the contents of the ad (Mathur et al., 2018). Labeling the content with the word “sponsored” is more recognizable than labeling it with “presented by [name of sponsor]” (Mathur et al., 2018). The FTC guidelines state that an ad is considered deceptive if it (1) Misleads consumers through formatting, omission of information, or expresses or implies false statements; (2) Misleads a significant minority the ad’s target audience; (3) Causes consumers to make different choices about the advertised product, respond more positively to the ad’s claims, or merely engage more with the advertisement (Campbell & Grimm, 2019). As seen on TikTok, while ads already blend in with normal content, they also do not always contain the proper disclosure.

ELM Moderators

Reviews

Both central and peripheral routes of elaboration increase online purchase intention and create lasting behavior changes (Lee, 2009). In a study using the ELM to examine participants' online shopping habits after reading online customer reviews, researchers find that both product review quality and quantity increase purchase intention (Lee, 2009). Reviews with strong argument quality and facts to support it have a positive effect on purchase intention (Lee, 2009). Products with higher amounts of reviews are viewed as more popular and increase purchase intention (Lee, 2009).

Involvement

Purchase intention is also correlated with how involved a consumer is with a product which is how relevant a product is to their needs and interests (Lee, 2009). High-involvement consumers value argument quality and take a central route of elaboration, whereas low-involvement consumers value argument quantity and take a peripheral route (Lee, 2009). Lee (2009) suggests that marketing managers and online review software developers should create digital presentations of reviews based on the involvement of their target audiences.

Credibility

In a similar study, researchers examined Yelp! reviewers and found a positive correlation between reviewer credibility and purchase intention (Thomas et al., 2019). Accuracy, completeness, and timeliness of online reviews are determinants of credibility of online reviews that are based on argument quality and therefore processed through a central route of elaboration (Thomas et al., 2019). Review quantity, review consistency, reviewer expertise, product/service rating and website reputation are determinants of credibility that are processed through a peripheral route of elaboration. Of these determinants, website reputation, product/service rating

and reviewer expertise were the most influential showing that the peripheral route was the primary route of elaboration for processing online reviews (Thomas et al., 2019).

Familiarity

How persuasive messages are received on social media is determined by each user's perceptions of social media, their online habits, and the platform's specific algorithm. The ELM can be used to examine the effectiveness of persuasive communication on short-form video social media platforms. In an investigation of how TikTok users process information in clinical trial recruitment videos, avid TikTok users find the videos to be effective and had higher intentions to participate in the clinical trial than less experienced TikTok users (Lee et al., 2024). This aligns with the ELM's theory that those who are familiar with the modality have higher capability and motivation to process the information and, as a result, can be more easily persuaded by messages (Lee et al., 2024).

ELM and Social Media Advertising

Instagram

The ELM has also been used to explore the influence of features of influencer advertising on information processing and purchase intention on Instagram. In a survey, Instagram users answered questions about their perceptions of central route factors and peripheral route factors of influencer messages (Farivar et al., 2023). Farivar et al. (2023) suggested that all three central route factors; perceived uniqueness, originality, and informativeness, have a direct impact on purchase intention. Additionally, Farivar et al. (2023) suggested that the peripheral factors perceived trustworthiness and self-presence do not have a direct impact on purchase intention, but perceived physical attractiveness of the influencer does have a direct impact.

In another Instagram study, researchers used the ELM to investigate how female participants perceive and process influencer marketing differently when the paid sponsorship is disclosed two different ways (Xie & Feng, 2023). Brand Influence Disclosure (BID) involves explaining how the brand influenced the post and influencer's opinion of the product and Compensation Type Disclosure (CTD) shows whether the influencer is paid via gifts, payment, or sales commission (Xie & Feng, 2023). While an honest opinion disclosure that is free from the brands influence is more attractive to users than a BID, purchase intention and elaboration likelihood were increased when there was a combination of both BID and CTD (Xie & Feng, 2023). Higher levels of disclosure on social media ads may positively influence elaboration likelihood and purchase intention.

TikTok

Higher consumer well-being results in higher purchase intention (Jamil et al., 2024). Consumer well-being includes their social and leisure well-being and their overall quality of life (Jamil et al., 2024). In a study examining TikTok users, researchers used the ELM to measure argument quality, which is a central cue and source credibility and influencer kindness, which is a peripheral cue, in increasing consumer well-being and therefore purchase intention (Jamil et al., 2024). Consumers find high quality messages to be more factual and credible, which reduces consumer anxiety and positively influences consumer well-being (Jamil et al., 2024). The peripheral cues also positively influence consumer well-being, but source credibility is more important for mega-influencers who have over 1 million followers, while influencer kindness is important for macro-influencers who have 100,000 to 1 million followers (Jamil et al., 2024).

The entertainment factor plays a crucial role in how consumers process and perceive and ad. When studying social media audio-visual advertisements, Zhang et al. (2025) found that

likes, comments, saves, and shares increase when influencers use a colloquial linguistic style. Using language that consumers find easy to understand reduces their cognitive load and allows them to trust the influencer more (Zhang et al., 2025). Visual aspects such as colorfulness and image richness also increase consumer engagement along with acoustic aspects such as background music (Zhang et al., 2025).

