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Gen Z & Social Media Influencers: The Generation Wanting a Real Experience

Alexandra Wolf
Merrimack College, wolfae@merrimack.edu

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THE CAPSTONE ISSUE

Gen Z & Social Media Influencers:
The Generation Wanting a Real
Experience By Alexandra Wolf

COM4011-D (Special Topics in
Communication): Social Media for
Strategic Communication (Dr. Kilhoe Na)

A Letter from the Editor

By: Alexandra Wolf

During my four years at Merrimack College, majoring in Business Administration with a concentration in Marketing and a minor in Communication and Media, I've taken on numerous roles related to social media. Throughout my time at Merrimack College, I worked within organizations to create, plan, and delegate social media tasks. This has allowed me to discover my passions for visual intelligence and to seek a career where I can impact others using digital marketing.

My previous marketing internships have included positions as a Marketing and Social Media Intern at Boston Mutual Life Insurance Company, a Social Media Intern for the Merrimack College Career Center, a Social Media Intern at Massachusetts General Hospital, and most recently a National PR Intern at Zozimus Agency.

While at my internships, much of my work consisted of research on generational patterns or influencer marketing. This leads me to the path of my capstone project. My generation is unlike most generations in that we see social media differently. We want real experience in every aspect of life and social media is no different. For my capstone project, I wanted to research micro-influencers and social media influencers, what works, what doesn't work and compile it into more than just a research paper.

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This research study focuses on Generation Z (those who were born mid-to-late 1990s; henceforth Gen Z). Gen Z is one of the most diversified audiences marketers have seen. With unique characteristics that define their generation, and an attention span lasting only 8 seconds (Hunt, 2019), it's important to know how to properly market to the generation. Understanding the impact of influencer marketing on this generation, in particular, more specifically, understanding preferences of this generation and their relation to influencers will allow for the ability to complete a marketing strategy, a key portion of the industry. The main goal of the study is to understand how Gen Z perceive social media influencers. The current study looks at Gen Z's perceptions of both influencers and micro-influencers. In this study, influencers refer to "people who have built a reputation for their knowledge and expertise on a specific topic. They make regular posts about that topic on their preferred social media channels and generate large followings of enthusiastic, engaged people who pay close attention to their views." ("What is an Influencer?", n.d.) and micro-influencers "Ordinary everyday people who have become known for their knowledge about some specialist niche. As such, they have usually gained a sizable social media following amongst devotees of that niche. Of course, it is not just the number of followers that indicates a level of influence; it is the relationship and interaction that a micro-influencer has with his or her followers. Micro-influencers have a general following between 1,000 and 100,000 followers on a single social platform." ("What is an Influencer?", n.d.) and social media influencers "people who have built a reputation for their knowledge and expertise on a specific topic. They make regular posts about that topic on their preferred social media channels and generate large followings of enthusiastic, engaged people who pay close attention to their views" ("What is an Influencer?", n.d.).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- RQ1: Are Gen Z more likely to purchase choices off of promoted or recommended items from influencers?
- RQ2: Regardless of influencer status ("micro" or "mega"), do Gen Z trust what an influencer says?
- RQ3: Is influencer marketing an effective form of marketing targeting Gen Z?
- RQ4: Does Gen Z have "trust issues" with influencers?

METHOD

An online survey was administered to address the research questions. For the survey questionnaire, see Appendix A.Respondents were recruited from undergraduate communication courses at Merrimack College and social media. The final sample consisted of 62 English-speaking Gen Z aged between 18 and 25, with the mean age of 21.01 (SD = 0.42). 47 respondents were female (75.80%) and 15 respondents were male (24.20%). The racial/ethnic distribution was 87.1% Caucasian, 1.6% African-American, 4.8% Asian-American, 4.8% Hispanic, and 1.6% others. It is important to note that the data collected was from 62 respondents and is a convenience sample. Due to the fact that it is a nonprobability sample, not everyone in the population has an equal chance of being a part of the sample. This means that our results are only true of the sample, not the population.

Formative Characteristics

Who is Gen Z?

Generation Z's values change the way they shop and the way that we market to them.

According to Influencer Marketing Hub, Gen Z represents the largest generation of consumers yet. Already, the generation has accounted for $29 billion in direct spending with the number steadily increasing ("Donovan, 2020").

There are many aspects to Generation Z that are important when following and assessing influencers. We asked respondents to rate those aspects on a 7-point Likert (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).
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01 ## Authenticity

At the root of their values is being authentic. If you aren't real Gen Z won't be interested or won't believe you.

02 ## Purchasing Intentions

Influencers have a significant effect on their followers in regards to their purchase choices or recommending items.

03 ## Personable & Lifestyle

For Gen Z, finding brands or influencers who are personable, fit into their social sphere and have similar lifestyles are appealing to them.

