



TikTok Comments as a Collective Credibility Filter: Social Proof and Purchase Decisions among Peruvian Gen Z Consumers

Nicol Munayco*¹  and Francisco Arbaiza¹ 

¹ Universidad Peruana de Ciencias Aplicadas (UPC), Prolongación Primavera 2390,
Monterrico, Santiago de Surco, Lima, Perú

U202019559@upc.edu.pe

Abstract. This study examines the role of TikTok comments in the collective construction of credibility and their influence on purchase decisions among Peruvian Generation Z consumers exposed to influencer advertising. While TikTok has become a central platform for product discovery and digital persuasion, the comment section operates as an additional layer of social evaluation where users validate, question, or reinterpret promotional messages through social proof. Methodologically, the study is based on 21 semi-structured interviews with Peruvian TikTok users aged 18 to 25, analyzed through thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's procedure. The findings show that comments function as a collective credibility filter. Participants do not rely only on the influencer's message or on the volume of reactions; instead, they prioritize argumentative quality, repeated experiences, visual evidence, and negative comments when assessing product reliability. The study identifies three decision trajectories shaped by comments: informed purchase, substitution, and rejection. It also shows that humor, emojis, and comment reactions operate as attention and consensus cues, but become persuasive only when combined with useful information. The paper contributes to research on platform-based advertising, electronic word-of-mouth, and social proof by showing how TikTok comments can reinforce, modify, or reverse purchase intention among young consumers.

Keywords: TikTok, Influencer advertising, Comments, Social proof, Credibility, Purchase decision, Generation Z.

1 Introduction

TikTok has become a central platform for product discovery, digital entertainment, and influencer advertising among young consumers. Its short-video format, algorithmic recommendation system, and participatory culture allow brands and creators to present products through persuasive narratives that are quickly evaluated by audiences [1, 2, 3]. In this environment, advertising is not interpreted only through the influencer's

message, but also through visible social reactions such as likes, replies, emojis, and especially comments.

Comments play a relevant role because they create a public space where users validate, question, or reinterpret promotional content. Unlike traditional advertising, TikTok advertising is immediately exposed to collective evaluation. Users may confirm product quality, report negative experiences, compare alternatives, ask for evidence, or use humor and irony to challenge the influencer's message. As a result, the comment section becomes a second persuasive layer that can reinforce or weaken purchase intention [4, 5, 6].

Previous studies have examined influencer credibility, electronic word-of-mouth, social interaction, and purchase intention in digital environments [7, 8, 9]. However, less attention has been paid to comments as a specific unit of analysis in TikTok advertising. This gap is relevant because comments may operate not only as audience feedback, but also as collective credibility signals that shape how young consumers interpret brands, influencers, and product claims.

This study addresses that gap by examining how TikTok comments influence purchase decisions among Peruvian Generation Z consumers aged 18 to 25. Based on 21 semi-structured interviews, the research explores how young users read, interpret, and use comments when evaluating influencer advertising. The study contributes to research on platform-based advertising by proposing that TikTok comments function as a collective credibility filter capable of redirecting consumer action toward informed purchase, substitution, or rejection.

The study was guided by the following research question: How do TikTok comments influence purchase decisions among Peruvian Generation Z consumers exposed to influencer advertising? The specific objectives were: (1) to identify the credibility criteria young consumers use when reading TikTok comments; (2) to analyze how positive, negative, humorous, and visually supported comments reinforce or weaken perceived credibility; and (3) to explain how comments redirect purchase intention toward informed purchase, substitution, or rejection.

2 Theoretical Background

TikTok advertising operates within a participatory communication environment where users do not simply receive promotional messages, but also evaluate, reinterpret, and circulate them through visible interactions. In this context, comments function as a platform-specific form of electronic word-of-mouth, allowing users to share experiences, warnings, comparisons, recommendations, and doubts about products promoted by influencers [4, 5, 20]. This collective participation is especially relevant for Generation Z consumers, who often use social media interactions as signals of trust, belonging, and social validation [6, 10]. Unlike conventional eWOM in review sites, forums, or text-based evaluation spaces, TikTok eWOM is embedded directly below short-form videos and is shaped by immediacy, public visibility, replies, emojis, humor, and algorithmic circulation. Therefore, comments operate less as static reviews and more as participatory, multimodal, and conversational credibility assessments.