ELM Hypotheses and Rationale

Past research using the ELM in the realm of media, social media, and social media advertising shows that both central and peripheral routes of elaboration taken by users on different media platforms can increase consumer purchase intention. Research also shows that the way a sponsorship is disclosed on a social media advertisement influences consumers' trust in the message and their elaboration likelihood. TikTok users often do not know they are watching an ad unless the ad reveals that the video is sponsored or a paid partnership. Little is known about how this element of deception affects the elaboration likelihood of TikTok's main audience, Generation Z, and their perceptions of transparency and trust for TikTok advertisements. Based on this, the present study hypothesizes the following:

H1A: Participants who view a video ad that discloses the sponsorship are more likely to engage with the Yellow Basket Button, comment section, and save for later button to peripherally elaborate the product.

H1B: Participants who view a video ad that does not disclose that the video is sponsored are more likely to rely on cues such as likes quantity, comment quantity, review quantity, and profile follower quantity to elaborate the product.

H2A: Participants who view a video that does not disclose the sponsorship are more likely to rate the brand as less transparent than participants who view a video that discloses the sponsorship.

H2B: Participants who view a video ad that does not disclose the sponsorship are more likely to rate the brand as less trustworthy than participants who view a video that discloses the sponsorship.

The affordances in this study that are associated with elaboration likelihood are the Yellow Basket button, the Save for Later button, and the comment section, because each of these features allows users to further elaborate on the product information in some way. Clicking the Yellow Basket button indicates the highest amount of elaboration because it means the user wants to know a variety of information about the product. However, looking at the comment section could also indicate intent to further elaborate because comments on ads are often customer reviews or customer comments that are answered by the seller. Furthermore, clicking the Save for Later button could indicate the user wants to come back to the ad in the future and elaborate further.

Affordances Theory

The Affordances Theory (AT) is also used to examine this research and the effects of the affordances mentioned above. The affordances theory was introduced in the ecology discipline by James J. Gibson in 1977 (Ronzhyn et al., 2023). In his original explanation of the theory, Gibson (1979) described the affordances of the environment as what it can offer the animal. Gibson (1979) defines an affordance as “a specific combination of the properties of its substance and its surfaces” meaning they are a combination of the value the feature affords the individual

as well as the physical and functional uses it affords the individual. Gibson (1979) suggests that the question asked by the theory is; how are affordances perceived?

Scholars have since applied the theory to many other fields including communication and social media. Ronzhyn et al. (2023) combines Gibson's initial definition of affordances with articles in the social media discipline to create a new definition for affordances in social media research as: "the perceived actual or imagined properties of social media, emerging through the relation of technological, social, and contextual, that enable and constrain specific uses of the platform." This definition highlights that social media affordances are not just the technology features and uses of a platform and has more to do with perception.

AT and Media

In the realm of communication and media, some common affordances of media are identified by researchers. In this field, some structural features of a medium or channel include text, graphic icons, photos, audio, and video (Fox & McEwan, 2017). There are also intangible features of substance afforded by channels. Social presence is the ability of different media to give users the feeling that they are sharing an experience with other users (Fox & McEwan, 2017). Channels that are asynchronous and do not give users instant message transmission, receipts, and responses when communicating do not give the social presence that other channels give (Fox & McEwan, 2017).

Another affordance is called information control, because different channels allow different levels of freedom when it comes to the information users want to share and how much they can edit it before sharing (Fox & McEwan, 2017).

Persistence is an affordance commonly seen in social media channels. This refers to the permanence and recordability that channels give to messages and information (Fox & McEwan,

2017). Digital messages can be viewed long after the interaction takes place. They can be saved, replicated, and shared within the medium, making it hard to remove from the platform indefinitely (Fox & McEwan, 2017).

Additionally, channels afford different levels of accessibility to users. Accessibility involves the channel being easy to use and access “regardless of time, place, structural limitations, technological literacy, and other constraints” (Fox & McEwan, 2017).

AT and Social Media

The affordances of different social media platforms have also been identified by researchers. Previous research on social media affordances focuses on Facebook and X, formerly known as Twitter, the most (Fox & McEwan, 2017). In a study done on Twitter, researchers examine the backlash and outrage that resulted from changing an affordance on the platform (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). In 2015, Twitter changed the icon of the ‘favorite’ button from a star to a heart, making it more like the generic ‘like’ button. Although the function of the button did not change, users were upset because the button meant more to them than merely bookmarking a Tweet, because it afforded them social and communicative actions (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). To Twitter users in 2015, favoriting a Tweet meant showing agreement, indicating the end of a conversation without having to make a new Tweet, or maintaining their sense of relatability to other users (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). Bucher & Helmond (2018) add to the existing idea that affordances are not just features or functionalities, but the value they afford users and the meaning that users create for them.