Defining Authenticity

AN INTEGRAL ASPECT

What does it mean to you?

Respondents were asked to give their own defintion of authenticity. Better understanding these key phrases, words, and themes, will help to understand the characteristics of Generation Z and why authenticity is a trait that plays such a crucial role.

What does it mean to you?

Respondents were asked to give their own defintion of authenticity. Better understanding these key phrases, words and themes, will help to understand the characteristics of Generation Z and why authenticity is a trait that plays such a crucial role.

The key takeaways

Key phrases included:

- authentic content
- honest
- genuine
- relatable
- "Being themselves"
- "Not for monetary gain"

These features are what Gen Z looks for in subject matter when gaining new experiences.

"Genuine material from the heart"

REAL & "UNEDITED"

Respondents when asked to define authentic explained characteristics including "real, unedited footage or photos". According to survey results, the generation would favor brands or personalities that appeared more authentic in their posts. In regards to social influencers, Gen Z would be most likely to reject over-edited photos that appear unrelatable. More acceptable content would be unedited photos with realistic features and characteristics. Micro-influencers, for this reason, are more "relatable" to this audience than large social media influencers.

HONEST CONTENT

When surveying respondents, "honest content" was a term that frequently came up. In relation to influencer marketing, respondents want to see honest content. Respondents noted how they felt about reviews from influencers. They felt that above all, telling the truth and not exaggerating in their postings defines authenticity. When influencers post reviews, either with a promoted product/brand or just based on their opinion, Gen Z would find this more credible if it was honest. This is another reason why the generation may find micro-influencers more appealing than social influencers due to their honesty.

GENUINE & WHOLESOME

Gen Z respondents used terms such as "genuine" and "wholesome" to describe authenticity. Someone who seems genuine and shares elements of their life "the good, bad, and ugly", appear more authentic to the generation. Respondents also said that posts that display "unattainable" lives or are only "ads" are harder to believe. For this reason, micro-influencers who display more candid and wholesome shots of their lives appear more authentic.

> **"** I define "authentic content" as being open about your own personal journey and about yourself and your life. **"**

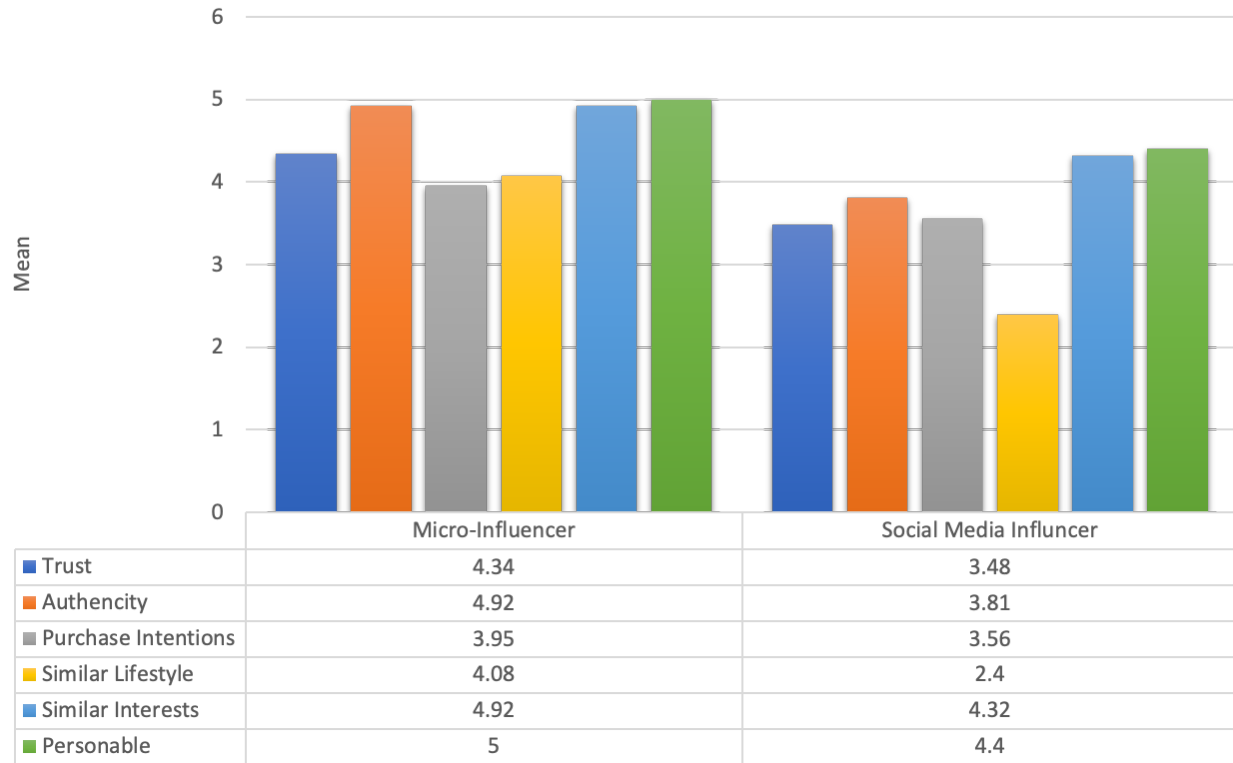| Item	Influencer Mean (SD)	Micro-influencer Mean (SD)	T-test
They have a large following	6.42 (0.69)	5.15 (1.08)	$t(61) = 8.85$, $p < .05$.
Their lifestyle is similar to mine	2.40 (1.42)	4.08 (1.54)	$t(61) = -8.21$, $p < .05$.
They have good recommendations that I can trust	4.13 (1.33)	4.84 (1.11)	$t(61) = -4.22$, $p < .05$.
They are personal and open about their life	4.40 (1.48)	5.00 (1.20)	$t(61) = -3.02$, $p < .05$.
They are physically attractive	5.84 (0.94)	5.44 (0.86)	$t(61) = 3.475$, $p < .05$.
They post beautiful/high quality images	6.18 (.84)	5.71 (0.89)	$t(61) = 4.01$ $p < .05$.
Their interests are similar to mine	4.32 (1.45)	4.92 (0.98)	$t(61) = -3.36$, $p < .05$.
They are knowledgeable	4.37 (1.35)	4.92 (1.13)	$t(61) = -3.19$, $p < .05$.
They are authentic and generally care about their followers or content	3.81 (1.42)	4.92 (1.37)	$t(61) = -5.30$, $p < .05$.