The persuasive role of comments can be explained through social proof, which suggests that individuals use the behavior and opinions of others as evidence when evaluating uncertain situations [18]. When users observe repeated opinions, high interaction levels, or detailed experiences from other consumers, they may interpret these signals as evidence of product reliability or risk. However, social proof in TikTok is not only quantitative. While likes and comment volume may indicate visibility, young consumers also evaluate the quality of comments, including argumentative detail, perceived spontaneity, visual evidence, and consistency across experiences [8, 11]. Thus, a small number of detailed comments may be more persuasive than a large number of generic or emotional reactions.

Credibility is also central to this process. Source credibility theory links persuasive influence to perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and the audience's evaluation of the communicator [19]. Influencer advertising depends on perceived trustworthiness, message value, and the relationship between the creator and the audience [7]. However, audience comments may moderate this credibility by confirming, questioning, or contradicting the influencer's message [4]. In TikTok, this means that the credibility of advertising is not produced only by the influencer, but negotiated collectively in the comment section.

Negative comments deserve particular attention because they may operate as risk signals. Previous research on social media marketing and purchase intention suggests that peer influence, perceived risk, and user-generated evaluations can shape consumer decisions in digital environments [9, 12]. In product categories such as beauty, fashion, technology, or personal care, comments that describe defects, unmet expectations, or differences between the advertised product and the actual experience may have a stronger effect than positive comments because they help users avoid possible loss or disappointment.

Finally, TikTok comments also include affective and visual forms of participation, such as emojis, memes, stickers, humor, and reactions. These elements can guide attention, make certain comments more visible, and create a sense of community. However, their persuasive value depends on whether they are connected to useful information. Visual or emotional cues can strengthen credibility when they support the user's experience, but they may remain merely entertaining when they do not provide relevant evidence [13, 14].

Based on this framework, the present study understands TikTok comments as a collective credibility filter. This means that comments do not merely accompany influencer advertising; they actively shape how young consumers evaluate promotional messages, assess risk, and decide whether to buy, substitute, or reject a product.

3 Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative design based on thematic analysis to understand how Peruvian Generation Z consumers interpret TikTok comments when evaluating influencer advertising. This approach was appropriate because the objective was to explore

meanings, perceptions, and decision-making processes rather than to quantify the effect of comments on purchase behavior [15].

The sample consisted of 21 Peruvian TikTok users aged 18 to 25. Participants were selected through purposive sampling because they had direct experience with the phenomenon under study [16]. The inclusion criteria were: being between 18 and 25 years old, living in Peru, using TikTok at least four times per week, having been exposed to sponsored influencer content, and reading comments before considering a purchase. This selection made it possible to collect information-rich cases related to the role of comments in purchase decision-making.

Table 1. Sociodemographic and methodological profile of participants.

Variable	Profile reported in the study
Participants	21 Peruvian TikTok users
Age	18–25 years old
Residence	Peru
Platform use	TikTok at least four times per week
Advertising exposure	Sponsored influencer content on TikTok
Decision practice	Reading comments before considering a purchase
Interview mode	Online interviews via Zoom or Google Meet
Interview duration	Approximately 30–40 minutes per session

This table summarizes the main sociodemographic and methodological criteria used to define the participant profile and ensure direct relevance to the phenomenon under study.