Social media affordances can also satisfy an individual's psychological needs. Social media satisfies or affords two primary psychological needs: self-determination and psychological ownership (Karahanna et al., 2018). Self-determination refers to the need for autonomy to make

choices such as which social media platform to use, what to create, what to share, and what to read (Karahanna et al., 2018). Psychological ownership refers to the need to possess a place to make their own and express themselves such as a Facebook profile page or Instagram bio (Karahanna et al., 2018). Knowing these needs can help predict user behavior and motivation to use different social media affordances (Karahanna et al., 2018).

AT and Social Media Advertising

While social media platforms offer their users valuable affordances, advertisers are also users and are afforded different things by the platform (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). The Favorite button on Twitter allows users to see who favorited their post, giving advertisers access to data that can help them measure engagement and see which audiences like their content (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). Additionally, the Twitter algorithm is based on user interactions with Twitter affordances such as retweeting, replying, liking, and sharing (Bucher & Helmond, 2018).

In their research, Sedalo et al. (2022) examines the role of affordances theory in social media and relationship marketing (RM) for small and medium-sized businesses that mostly used Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp. RM is an organization's effort to build and maintain quality relationships with customers and stakeholders through collaboration and interaction (Sedalo et al., 2022). The social media affordances associated with assisting small and medium-sized businesses in RM and customer acquisition are brand visibility, sharing, and relationship (Sedalo et al., 2022). With the ability to share photos, videos, audio, and texts of products, social media offers organizations visibility to potential customers and the ability to share their information, get customer feedback, and gain valuable insights (Sedalo et al., 2022). Additionally, social media helps with building sustainable relationships by engaging with

customers through likes, shares, and comments, which helps to gain their trust and confidence (Sedalo et al., 2022).

AT Hypotheses and Rationale

The theory of affordances has been applied to works in communication, social media, and social media advertising, but has not yet been applied to social media advertising on TikTok. Prior research outlines many different affordances offered by Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter that motivate engagement, satisfy user needs, and give valuable insights to advertisers. While TikTok ads have similar features to other platforms such as likes, comments, saves, and shares, it also has the Yellow Basket button and labels that read “sponsored” and “creator earns commission” that are specific to ads on TikTok. After clicking the Yellow Basket button, users are taken to the TikTok Shop product page which affords them customer reviews, information about shipping, the TikTok Shop protections, information about the shop or seller, and more in-depth product descriptions. Little is known about how these affordances influence purchase intention and consumer trust on TikTok. Accordingly, the present study hypothesizes the following:

H3A: Participants who report intention to engage and interact with likes, comments, saves and shares on TikTok ads are more likely to have higher levels of trust in the brand.

H3B: Participants who report intention to engage and interact with likes, comments, saves and shares on TikTok ads are more likely to have higher purchase intention.

H4: Participants who report intention to interact with the Yellow Basket button and TikTok Shop product page affordances are more likely to have higher purchase intention.

Methodology

To investigate how sponsorship disclosure or lack thereof in short-form video social media advertisements affect Generation Z consumer's elaboration, purchase intentions, and perceptions of brand trustworthiness and transparency, I administered an online survey-embedded experiment using a convenience sample. The stimulus included two fabricated videos that I created to resemble a TikTok Shop advertisement for a reusable water bottle.

Participants were randomly assigned to watch one of the videos. Half of participants viewed a video in which the creator clearly discloses the existence of a paid sponsorship ($n=72$), and the other half of participants viewed a video in which the creator does not disclose the existence of a paid sponsorship ($n=71$). After viewing the assigned video, participants were asked questions about their intentions to elaborate on the video further, their perceptions of trustworthiness and transparency of the brand, and their purchase intentions.

Participants

The participants whose data were analyzed in this study consisted of 143 individuals who are members of the target population, Generation Z. A total of 160 individuals started the survey, 143 completed the survey, and 143 were analyzed ($N=143$). No participants chose to withdraw from the survey after the debrief.

Participant Demographics

The criteria to be included in this survey required participants to be between 18 and 28 years of age at the time of participation. Individuals younger than 18 would not have been allowed to complete the experiment ($n=0$) and individuals older than 28, and therefore not a part of Gen Z, would have been removed from the sample ($n=0$). The participant pool consisted of 31.5% identifying as men, 67.8% as women, and 0.7% as nonbinary. Participant ages ranged

from 18 to 23 ($M=19.84$, $SD=1.14$). Participants were able to name more than one race or ethnicity.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Race/Ethnicity of Participants

Race (Select all that apply)*	White	Asian/ Pacific Islander	Hispanic/Latino	Black/African American	American Indigenous	Other
<i>N</i>	115	27	16	11	4	4
Percent	80.4%	18.9%	11.2%	7.7%	2.8%	2.8%

Procedure

I obtained the sample by distributing a survey via the online Virginia Tech School of Communication Sona system from February 20, 2026, to March 5, 2026, where Virginia Tech undergraduate students of different majors and backgrounds participate voluntarily in research studies using their student Sona account. I chose to use the VT Sona system for recruitment because undergraduate students are members of Generation Z. The students who chose to participate in my research study were directed to a Qualtrics survey instrument, where they gave consent, viewed the stimulus, and responded to a questionnaire. Participants took the survey on their personal devices with unlimited time.