Micro & Social Media Influencers

In reviewing the statements of influencers and micro-influencers, the difference was statistically significant. A large factor that plays into the Generation and how they perceive influencers is lifestyle similarities. For Gen Z, finding brands or influencers who fit into their social sphere or similar lifestyle is appealing to them. People who engage in the same behaviors are more likely to purchase in these "social groups" as well. For example, people who follow beauty influencers will be most likely to purchase products promoted by the influencer, as it fits with their personality.

As seen in the data chart, micro-influencers lifestyles were statically significant than that of influencers t (61)=8.85,p<.05. Above all, Gen Z is a generation that cares about the choices they make. Gen Z wants people or influencers who have similar interests M = 4.32 (influencer) vs. M = 3.92 (micro-influencer). The mean difference is statistically significant t (61) = − 3.36, p < .05. Even more important is the similar lifestyles, M = 2.40 (influencer) vs. M = 4.08 (micro-influencer). The mean difference is statistically significant t (61) = − 8.21, p < .05. Respondents also noted that they do like to see quality images, but they do care about the authenticity of the posts or content that they see. By having genuine, wholesome content and apply these qualities to the image is how the generation relates to influencers. Respondents also expect those who post about content to be knowledgeable about the subject. Micro-influencers were seen as more knowledgable than larger influencers.

Defining Characteristics

	Micro-Influencer	Social Media Influncer
■ Trust	4.34	3.48
■ Authencity	4.92	3.81
■ Purchase Intentions	3.95	3.56
■ Similar Lifestyle	4.08	2.4
■ Similar Interests	4.92	4.32
■ Personable	5	4.4

Above is a summary of defining characteristics from respondents on micro-influencers and social media influencers. Micro-influencers outranked social media influencers in six main areas including trust, authenticity, purchase intentions, similar lifestyles, similar interests, and being "personable".

In the ranking of statements (*survey questions in appendix a*) on influencers and micro-influencers, the difference was statistically significant. Respondents noted that they do like to see beautiful or high-quality images, but they do care about the authenticity of the posts or content that they see. Continuing to see less highly-polished photos, but remaining "on brand" is an important factor.

According to the survey results, authenticity is one of the most important aspects when finding an influencer or product recommendation. Being authentic is a key factor in gaining trust and making product recommendations.

As seen above, the generation as a whole has more trust in micro-influencers than larger influencers. Respondents feel more connected to smaller influencers who share similar lifestyles, interests and are more open about their life.

Most importantly, the respondents want an experience, even if that can be achieved through marketing or a social media platform. If a brand has recommendations, similar interests, a similar lifestyle, or are personable- as long as they are selling or sharing an experience that a person can see or get, it will go a long way. Influencer marketing can be an effective form of marketing if done correctly. Understanding the products, services and the characteristics of Generation Z are all important aspects when creating a marketing strategy.

