

Influencer’s Authenticity from the Perspective of Generation Z Consumers

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Abstract

Throughout economic and technological change, the marketing process has encountered a number of changes in order to meet the demands of 21st century consumers. Therefore, this article aims to understand how influencers are introduced into the online brand’s marketing strategies. So, the research’s purpose is to answer the following question: What qualities must an influencer possess to be considered authentic? Starting from this question, we designed a qualitative analysis, based on an in-depth interview with 10 Generation Z consumers from the Moldova area, Romania. To begin with, the study analyzed the circumstances in which the interviewees chose to follow an influencer, to then identify the elements of authenticity observed in his experience, and finally, to understand the factors that influenced the following of the micro celebrity. Therefore, this article aims to identify the traits of an influencer and the activities they practice to positively impact Generation Z consumers.

Key words: social media influencers, authenticity influencer, digital influencer

J.E.L. classification: M31

1. Introduction

With the constant evolution of web technologies, market participants tend to look for up-to-date solutions that offer them modern opportunities to continue their business processes. In other words, the introduction of social media platforms is becoming a necessity for modern brands since communication with potential consumers is shaped by the Internet. In particular, new ways of interacting with the end customer are being exploited, since approximately 63.1% of the world's population (reported by July 2022) actively participate as users of these platforms. (information recorded by the Statistics Research Department) Therefore, social media becomes the central pawn of the brand-buyer relationship and thus facilitates the dynamic communication between them, offering the possibility for both parties to react directly to the content displayed and not just observe and consider it as part of the purchase process. (Młodkowska, 2019, p. 5; Moulard, Raggio & Folse, 2021, p. 99)

This paper will explore the activity of a micro-celebrity, starting from the phenomena already identified in the existing literature articles to date and building on the analysis of the responses provided by the participants to design the proposed objectives. In other words, our focus is on the impact of a social media influencer's activity on the consumer's purchase process starting from current market circumstances. More importantly, the collection of this data will be carried out by conducting in-depth interviews with the influencers' followers, so that they can express their opinion with reference to their experience with the respective micro celebrities. Sampling is non-probability sampling, focusing on the snowball sampling method. Respectively, this approach was desired since our target audience represents a small group of individuals, whose probability of reach is relatively low (Etikan, Alkassim & Abubakar, 2015, p. 1).

Next, the in-depth interview with followers has the primary purpose of examining the influences that content offered by a micro celebrity has on a user of digital social media platforms in relation to their willingness to purchase the promoted product. Here, 10 users who follow at least one influencer

online, over 18 years old, both female and male, residing in the area of Moldova, Romania were interviewed. The interview also contains questions that help to understand the relationship between an influencer and his/her follower, which ranks as the age at the start of the representative range for Generation Z (1998 – 2000).

2. Theoretical background

As the online environment gradually but surely becomes a 21st century way for individuals to communicate, interact and complete various actions, the use of social media platforms embodies an important element of the population. In this case, the majority of consumers, especially young adults – Generation Z, rely primarily on mobile applications to inform themselves and, by default, purchase various products or services. (Balaban & Mustătea, 2019, p. 32) Thus, this Internet-facilitated environment lays the foundations for connectivity on multiple informational levels and, at the same time, transforms the society we find ourselves in in terms of the speed with which individuals interact. (Leparoux, Minier & Anand, 2019, p. 421)

Moreover, with the emergence of these platforms, the possibilities of promoting products and services in the same sphere are also developing in tandem. Therefore, social media has become an effective way to create advertisements and convince consumers to purchase various products or services without overstepping the bounds of insistence compared to traditional promotional techniques. (Balaban, Mucundorfeanu & Naderer, 2022, p. 397; Freberg, Graham, McGaughey & Freberg, 2010, p. 90) In other words, it appeals to people who have a high number of online followers and are considered popular among the users of the respective platform to become the new "relationship" of various brands with their audience, with the primary aim of connecting the target market through the influencer's direct communication with them. (Jimenez-Castillo & Sanchez-Fernandez, 2019, p. 366) Respectively, the micro celebrity is the connecting piece between the two parts of the economic process, later becoming the independent third party that manages to shape the attitudes of buyers by presenting products from their own perspective. (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey & Freberg, 2010, p. 91)

Furthermore, as stated in various studies, influencers occupy an important place in the consumer purchasing decision process, as the content they create inspires trust and is also an easy source of information, especially accepted by Generation Z users. (Młodkowska, 2019 p. 4; Balaban & Mustătea, 2019, p. 35; Freberg, Graham, McGaughey & Freberg, 2010, p. 90) Also, influencer marketing is gradually becoming the way in which individuals' opinions can be shaped and implicitly, their actions regarding the choice of certain products or services. So, the behaviour of an influencer also becomes the behaviour of the consumer, the latter micro imitates the celebrity with the unconscious aim of later becoming like the influencer. (Balaban & Mustătea, 2019, p. 33; Nandagiri & Philip, 2018, p. 62) As these digital content creators are constantly working to maintain their popularity and interaction with followers, brands choose to turn to them to strengthen relationships with potential or current customers and more importantly, to facilitate their promotion through a modern and effective 21st century technique. (Marwick, 2017, p. 2)