After consenting to participate in the research study, participants were prompted to view one of two social media videos with sound that were designed to resemble a TikTok Shop advertisement for a water bottle called “HydroSmart.” I chose to use a water bottle as the product for this experiment for a variety of reasons. Both men and women use the product, and approximately 60% of adults in the U.S. own a reusable water bottle, and the market is still

growing (Ruiz, 2025). Additionally, online reusable water bottle sales are expected to reach 25% of total sales of the water bottle market by 2030 (Ruiz, 2025). Lastly, the main reason that consumers buy a reusable water bottle is to become more environmentally friendly by reducing their plastic consumption (Ruiz, 2025), and Generation Z is known to care about environmental activism and reform more than other generations (Tyson et al., 2021).

In Video A, the content creator in the ad clearly discloses that the video is a sponsored ad by saying “I’m super excited to share with you guys my new partnership with HydroSmart” (See Appendix B). Video B is identical to Video A, but omits any mention of a partnership (See Appendix B). The questionnaire randomly assigned participants to watch one of the two videos. After participants viewed the video assigned, they answered two manipulation check questions. Next, participants responded to items regarding the independent variables for H3A, H3B and H4 to investigate intent to engage with the affordances from the video. Then, participants responded to items regarding dependent variables for H1, H2A, and H2B to investigate participants' intent to elaborate on the video. Finally, participants answered questions regarding dependent variables for H3A, H3B, and H4 to investigate their perceived levels of trust and transparency in the brand and their purchase intentions. After answering some brief questions about their demographics, participants were informed that the video and product were fabricated. After being informed of the experimental design of the survey, participants had the option to withdraw from the survey.

Table 2

Manipulation Check: Was the video you watched a sponsored advertisement?

Condition	Disclosure	No Disclosure	Total
Yes	61	53	114
No	11	18	29

Table 3

Manipulation Check: Was the video you watched from TikTok?

Condition	Disclosure	No Disclosure	Total
Yes	70	69	139
No	2	2	4

Variable Construction

IV: Elaboration

Engagement with heuristics: To investigate H3A, H3B, and H4, I used a 5-point Likert-type scale to measure the participants' intent to engage with like button, comment section, save button, share button, the Yellow Basket button, and the product page if given the chance (1=Highly unlikely, 5=Highly likely). I created a variable from the average score of four factors: like, comment, save, and share button questions ($M=1.87$, $SD=.82$). The Cronbach's Alpha for this variable was .74. I also created a variable from the average scores of the Yellow Basket button and the product page questions ($M=1.83$, $SD=.97$). The Pearson Correlation for this variable was .78 ($p<.001$).

DV: Elaboration

Central route processing: To investigate H1A, I used a 5-point Likert-type scale to measure likeliness to engage with the comment section, Yellow Basket button, and save for later button (1=Highly unlikely, 5=Highly likely). I created a variable from the average scores of three factors: comment section, Yellow Basket button, and save for later button questions ($M=1.87$, $SD=.80$). The Cronbach's Alpha for this variable was .56.

Peripheral route processing: To investigate H1B, I used a 5-point Likert-type scale to measure how much the quantity of likes, comments, saves, shares, reviews, and followers would positively influence their purchase intentions (1=Not at all, 5=Entirely). I created a variable from the average scores of four factors: quantity of likes, comments, saves, and shares ($M=2.08$,

$SD=.98$). The Cronbach's Alpha for this variable was .92. I also created a variable from the average scores of the customer reviews and follower quantity factors ($M=3.73$, $SD=1.21$). The Pearson Correlation for this variable was .38 ($p<.001$).

DV: Transparency and Trust

Wojdyski et al. (2018) developed a scale to measure participants' perceptions of transparency of advertising sponsorships. Based on that work, a 5-point Likert-type scale (1=Strongly disagree, 5=Strongly agree) was used to measure transparency, consisting of four dimensions: Brand presence, sponsor clarity, disclosure, and lack of deception (Wojdyski et al., 2018). For the purposes of this study, I adopted one question from each factor to measure how participants perceive the transparency of the brand from the study. To investigate H2A, participants also rated their perception of the statement; "the brand from the video is transparent" on a 5-point scale (1=Strongly disagree, 5=Strongly agree). I created a variable from the average scores of 5 transparency factors ($M=3.31$, $SD=.72$). The Cronbach's Alpha for this variable was .79.

Lee et al. (2024) measured participants' trust in their doctor as a control variable in their study which investigated how TikTok users process information in clinical trial recruitment videos. These researchers used a 5-point scale (1=Strongly disagree, 5=Strongly agree) to measure trustworthiness, which was found to be reliable ($\alpha=.84$). I adopted this scale to measure the participants' perception of TikTok Shop's trustworthiness and the brand's trustworthiness. To investigate H2B and H3A, participants rated their perception of the statements; "TikTok Shop is a trustworthy shopping site" and "The brand is trustworthy" on a 5-point scale (1= Strongly disagree, 5= Strongly agree). I created a variable from the average scores of those two factors

($M=2.80$, $SD=.78$). The Pearson Correlation for this variable was .39, showing a positive correlation ($p<.001$).