Trust and Product Promotion
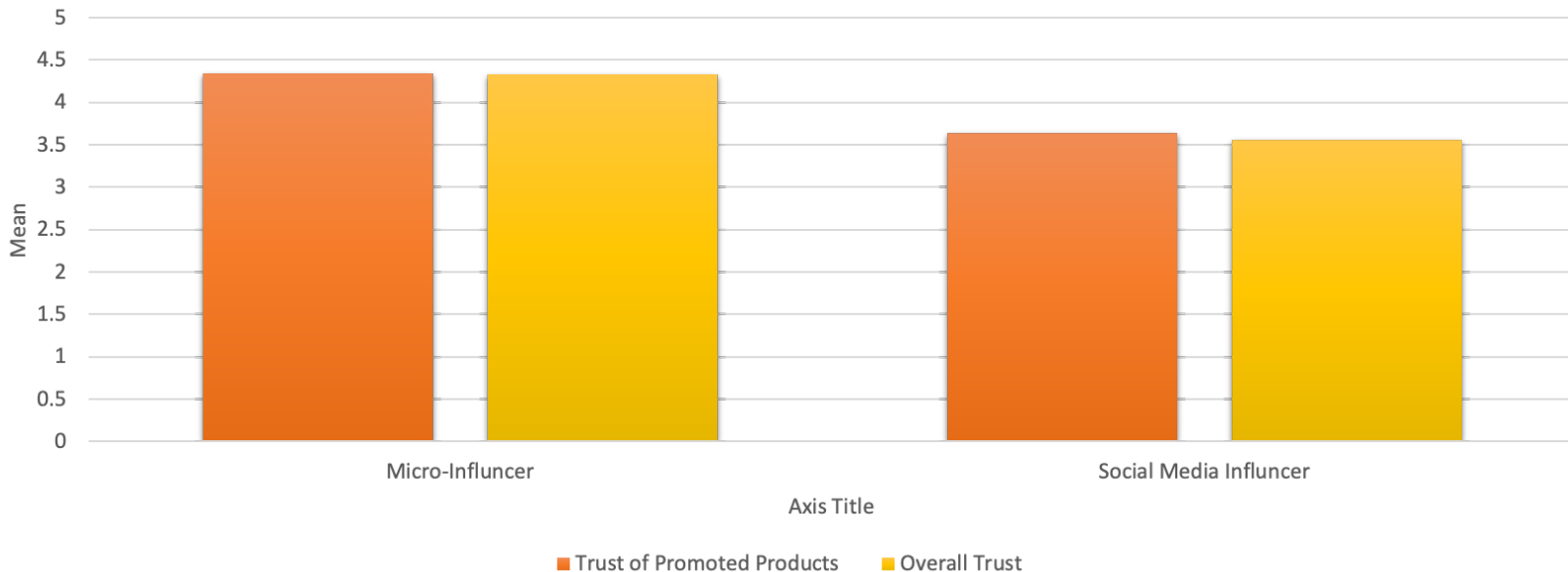
Gen Z holds trust as an important aspect when evaluating brands, but also when assessing influencers and their credibility.

In looking at the respondent's data regarding trust with influencers, Generation Z holds more trust with smaller influencers than with larger influencers. This can be attributed to their authenticity, realness, or other unique characteristics they possess. Using the 7-point Likert Scale, we asked respondents the question:

"In general, I trust micro-influencers' opinion more than celebrities' opinion"

With a mean of 4.94 (SD = 1.26), which is above the midpoint (i.e., 3.5) that respondents generally trust micro-influencers' opinions more than that of celebrities. Respondents said that in terms of trusting and connecting with micro-influencers (M = 4.34, SD = 1.42) as opposed to the influencer (M= 3.48, SD = 1.36).

The data suggests that in the promotion of products, Gen Z also leans towards micro-influencers (M = 4.32, SD = 1.31), rather than that of influencers (M = 3.64, SD = 1.46). The difference is statistically significant t (61) = −3.14, p < .05. When looking at the aspect of promoting products, it is important to reiterate the notion of authenticity, as it is an important trait for this generation. When respondents defined "authenticity", they also wrote phrases such as "not for monetary gain". It is important for the generation to display "being real", even if it includes a paid promotion or a sponsor. For this reason, micro-influencers appear more trustworthy than that of larger influencers.