The final number of interviews was determined by thematic saturation. After the last interviews, the main patterns related to credibility, comment quality, negative comments, humor, visual evidence, and purchase trajectories were repeated across participants, and no substantially new themes emerged. This criterion supported the adequacy of the sample for the exploratory and interpretive purpose of the study.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted online through platforms such as Zoom or Google Meet. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 40 minutes. This technique allowed participants to describe their experiences in their own words while maintaining a thematic structure focused on TikTok advertising, comment credibility, social validation, emotional reactions, and purchase decisions [17]. The interviews explored how participants read comments, what types of comments they considered credible, how positive and negative comments influenced them, and whether comments had led them to buy, replace, or reject a product.

To contextualize the interviews, three TikTok advertising videos from the Peruvian lifestyle creator @Salandela were used as discussion stimuli. These videos promoted La Bomba perfume, San Luis flavored sparkling beverages, and Popeyes sauces. The first video registered 29,968 interactions and an engagement rate of 6.92%; the second registered 8,251 interactions and an engagement rate of 1.91%; and the third registered 94,770 interactions and an engagement rate of 21.90%. Engagement was calculated as total interactions divided by followers and multiplied by 100. The stimuli were not

treated as a separate quantitative sample, but as contextual materials to elicit participants' interpretations of real TikTok advertising situations. The use of advertising stimuli helped participants recall concrete browsing situations rather than discussing TikTok comments in abstract terms. After the visualization of the stimuli or, in cases where participants already knew the content, after evoking their prior experience with them, participants were asked to describe how they interpreted the comment section, what types of comments they considered more credible, and whether the comments could confirm, modify, or reverse their initial purchase interest.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Following Braun and Clarke's procedure, the analysis involved familiarization with the transcripts, initial coding, theme identification, theme review, and final definition of analytical categories [15]. The analysis was conducted manually through a spreadsheet-based codebook. Initial codes included second opinion, comment quality, visual evidence, repetition, negative risk signal, humor, emoji reactions, consensus, informed purchase, substitution, and rejection. These initial codes were first organized into six preliminary thematic families: comments as a second persuasive layer, credibility criteria, reaction and humor cues, negative comments, purchase trajectories, and emotional identification. During theme review, overlapping codes were merged and the six preliminary families were condensed into four broader findings for this paper. To strengthen analytical consistency, the codebook was audited iteratively, excerpts were compared across participants, and the thematic map was reviewed internally before the final categories were defined. Member checking was not conducted; this is acknowledged as a limitation, while coherence was supported through repeated transcript review, codebook auditing, and comparison between interview accounts and the three advertising stimuli.

Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent. Interviews were recorded and transcribed with participants' authorization. To protect anonymity, interview excerpts are identified with codes rather than names. The letter "E" refers to the interview number, followed by basic demographic information when relevant.

4 Findings

The analysis of the 21 semi-structured interviews revealed four main themes regarding how TikTok comments influence purchase decisions among young Peruvian consumers. Overall, participants described comments as a public evaluation space that can validate, modify, or contradict the influencer's message. Rather than treating comments as secondary reactions, participants used them as a collective credibility filter before deciding whether to buy, compare, or reject a product.

The three advertising stimuli helped reveal that participants did not evaluate the influencer's message in isolation. In each case, they moved from the video to the comment section to verify whether the community confirmed, questioned, or contradicted the promotional claim. This movement from influencer content to peer evaluation was central to the way participants described their decision-making process.

4.1 Comments as a Second Persuasive Layer

The first finding shows that comments operate as a second persuasive layer that users consult after watching influencer advertising. For most participants, the video creates initial interest, but the comment section determines whether that interest becomes credible. Comments were described as a space where users compare the influencer's claims with the experiences of ordinary consumers.

Participants repeatedly framed comments as a source of "real experience" and collective verification. One interviewee stated:

"The video is one part; the comments are the real experience" (E6, female, 22 years old).

Another participant summarized the role of comments as follows:

"If everyone says 'it is worth it,' I trust it; if they say 'it does not work,' I pass" (E12, female, 21 years old).