DV: Purchase Intention

Jamil et al. (2024) used a 5-point Likert-type scale to measure purchase intention when investigating how it is affected by argument quality, source credibility and influencer kindness in TikTok advertising ($\alpha=.93$). To investigate H3B and H4, participants rated their likeliness to purchase the product from the video they viewed (1=Highly unlikely, 5=Highly likely, $M=2.39$, $SD=1.05$).

Results

The data were processed and tested using SPSS Version 31. The results from the questions regarding H1 and H2 were measured using an ANOVA. The results from the questions regarding H3, and H4 were measured using a Pearson Correlation.

ELM Hypotheses

H1A predicted that those who watched Video A were more likely to engage with the comment section, Yellow Basket button, and save for later button to elaborate the message. Results show that the engagement with non-disclosure condition ($M=1.83$, $SD=.79$) was not significantly different than the disclosure condition ($M=1.92$, $SD=.81$), $F(1,141)=.410$, $p=.523$. The condition explained only 0.3% of the variance in engagement with the comment section, Yellow Basket button, and save for later button ($R^2=.003$). The direction was predicted, despite no significance being found. The results show that watching a social media ad that disclosed a brand partnership did not affect engagement with the comment section, Yellow Basket button, or save for later button more than watching a video that did not disclose the brand partnership. There is no evidence to support H1A.

H1B predicted that those who watched Video B were more likely to rely on the quantity of likes, comments, saves, and shares to elaborate on the message. The results show that the engagement with non-disclosure condition ($M=2.15$, $SD=1.01$) was not significantly different than the disclosure condition ($M=2.02$, $SD=.95$), $F(1, 141)=.58$, $p=.448$. The condition explained only 0.4% of the variance in likes, comments, saves, and shares quantity ($R^2=.004$). The direction was predicted, despite no significance being found. H1B also predicted that those who watched Video B were more likely to rely on the quantity of customer reviews and followers to elaborate the message. The results show that the engagement with non-disclosure condition ($M=3.73$, $SD=1.28$) was not significantly different than the disclosure condition ($M=3.74$, $SD=1.15$), $F(1, 141)=.000$, $p=.985$. The condition explained 0% of the variance in customer reviews and follower quantity ($R^2=.000$). Both results show that watching a social media ad that did not disclose the brand partnership did not affect reliance on the quantity of likes, comments, saves, shares, customer reviews, or followers more than watching a video that did disclose the brand partnership. There is no evidence to support H1B.

H2A predicted that those who watched Video A would have higher perceptions of brand transparency. The results show that the transparency with exposure to the non-disclosure condition ($M=3.22$, $SD=.60$) was not significantly different than the disclosure condition ($M=3.40$, $SD=.81$), $F(1,141) = 2.30$, $p = .132$. The condition explained 1.6% of the variance in transparency ($R^2 = .016$). Despite no significance being found, the direction was predicted. The results show that watching a social media ad that clearly disclosed a brand partnership did not affect perceptions of brand transparency more than watching a video that did not disclose the brand partnership. There is no evidence to support H2A.

H2B predicted that those who watched Video A would have higher perceptions of brand trust. The results show that the transparency with exposure to non-disclosure condition ($M=2.93$, $SD=.75$) was not significantly different than the disclosure condition ($M=2.67$, $SD=.79$), $F(1,141)=3.92$, $p=.050$. The condition explained 2.7% of the variance in trust ($R^2=.027$). The results show that watching a social media ad that clearly disclosed a brand partnership did not affect perceptions of brand trustworthiness, compared to watching a social media ad that did not disclose the brand partnership. There is no evidence to support H2B.

Affordances Theory Hypotheses

The questions regarding the affordances hypotheses were answered by participants after they viewed the conditions, so I split the condition file. H3A predicted that those who reported higher intention to engage with likes, comments, saves, and shares are more likely to have higher levels of trust in the brand. For the disclosure condition, participants reported moderate levels of trust ($M=2.67$, $SD=.79$) and low levels of engagement ($M=1.88$, $SD=.88$). Also, for the disclosure condition, the results show a small positive relationship between engagement and trust, $r(70)=.151$. The effect of engagement on trust was not significant, $p=.207$, therefore for those who watched Video A, intention to engage with likes, comments, saves, and shares did not influence trust levels. For the non-disclosure condition, participants reported moderate levels of trust ($M=2.93$, $SD=.75$) and low levels of engagement ($M=1.87$, $SD=.76$). Also, for the non-disclosure condition, the results show a small negative relationship between engagement and trust, $r(69)=-.010$. The effect of engagement on trust was not significant, $p=.936$. Therefore, for those who watched Video B, intention to engage with likes, comments, saves, and shares did not influence trust levels. There is no evidence to support H3A for either condition.