In combining overall trust, micro-influencers (M = 4.33, SD = 1.28) still have the notion "more trust" than that of celebrities or higher ranked influencers (M = 3.56, SD = 1.32). The difference is statistically significant t(61) = −3.98, p < .05. The dataset shows that with factors such as authenticity, knowledge, personal stories, and lifestyle similarities, this allows for a deeper experience to go beyond just a simple Instagram post. Generation Z would rather have meaningful content with quality over quantity. This can also be attributed to the question of:
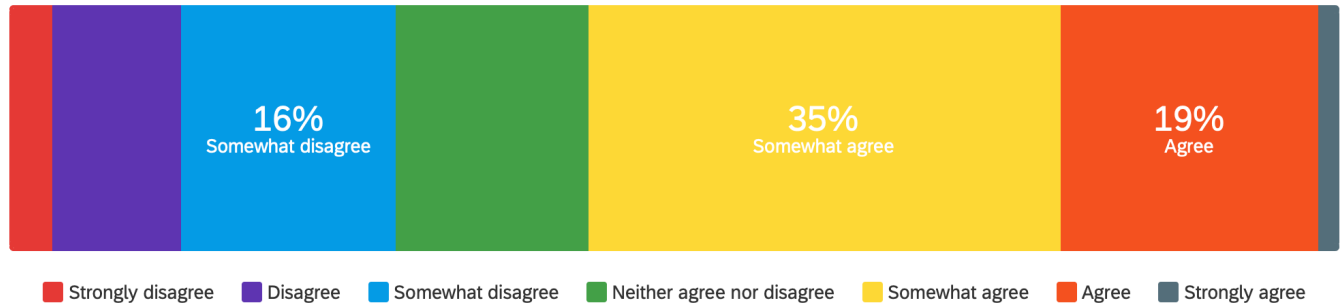
"I tend to connect better with micro-influencers"
(M = 4.84, SD = 1.49)

For this reason, this directly correlates the question,

"In general, I trust micro-influencers opinions more than celebrities opinions"
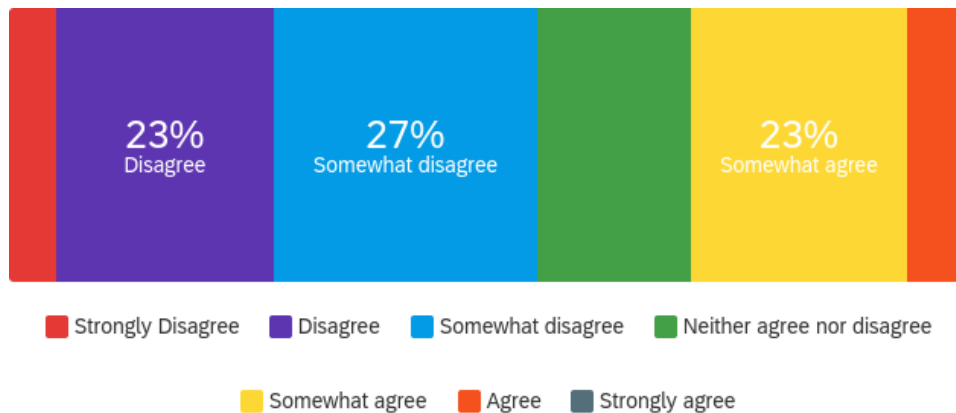(M = 4.94, SD = 1.26)

Trust and Micro-Influencers
(see full survey questions in appendix a)

		16% Somewhat disagree		35% Somewhat agree	19% Agree	

🟥 Strongly disagree   🟪 Disagree   🟦 Somewhat disagree   🟩 Neither agree nor disagree   🟨 Somewhat agree   🟧 Agree   ⬛ Strongly agree

Trust and Social Media Influencers
(see full survey questions in appendix a)

	23% Disagree	27% Somewhat disagree		23% Somewhat agree	

🟥 Strongly Disagree   🟪 Disagree   🟦 Somewhat disagree   🟩 Neither agree nor disagree

🟨 Somewhat agree   🟧 Agree   ⬛ Strongly agree

In surveying respondents there were three statements regarding social media influencers and trust:

"In general, I trust social media influencers."
"I trust social media influencers who are promoting a product or brand."
"In general, I believe what social media influencers post is to be authentic."

Less than 1.59% said that they strongly agree with these statements. It is also important to note that the "general feeling of trust" had a M= 3.48, as compared to the M= 4.34 for micro-influencers. The difference is statistically significant $t(61) = -4.35$, $p < .05$, showing there is a larger feeling of trust in micro-influencers than that of larger influencers. Based on the data below, the results show mixed feelings in relation to trust and social media influencers with a large following. The results on larger influencer's trust are mixed, while the data on trusting smaller influencers is skewed towards a feeling of trust.

The Power of Influencers

How Gen Z Interprets the form of marketing

"Not trying too hard to be relatable, but being honest and being themselves."

In recent years, influencer marketing has increased in popularity. How marketers use influencers with each generation lends the ability to promote new products and services. According to Social Sprout, the rise of social media marketing has, in turn, made types of influencers popular ("What is an Influencer?", n.d.).

Initially, companies used influencer marketing with celebrities or major spokespeople to advertise their products. The way we use influencer marketing with Gen Z has drastically changed from years prior. Today, micro-influencers are seen as a cost-effective way to promote brands credibly and authentically ("What is an Influencer?", n.d.).

Based on survey results, we have seen that respondents trust micro-influencers more than larger influencers and see these influencers as more authentic.