This finding suggests that TikTok advertising is not interpreted as a closed message. Once published, the influencer's recommendation becomes subject to collective interpretation. Comments may reinforce the message, but they may also reframe it by adding warnings, alternative experiences, doubts, jokes, or comparisons. In this sense, the credibility of advertising is negotiated after the video, not only within it.

4.2 Credibility Criteria: Quality, Evidence, and Repetition Over Volume

The second finding shows that participants did not evaluate comments only by quantity. Although a large number of comments could indicate visibility or virality, it was not automatically interpreted as product reliability. In purchase-related situations, participants prioritized detailed comments that included explanations, context of use, visual evidence, comparisons, or repeated experiences.

One participant expressed this preference clearly:

"I prefer three useful comments over twenty thousand saying 'I'm dying'" (E2, female, 23 years old).

Another participant emphasized the persuasive value of visual evidence:

"One well-explained comment weighs more than a thousand repeated ones" (E17, female, 24 years old).

Participants considered long, specific, and spontaneous comments more credible than brief emotional reactions. Comments that mentioned product duration, texture, size, delivery time, material quality, side effects, or compatibility were seen as more useful for decision-making. Repetition also mattered: when several users described the same positive or negative experience, participants interpreted this pattern as a stronger credibility signal.

Thus, the persuasive value of comments depended less on volume and more on perceived usefulness. Quality, evidence, and recurrence were the criteria through which young consumers distinguished credible peer evaluation from generic engagement.

4.3 Negative Comments and Functional Humor as Decision Shortcuts

The third finding shows that negative comments had a stronger influence than positive ones. Participants perceived negative comments as more spontaneous, less commercially motivated, and more useful for avoiding risk. A single negative comment could generate doubt, especially when it included specific details or visual evidence.

One participant stated:

“One negative comment with a photo already makes me doubt” (E9, female, 22 years old).

Another participant summarized the asymmetry between positive and negative opinions:

“One bad comment weighs more than twenty good ones” (E19, male, 23 years old).

Negative comments were especially influential in categories such as skincare, makeup, clothing, perfumes, technology, and personal care products. In these cases, participants were attentive to comments describing defects, differences between what was shown and what was received, poor durability, adverse effects, or delivery problems. When several users described the same issue, the promotional message was immediately weakened.

The interviews also showed that humor plays a functional role in the comment section. Humorous comments, emojis, memes, and reaction threads attracted attention and encouraged users to remain in the comment section longer. However, humor became persuasive only when combined with useful information. Participants did not trust a comment merely because it was funny; they trusted it when humor carried a warning, comparison, or practical insight.

4.4 From Interest to Action: Informed Purchase, Substitution, and Rejection

The fourth finding identifies three decision trajectories shaped by comments: informed purchase, substitution, and rejection. These trajectories show that comments do not only influence perception; they redirect consumer action.

The first trajectory is informed purchase. In this case, participants still bought the product, but adjusted their expectations based on the comments. They used the comment section to anticipate product limitations, delivery conditions, or differences between the influencer’s presentation and the actual consumer experience.

“It is as if someone had tried it for me before” (E2, female, 23 years old).

The second trajectory is substitution. Participants maintained interest in the product category but rejected the specific item promoted by the influencer. After reading comments, they searched for a similar, cheaper, or better-rated alternative.

The third trajectory is rejection. In this case, negative comments led participants to abandon the purchase completely. This occurred when users found repeated warnings, evidence of poor quality, or descriptions of problems that contradicted the influencer’s message.

“I closed the link when I read how the product arrived” (E17, female, 24 years old).

These trajectories show that TikTok comments act as a decision-making infrastructure. They can transform initial interest into a more cautious purchase, redirect the user toward another option, or block consumption entirely. Therefore, comments should not

be understood only as engagement indicators, but as collective evaluative mechanisms that shape the final consumer decision.

Overall, the findings suggest that TikTok comments influence purchase decisions by adding a collective layer of credibility, risk assessment, and emotional validation to influencer advertising. The comment section becomes a space where young consumers evaluate not only the product, but also the trustworthiness of the influencer and the reliability of the brand promise.