H3B predicted that those who reported higher intention to engage with likes, comments, saves, and shares are more likely to have higher purchase intention. For the disclosure condition, participants reported moderate levels of purchase intention ($M=2.44$, $SD=1.09$) and low levels of engagement ($M=1.88$, $SD=.88$). Also, for the disclosure condition, the results show a significant positive relationship between engagement and purchase intention $r(70)=.347$, $p=.003$. For those who watched Video A, intention to engage with likes, comments, saves, and shares did influence purchase intention. For the non-disclosure condition, participants reported moderate levels of purchase intention ($M=2.34$, $SD=1.01$) and low levels of engagement ($M=1.87$, $SD=.76$). Also, for the non-disclosure condition, the results show a significant positive relationship between engagement and trust, $r(69)=.537$, $p<.001$. For those who watched Video B, intention to engage with likes, comments, saves, and shares also influenced purchase intention. There is evidence to support H3B for both disclosure and non-disclosure conditions.

H4 predicted that those who reported higher intention to engage with the Yellow Basket button and product page are more likely to have higher purchase intention. For the disclosure condition, participants reported moderate levels of purchase intention ($M=2.44$, $SD=1.09$) and low levels of engagement ($M=1.86$, $SD=.96$). Also, for the disclosure condition, the results show a significant positive relationship between engagement and purchase intention, $r(70)=.412$, $p<.001$. For those who watched Video A, intention to engage with the Yellow Basket button and product page did influence purchase intention. For the non-disclosure condition, participants reported moderate levels of purchase intention ($M=2.34$, $SD=1.01$) and low levels of engagement ($M=1.80$, $SD=.98$). Also, for the non-disclosure condition, the results show a significant positive relationship between engagement and trust, $r(69)=.629$, $p<.001$. For those who watched Video B,

intention to engage with the Yellow Basket button and product page also influenced purchase intention. There is evidence to support H4 for both disclosure and non-disclosure conditions.

Table 4

Hypotheses Organized by Significance Found

#	Hypothesis	Significance found?	Notes
H1A	Viewing Video A will increase elaboration via Yellow Basket button, comment section, and save for later button.	No	
H1B	Viewing Video B will increase elaboration via quantity of likes, comments, reviews, and followers.	No	
H2A	Viewing Video A will increase their perception of video transparency.	No	
H2B	Viewing Video A will increase their perception of video trustworthiness.	No	$p=.05$
H3A	Intention to engage with likes, comments, saves and shares on TikTok ads will be positively correlated with trust in the brand.	No	
H3B	Intention to engage with likes, comments, saves and shares on TikTok ads will be positively correlated with purchase intention.	Yes	Video A: $r(70)=.347, p=.003$ Video B: $r(69)=.537, p<.001$
H4	Intention to engage with the Yellow Basket button and product page will be positively correlated with purchase intention.	Yes	Video A: $r(70)=.412, p<.001$ Video B: $r(69)=.629, p<.001$

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate how sponsorship disclosure on TikTok Shop advertisements influenced Generation Z's level of purchase intention, engagement, and trust in the ad. TikTok's main audience, Gen Z, values trust and authenticity (Putri et al., 2023). Ads on TikTok often blend in with regular content, making it hard to decipher when an ad is being shown (Shepard, 2025). This is increasingly important with the prominence of creators not following FTC guidelines that enforce clear disclosure of a sponsorship.

Past literature has shown that both central and peripheral routes of elaboration taken by users on different media platforms can increase consumer purchase intention. Research has also shown that the way a sponsorship is disclosed on a social media advertisement influences user elaboration likelihood (Xie & Feng, 2023). Little is known about how disclosure on TikTok influences Gen Z's perception of trust and transparency on the app.

Prior research also outlines many different affordances offered by Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter that motivate engagement, satisfy user needs, and give valuable insights to advertisers. However, TikTok affordances and their effects on user behavior have not yet been studied.

With minimal past research being done on TikTok Shop advertising, this study used the ELM and Affordances Theory to bridge that gap by examining how deception on TikTok ads affects Gen Z's behaviors on the app as well as how this cohort and this platform may be different from past advertising research on trust and transparency.

ELM Hypotheses (H1-H2)

Whether the video clearly disclosed a paid sponsorship or not, had no influence on how or how much Gen Z elaborated the TikTok advertisement. It also did not affect their perception

of ad trustworthiness or transparency. This does not align with past research using the ELM on Instagram that showed elaboration likelihood was increased when there is a clear brand disclosure (Xie & Feng, 2023). One explanation is that participants could not view the quality or quantity of customer reviews, which were found to increase purchase intention in a study using the ELM to examine online shopping habits (Lee, 2009).

Another possible explanation is that participants were not motivated to elaborate on the video. Elaboration depends on the individuals' level of motivation to evaluate and critically process the information (Petty Cacioppo, 1986) as well as their engagement in the content (Zhang et al., 2025). Additionally, elaboration likelihood is correlated with how involved a consumer is with the product (Lee, 2009). Participants may not have been interested in the product or engaged in the video. Lastly, not all of the participants were avid TikTok users (18.2% reported they do not use TikTok and 11.9% said they do not have a TikTok account). In a TikTok study using the ELM, avid TikTok users had higher intentions to participate in a clinical trial promoted on TikTok than less experienced TikTok users (Lee et al., 2024). Participants may not be familiar with TikTok shop or even trust shopping on the platform, which could explain the results.