In the survey, we asked respondents to rank photos based on how "authentic" they viewed the post. We took their definitions of authentic one step further to see how they placed concepts of "genuine, unedited, trustworthy, and wholesome" when ranking real Instagram posts.

Respondents were also asked to rank four photos. Each photo consisted of a screenshot of two influencers and two micro-influencers promoting products from Instagram posts. Based on the concept of "authenticity" we asked respondents to rank the photos on a 4-point scale (1 = *most authentic*, 4 = *least authentic*).

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charlieandcrewmama Who else is ready for Spring? 🌼 It's one of my favorite times of the year with all the flowers blooming, warmer days and Easter! @CVSPharmacy is here to help with all the little things this Easter season #CVSEasterShop With a fun Variety of items at CVS I picked up some awesome goodies for the kids' easter baskets! CVS is convenient and affordable and made it even more fun to check everything off my list for the holiday.

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"That is why I don't always have trust on influencers in general because I feel like most of them can be liars"

In looking at the data, 58 out of 62 respondents answered the ranking question. The results of the ranking showed that photo (A), a micro-influencer, was rated 1st by respondents with a score of 32.14%, meaning 18 of the 58 rated the photo first in authenticity. Photo (A) was rated second by 12 out of 58 respondents with a score of 21.43%.

The second highest in authenticity was a larger social media influencer photo (B) with a score of 30.36%, meaning that of 17 of the 58 rated this photo as first in authentic. 14 out of 58 respondents rated photo (B) 2nd in authenticity with a score of 25.00%. This can be attributed to key themes connected to authenticity such as "being themselves, or realistic". One reason the larger influencer ranked higher was the authentic quality he displayed in his photo (i.e, in his kitchen, in a sweatshirt, and the quality of the photo).

The third-ranked in authenticity was a photo (C) or a micro-influencer with a score of 16.07%.

The larger social media influencer, photo (D), was ranked last in terms of authenticity (21.43%). This can be attributed to the lack of authenticity that her photo is displayed in comparison to the other's photos.

"My favorite influencer would be Jera Bean. She expresses to her followers her full blown personality and is real about everything …. To me this is authentic content"

CONCLUSION

IMPLICATION & FINDINGS

Based on the data collected from this survey, many implications can be made for marketers within influencer marketing, specifically Generation Z. Influencer marketing has greatly risen in popularity throughout the years, but targeting the correct audiences with precise messages is an intricate part of the success of a marketing strategy. Gen Z process information and data at a rate faster than any other generation, which is why it is pivotal to create targeted content that they will find not only appealing but relatable. The digital natives find authenticity to be the most important aspect when it comes to choosing whom to follow, what to like, or where they can find new products. When finding a brand or influencer to partner with, it is important that they are authentic in their photos, captions, and their brand, or their audience will not believe it.

For brands that are looking to partner with an influencer, one factor that is important for Generation Z is the following people who have similar interests. For example, following a micro-influencer coffee review account, a company that is looking to partner with an influencer and trying to target Gen Z would most likely reach people who share a similar love of coffee. Creating relationships, as seen throughout the data is one of the most important aspects of the generation. Being open about their personal life, and caring about their followers or the content they post, are two defining factors that allow influencers to reach this targeted audience. When brands look to create a partnered brand, they should do it with a story and relationship, but also naturally. Having social media posts that are creative is a key way to draw in the generation into posts. Followers of these micro-influencer accounts expect these influencers to be knowledgeable about the subject they are talking about.

Above all, Gen Z wants an experience, and they want it to be real. Being able to connect with an influencer through similarities and knowing that they too are real people, are important aspects. Although this generation has changed the way that influencers and marketers alike advertise to them, it does not mean that it makes it any harder to do so. By knowing the characteristics and traits of Gen Z, allows for wiser and creative marketing strategies that will deliver. After all, this generation is just like any other, only with different marketing qualities.

[Screen Question] Q. How old are you? _____

[Part 1: Questions about influencers]
In this part, we would like to know about your opinion about social media influencers.

We define social media influencers here as *"people who have built a reputation for their knowledge and expertise on a specific topic. They make regular posts about that topic on their preferred social media channels and generate large followings of enthusiastic, engaged people who pay close attention to their views."*

To help you understand, here are some examples of social media influencers.