5 Discussion

The findings show that TikTok comments do not operate as peripheral reactions to influencer advertising, but as a collective credibility filter that shapes how young consumers interpret, validate, or reject promotional messages. This supports previous research on audience comments as moderators of influencer credibility [4] and extends studies on social proof in short-form video platforms [8] by showing that comments influence not only impulse buying, but also more cautious decision trajectories such as informed purchase, substitution, and rejection.

A central contribution of this study is that TikTok comments are not evaluated only through quantitative visibility. Participants did not rely exclusively on the number of comments, likes, or reactions. Instead, they prioritized argumentative quality, visual evidence, repeated experiences, and perceived spontaneity. This finding nuances the role of electronic word-of-mouth and social validation in digital environments [5, 6], suggesting that young consumers distinguish between generic engagement and useful peer evaluation.

The greater weight of negative comments is another relevant finding. Negative comments were interpreted as risk signals, especially when they included detailed explanations, photos, or repeated complaints. This suggests that the comment section functions as a protective mechanism against misleading or incomplete advertising. In categories such as skincare, fashion, technology, and personal care, a single detailed negative comment could weaken the persuasive effect of the influencer's message and redirect the consumer toward another option or toward purchase rejection.

The study also shows that humor, emojis, and reactions play an ambivalent role. They attract attention, increase time spent reading comments, and create a sense of community, but they do not automatically produce credibility. Their persuasive effect appears when they are connected to useful information, such as warnings, comparisons, or practical experience. This confirms that TikTok's participatory culture is not only entertainment-oriented, but also evaluative and decision-oriented.

In practical terms, these findings suggest that brands and influencers should not treat comments merely as engagement indicators. The comment section is a reputational space where product claims are publicly tested, negotiated, and sometimes contradicted. Managing TikTok advertising therefore requires attention not only to the influencer's content, but also to the collective interpretations that emerge below the video. Transparent responses, acknowledgment of recurring concerns, and evidence-based communication may help sustain credibility in this environment.

This study has limitations. The sample consisted of 21 young Peruvian TikTok users selected for their habit of reading comments before considering a purchase, so the findings cannot be generalized to all Generation Z consumers. This may overrepresent more cautious or evaluative users and does not capture consumers who make impulsive purchases without consulting the comment section. In addition, the study used three advertising stimuli from one Peruvian lifestyle creator, which limits comparison across influencer size, product category, region, and platform format. Future research could expand the sample across different Peruvian regions, socioeconomic profiles, and levels of TikTok use; compare TikTok with Instagram, YouTube Shorts, or e-commerce review spaces; and conduct quantitative or experimental studies to measure the relative weight of comment quality, negative comments, visual evidence, humor, and engagement volume in purchase decisions.

6 Conclusions

In conclusion, TikTok comments influence purchase decisions by adding a collective evaluative layer to influencer advertising. For young Peruvian consumers, comments help determine whether a product is worth buying, whether a better alternative should be considered, or whether the purchase should be rejected. The main contribution of this study is the concept of comments as a collective credibility filter: a participatory mechanism through which users transform individual promotional messages into socially negotiated evidence. This finding suggests that credibility in TikTok advertising is not fixed by the influencer alone, but continuously tested by the community through detailed experiences, visual evidence, repetition, humor, and warnings. Consequently, brands and creators should understand the comment section as part of the persuasive message itself and as a key space for reputation, transparency, and consumer protection.