While not significant, the results for H1 and H2 contribute to the discussion surrounding the Elaboration Likelihood Model. The ELM is a framework used to determine the effectiveness of persuasive methods of communication and effectiveness is measured by how individuals process information (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). It is possible that Gen Z is different from previously studied cohorts. The results show that motivation to elaborate, how engaging the content is, and familiarity of the communication method may have a strong impact on how Gen Z cognitively processes persuasive content. This finding may further support ELM's theory that

elaboration likelihood depends on the individual's level of motivation to evaluate the persuasive message (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

The results for H1 and H2 also have implications for advertisers and social media creators. Generation Z is relying on more than just the existence of brand disclosure to evaluate TikTok ads. Complying with FTC guidelines is not shown to benefit or harm Gen Z purchase intentions. They are also relying on something other than the Yellow Basket button, comment section and how popular the ad or influencer is to evaluate TikTok ads. Advertisers and TikTok creators should keep this finding in mind when making content for TikTok Shop. Content may need to be targeted toward more avid TikTok users for higher elaboration, the entertainment aspect may also be a critical factor, and lastly the product needs to reach individuals who are in the market for it.

Affordances Theory Hypotheses (H3-H4)

Whether participants intended to engage with the TikTok affordances (like button, comment button, save for later button, and share button) or not, did not correlate with Gen Z's trust in the brand from the advertisement. Past research found that social media helps with building sustainable relationships by engaging with customers through likes, shares, and comments, which helps to gain their trust and confidence (Sedalo et al., 2022). Past research also shows that social media features such as the like and comment buttons afford users social and communicative actions and not just the physical action of pressing the button (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). The findings from this study are inconsistent with past research on social media affordances and trust. One explanation for this could be that participants were not able to physically engage with the affordances, rather they reported their intention to, which takes away the social and communicative actions. They were able to view the comment section but could not

experience the two-way communication that the comment section affords users. Past research shows that channels that do not give users instant message transmission, receipts, and responses when communicating do not give the social presence that other channels give (Fox & McEwan, 2017). Because participants could not interact with the TikTok Shop ad as they normally would, they did not experience the social aspect of TikTok affordances. They also could not experience the psychological ownership and sense of autonomy that social media affordances give (Karahanna et al., 2018).

While not significant, the results from H3A contribute to the discussion surrounding social media and affordances theory by implying that the social and communicative actions that the platforms afford the user may be critical for increasing trust and predicting user behavior. Also, the sense of autonomy and psychological ownership may also be critical.

H3A also implies that advertisers should take full advantage of social media affordances such as comments, that provide two-way communication with users. Asynchronous channels do not give the social presence that other channels give (Fox & McEwan, 2017). This study shows that social media may be a great way to advertise because it is a space where users can experience psychological ownership. Users have the need for autonomy to make choices such as which social media platform to use, what to create, what to share, and what to read (Karahanna et al., 2018). Knowing these needs can help predict user behavior and motivation to use different social media affordances (Karahanna et al., 2018).

The participants' intention to engage with the TikTok affordances (like button, comment button, save for later button, and share button) did positively correlate with their intentions to purchase the product from the video. There was a stronger correlation among the group who watched the video with no disclosure. This aligns with Sedalo et al. (2022) and their research

mentioned above that engaging with likes, shares, and comments helps gain user trust and confidence on social media. Trust mitigates the uncertainty associated with purchasing something and is positively associated with purchase intention (Shamim & Azam, 2014). The results show that Generation Z users who intend to engage with TikTok affordances have higher purchase intentions.

The results from H3B contribute to the discussion about affordances theory by adding to the idea that the features of a medium affect user behavior. An affordance of an environment is what it can offer to the individual who is in the environment (Gibson, 1979). In the environment of social media, the like button allows users to signify their agreement, the end of a conversation, or maintain their sense of relatability to other users (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). The results show that what the TikTok affordances provide for Generation Z is important for increasing their purchase intention.

The results from H3B have implications for advertisers and social media creators. Social media platforms allow users to see who is engaging with their posts, giving advertisers and content creators access to data that can help them measure engagement and see which audiences like their content (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). Since engagement with these affordances increases purchase intention, advertisers should monitor and analyze their data to identify their main audience and target market.

The participants' intention to engage with the affordances specific to TikTok (Yellow Basket button and product page) did positively correlate with their intentions to purchase the product from the video. There was a stronger correlation among the group who watched the video with no disclosure. While this aligns with the past research discussed above for H3B, these affordances are specific to TikTok Shop advertisements and there is little to no past research on

how these features affect Gen Z's purchase intention. However, engaging with both affordances indicates the participants' desire to find out more details about the product.