- Cameron Dallas
- Huda Kattan
- Kylie Jenner
- Jeffree Star
- Eugene Lee Yang
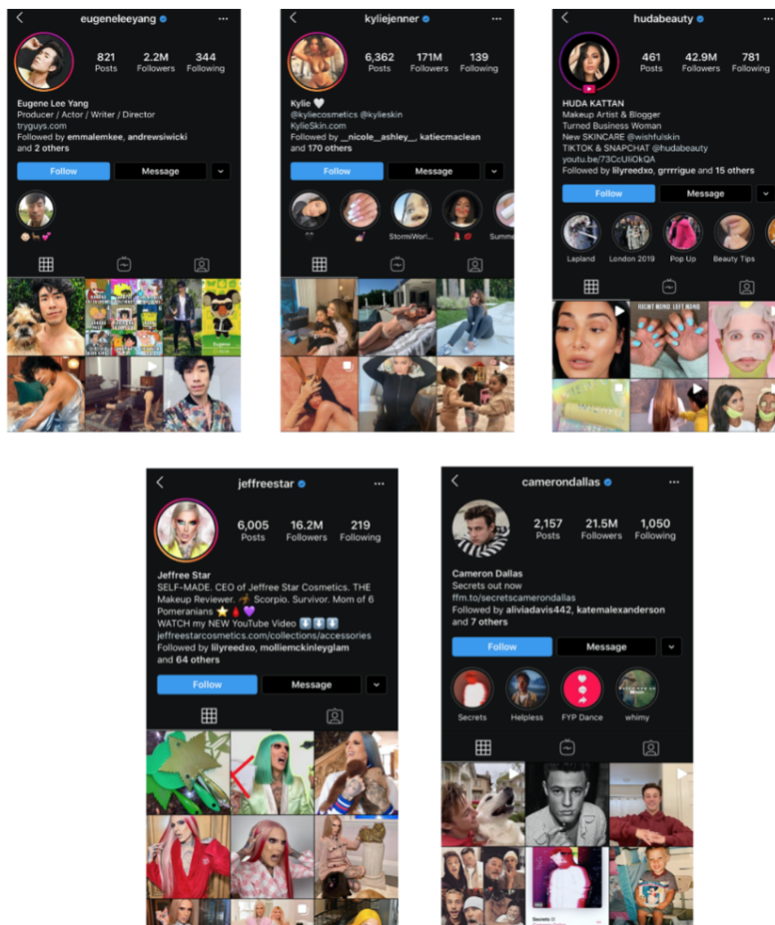
Please rate the following statement [1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree]

"Influencer marketing is an effective form of marketing"

Please rate the following statements about social media influencers [1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree]

They have a large following
Their lifestyle is similar to mine
They have good recommendations that I can trust
They are personal and open about their life
They are physically attractive
They post beautiful/high quality images
Their interests are similar to mine
They are knowledgeable
They are authentic and generally care about their followers or content

Do you follow social media influencers on Instagram who post about the following. Select all that apply:

Gaming Beauty/Skincare Sports/FitnessFashion Food TravelFamily Health/WellnessPolitics None

Please rate the following statements [1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree]

In general, I trust social media influencers.
I trust social media influencers who are promoting a product or brand
In general, I believe what social media influencers post are to be authentic

Please rate the following statements [1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree]

I tend to purchase or have an intention to purchase products promoted by social media influencers.
Social media posts are where I learn about new products
Influencers are where I learn about new products
I have purchased a product that someone has promoted on social media

[Part 2: Questions about micro-influencers]

In this part, we would like to know about your opinion about social media micro-influencers.

We define social media micro-influencers here as "Ordinary everyday people who have become known for their knowledge about some specialist niche. As such, they have usually gained a sizable social media following amongst devotees of that niche. Of course, it is not just the number of followers that indicates a level of influence; it is the relationship and interaction that a micro-influencer has with his or her followers. Micro-influencers have a general following between 1,000 and 100,000 followers on a single social platform."

To help you understand, here are some examples of social media micro-influencers.

- lucialitman
- nomnom_boston
- _withsarah
- passportfriday
- the.skincare.diary
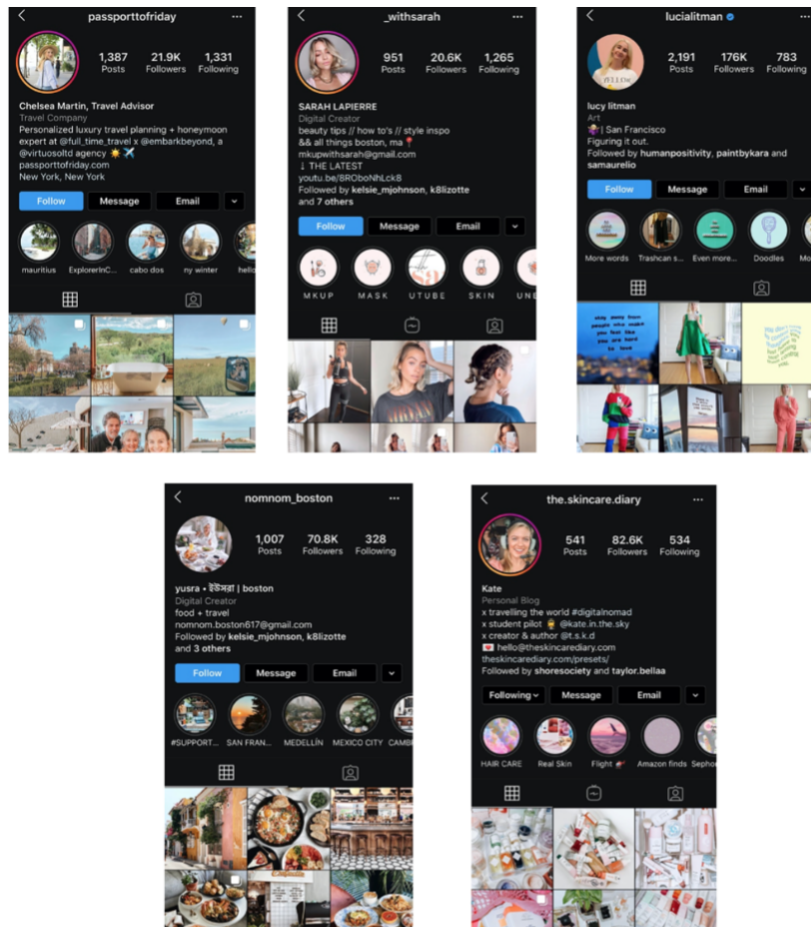
Please rate the following statements [1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree]