References

1. Molem, A., Makri, S., McKay, D.: Keepin' it reel: Investigating how short videos on TikTok and Instagram Reels influence view change. In: *Proceedings of the 2024 ACM SIGIR Conference on Human-Information Interaction and Retrieval*, pp. 317–327 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1145/3627508.3638341>
2. O'Brien, H.L., Davoudi, N., Nelson, M.: TikTok as information space: A scoping review of information behavior on TikTok. *Library & Information Science Research* 47(4), 101379 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lisr.2025.101379>
3. Torres-Toukoumidis, Á., De-Santis, A., Vintimilla-León, D. (eds.): *TikTok: Más allá de la hipermedialidad*. Editorial Abya-Yala, Quito (2021). <https://doi.org/10.7476/9789978106815>
4. Reinikainen, H., Munnukka, J., Maity, D., Luoma-aho, V.: Parasocial relationships, credibility, and the moderating role of audience comments in influencer marketing. *Journal of Marketing Management* 36(3–4), 279–298 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2019.1708781>
5. Arratia, M., Sánchez, Y., Mendoza, J.: La influencia de las recomendaciones en las redes sociales sobre la intención de compra. Un estudio comparativo en la generación millennial

- y centennial. *Paakat: Revista de Tecnología y Sociedad* 14(26) (2023). <https://doi.org/10.32870/pk.a14n26.842>
6. Lüders, A., Dinkelberg, A., Quayle, M.: Becoming “us” in digital spaces: How online users creatively and strategically exploit social media affordances to build up social identity. *Acta Psychologica* 228, 103643 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2022.103643>
 7. Lou, C., Yuan, S.: Influencer marketing: How message value and credibility affect consumer trust of branded content on social media. *Journal of Interactive Advertising* 19(1), 58–73 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2018.1533501>
 8. Zhang, X., Youn, S., Kim, J.: Beyond likes and comments: How social proof influences consumer impulse buying on short-form video platforms. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 76, 103576 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2024.103576>
 9. Lim, J.Y., Lee, T.C., Rashid, U.K., Abu Seman, N.A.: Social media marketing in Industry 4.0: The role of TikTok in shaping Generation Z’s purchase intentions. *Procedia Computer Science* 253, 2176–2185 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.procs.2025.01.278>
 10. Barros, E., Landa, C., Villalba, R.: Los medios sociales y su influencia en la decisión de compra de la generación millennial. 593 *Digital Publisher CEIT* 5(6-1), 80–94 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.33386/593dp.2020.6-1.388>
 11. Guíñez, N., Mansilla, K., Jeldes, F.: La transparencia publicitaria en los influencers de las redes sociales. *Retos: Revista de Ciencias de la Administración y Economía* 10(20), 265–281 (2020). <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=7729898>
 12. Yulianto, H., Sutomo, Y., Palupiningtyas, D., Nugraheni, K.S.: Investigating the role of interactive social media and halal brand equity on purchase decision-making: Direct and indirect effects. *Measuring Business Excellence* 26(4), 524–540 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1108/MBE-02-2021-0025>
 13. Su, L.: A picture is worth a thousand words: Understanding the impact of images in online customer reviews. *Heliyon* 9(11), e23945 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e23945>
 14. Karduni, A., Wesslen, R., Markant, D., Dou, W.: Images, emotions, and credibility: Effect of emotional facial images on perceptions of online information bias. *arXiv preprint arXiv:2102.13167* (2021). <https://arxiv.org/abs/2102.13167>
 15. Braun, V., Clarke, V.: Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2), 77–101 (2006). <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
 16. Palinkas, L.A., Horwitz, S.M., Green, C.A., Wisdom, J.P., Duan, N., Hoagwood, K.: Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research* 42, 533–544 (2015). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y>
 17. Marín, V.: Entrevistas cualitativas en entornos digitales: nuevos retos metodológicos. *Revista de Estudios Sociales* 81, 52–65 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.7440/res81.2022.05>
 18. Cialdini, R.B.: *Influence: Science and Practice*, 5th edn. Pearson, Boston (2009).
 19. Hovland, C.I., Janis, I.L., Kelley, H.H.: *Communication and Persuasion: Psychological Studies of Opinion Change*. Yale University Press, New Haven (1953).
 20. Cheung, C.M.K., Thadani, D.R.: The impact of electronic word-of-mouth communication: A literature analysis and integrative model. *Decision Support Systems* 54(1), 461–470 (2012). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dss.2012.06.008>

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