These results add to the discussion about social media and affordances theory in the same way that H3B does. The results from H4 show that advertisers and brands can benefit from selling their products on TikTok Shop because it will shorten the path to purchasing products and therefore result in higher purchase intentions.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides implications for both ELM and Affordances Theory as well as insights for advertisers and content creators, there are some limitations. First, the participant pool consisted of 67.8% women, 31.5% men, and 0.7% nonbinary, which does not match the US gender ratio of 50.5% women and 49.5% men. Another limitation was the manipulation check, which had a fail rate of 23.1%. This could have been due to the design of the stimulus not being convincing enough or the participants' familiarity with TikTok and TikTok Shop ads. The stimulus design is a limitation due to the inability to make the video look exactly the same as a TikTok Shop ad, which could have had an effect on the manipulation check as well as the results. Due to the videos being fabricated, participants could not fully experience the physical engagement with the affordances such as commenting on the video, sharing the video, and clicking the Yellow Basket button to read about the product and see customer reviews. This could have had an effect on the results regarding affordances theory. For future studies like this one, researchers should consider these limitations.

Future research should investigate whether Generation Z as a cohort is truly disinterested in disclosure methods of TikTok ads, or if this is due to their young age. The Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) developed by Marian Friestad and Peter Wright could be used to

examine this question. The PKM suggests that an individual's ability to assess persuasive messages is contingent upon how much they have developed (Friestad & Wright, 1994). An individual's level of persuasion knowledge influences how they respond to persuasive messages such as ads (Friestad & Wright, 1994). While Gen Z is young and inexperienced, they are the only generation, besides Generation Alpha, who grew up in an “always on” technological mode (Silveira et al., 2023), making them exposed to persuasive messages from a young age. Future research could use PKM to examine Gen Z as a cohort and how they analyze and respond to social media advertisements.

To help ensure that stimulus design error did not influence the results of this study, future research could conduct a similar experiment but with actual TikTok Shop advertisements in a group experiment. Using the actual platform could improve the manipulation check success rate. This would also allow participants to physically engage with the TikTok affordances and could give more accurate insights on how TikTok affordances influence user behaviors. Using AI ad cloning technology could also potentially improve a study like this one. Recent research has shown that people are unable to differentiate between real and AI cloned advertisements (PR Newswire, 2026).

Conclusions

TikTok Shop advertisements are found to be entertaining (Hubschmid, 2024) and often blend in with regular content (Shepherd, 2025). In addition, many TikTok Shop ads do not adhere to FTC guidelines and do not clearly disclose the existence of a sponsorship. With a main audience, Generation Z, who values their sense of trust (Putri et al., 2023), it is important to investigate how their trust is affected by disclosure methods. This study hypothesized that Generation Z would have higher trust in a TikTok ad that clearly disclosed sponsorship, leading

to higher levels of purchase intention and higher engagement with the videos affordances such as likes, comments, saves, shares, and the Yellow Basket button that is featured on every TikTok Shop ad. The results showed that Gen Z's trust and perception of transparency was not influenced by the disclosure method. I also predicted based on the Elaboration Likelihood Model, that Generation Z would engage with likes, comments, saves, and shares to cognitively analyze the video that clearly disclosed a sponsorship and rely on the quantity of those features to analyze the video with no disclosure. The results did not align with this prediction. However, engaging with likes, comments, saves, shares, Yellow Basket button, and product page did positively correlate with purchase intention.

This study shows that disclosure methods may not influence Generation Z's trust in advertisements and that they are analyzing advertisements via something other than the videos' popularity and what others are saying in the comments. Future research should explore what Generation Z uses to cognitively analyze social media ads, what features of the ad influence their trust, and if their age impacts these questions.

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Appendix A



Figure 1. A screenshot of a TikTok ad that reads “sponsored.”



Figure 2. A screenshot of a TikTok ad that reads “Creator earns commission.”



Figure 3. A screenshot of a TikTok ad with no label.



Figure 4. A screenshot of a TikTok ad showing the Yellow Basket button.



Figure 5. A screenshot of the TikTok shop product page.

Appendix B

Video A Transcription

“So, I didn’t think I would be this excited to share with you my new water bottle, but here we are. I’ve been in the market for a new water bottle like forever now because my old one keeps getting moldy really fast. So that’s why I’m super excited to share with you guys my new partnership with HydroSmart. This bottle is great. It keeps your water cold for 24 hours; it’s leakproof; it’s got this handle for if you want to go on walks with it or carry it around wherever you go. It’s super affordable; it comes in lots of different colors and sizes. I got the 32 ounce and that works great for me. So, if you needed a sign to drink more water, this is it. Click the Yellow Basket button below.”

Video B Transcription

“So, I didn’t think I would be this excited to share with you my new water bottle, but here we are. I’ve been in the market for a new water bottle like forever now because my old one keeps getting super moldy really fast. So, I wanted to share with you guys this one called the HydroSmart and it’s great, I love it. It keeps your water cold for 24 hours, it’s leakproof, and it’s got this handle for if you want to carry it around with you, go on walks. It’s super affordable; it comes in lots of different colors and sizes. I got the 32 ounce and that works great for me. So, if you needed a sign to drink more water, this is it.”