They have a large following

Their lifestyle is similar to mine

They have good recommendations that I can trust

They are personal and open about their life

They are physically attractive

They post beautiful/high quality images

Their interests are similar to mine

They are knowledgeable

They are authentic and generally care about their followers or content

Do you follow social media micro-influencers on Instagram who post about the following. Select all that apply.

Gaming Beauty/Skincare Sports/FitnessFashion Food TravelFamily Health/WellnessPolitics No ne

Please rate the following statements [1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree]

In general, I trust social media micro-influencers.

I trust social media micro-influencers who are promoting a product or brand

I tend to connect better with micro-influencers

In general, I trust micro-influencers opinions more than celebrities opinions

Please rate the following statements [1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree]

I tend to purchase or have an intention to purchase products promoted by social media micro-influencers.

I would rather purchase an item promoted by a micro-influencer than a celebrity

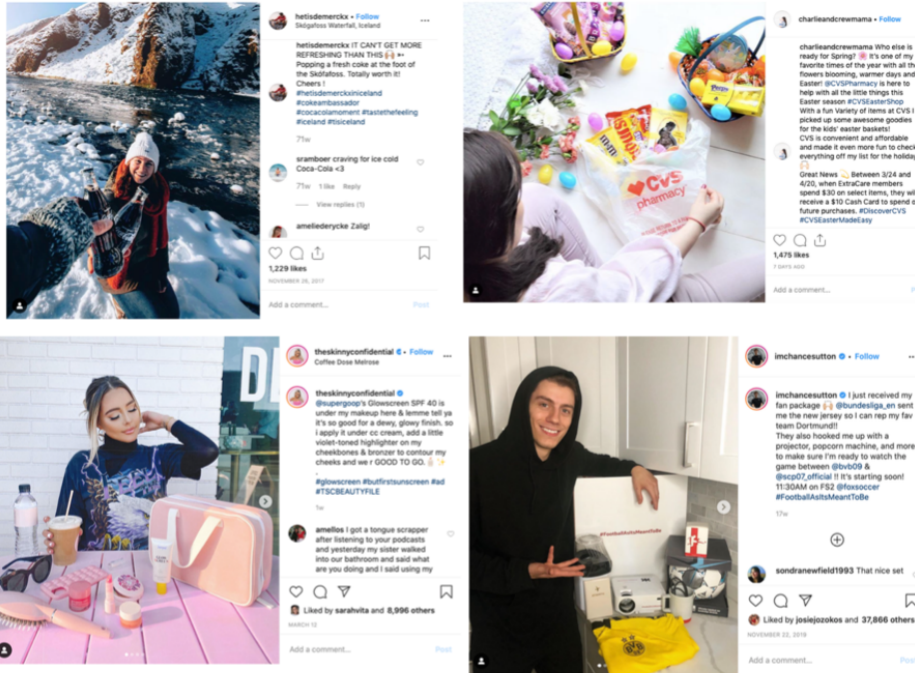*Ads promoted or posted by micro-influencers appear to be authentic and organic*

[Part 3: Authenticity]

How do you define "authentic content"_____

Which Instagram post do you consider to be the most "authentic" (rank from least to most – 1 being most authentic , 4 being least authentic)

[Demographics & Social media Use]

What is your sex?

Male

Female

Other

Race/Ethnicity

White/CaucasianBlack/African-AmericanAsian/Asian-AmericanLatino/Other

Please select all the social media platforms you're currently using.

Facebook

Instagram

Snapchat

Twitter

Youtube

TikTok

Other

How much time do you spend on social media per day?

1-3 hours

4-6

7-9

10+ hours

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