As mentioned earlier, this approach to influencer marketing is a relevant technique that manages to quantify its impact on new generations of consumers, especially Generation Z. As such, we highlight that brands are choosing to implement this influencer trend into their promotional strategies and moreover, consistently invest in them to generate real-time results. (Klimes, 2021, p. 316) Above all, for influencer activity to be fully fruitful, it must relate to the diversity with which the digital environment is advancing and, correspondingly, shape its activities in line with the dynamism that users have in terms of the choices they make. (Huang, Chen & Cheng, 2013, p. 1)

Therefore, we recall that the influencer occupies the role of an individual who simultaneously represents a celebrity, a trusted person in terms of the information offered and a landmark in terms of the reviews offered, all of which have the power to persuade consumers to adhere to certain types of behaviour, in particular the purchase of the products or services they present. (Jimenez-Castillo & Sanchez-Fernandez, 2019, p. 367; Balaban, Mucundorfeanu & Naderer, 2022, p. 366)

3. Research methodology

This study focuses on the decision problem identified; namely What qualities must an influencer possess to be considered authentic? Also, the research question on which this analysis was based is: Identify the traits of an influencer and the activities they practice having a positive impact on Generation Z consumers. In other words, a qualitative research was conducted with the main objectives of:

Objective 1 – (O1). Identifying the traits a consumer wants in an influencer;

Objective 2 – (O2). Finding out the perspective of authenticity from the Generation Z consumer's point of view;

Objective 3 – (O3). Finding out the activities and factors that persuade the end consumer to pursue an influencer.

In terms of the instrument used – the in-depth interview, the research focused on its semi-structured form, as we created a guide of predefined questions, which the interviewees had to answer from the perspective of their knowledge of the influencers. Therefore, we carried out a detailed investigation of the consumers of this type of content in the online environment regarding their experience in terms of interaction, behaviour, but also the traits they observe in an influencer. We also wanted to identify subjects' attitudes towards the actions these micro celebrities take online. In order to do that, we focused our research on a meta-analysis of the answers and used codes to identify the frequency of the answers, dated in *Table 1*.

In terms of sampling, the research included a total of 10 subjects who actively participated in the interview, and the structure of this group of interviewees consists of both women and men, aged between 23 and 25. Thus, they represent people who are part of Generation Z and frequent the digital environment for the purpose of information and possibly purchasing products. In terms of gender, there was an unequal number of participants in our research, with the total consisting of three women (3) and seven men (7). They were of similar ages, with the majority stating that they were aged 24, but there were also people aged 23 and 25 respectively. For such a research, 10 interviews were carried out, because it was desired to cover the phenomenon studied in terms of the new information accumulated and therefore, at this point, the principle of saturation was reached. Moreover, the sample is adequate, and, in the same way, no new themes appear throughout the text analysis. (Rusu-Mocanaşu, 2020, p. 183)

The positions that subjects are held at the time of the interview vary, as some are either not currently working, being students, or are in diversified areas of work. In this way, we can deduce that the subjects' education is an important aspect, and it is also a criterion we recorded in our observation. So, there are four (4) subjects with IT education, two (2) who are students, two (2) individuals practicing law, and the remaining two (2) individuals identify themselves as employed as a bartender or architect.

As the selection of participants supports the identification of a specific profile of the consumer of influencer-created content, namely individuals from Generation Z who follow at least one influencer online, we sampled the target market through a selection questionnaire. In other words, the snowball method was used, using the initial units – close individuals meeting the conditions mentioned above to generate additional units. Also, all subjects achieve the characteristics we look for in the consumer of this type of online content.

The present research we conducted was carried out both online, using various social media and communication platforms, and in the physical environment – where we interacted with people close to us, both of which were supported by audio. Therefore, data was collected on research participants who fall into a specific market segment, that being consumers of content created by an influencer. Moreover, the actual data collection period took place over three weeks, namely 27 November 2022 - 17 December 2022.

4. Findings

The analysis of the interviews was carried out in order to deepen the main themes identified, as can be seen in *Table 1*, together with the codes recorded and used for the axial coding of the responses. In particular, the characteristics of an influencer from the perspective of the Generation Z

consumers were concretized so that they could be considered suitable for the actions they perform online. Moreover, we established a frequency per word used by the participants with the main reason to strengthen the importance of the theme identified according to each individual's perspective of the influencers and their presence online.

Table no. 1. Frequency of coded responses in identified themes.

Objective 1 – Theme 1: When consumers choose to follow an influencer		
Code description	Code	Frequency per word
• Product details	PRD	8
Presentation of the product in terms of its details and history	IST	3
Description of the importance of the choice of product	IMP	5
• Influencer interaction	INT_INFL	9
Use of common, easy-to-understand terms	ACCS	3
Physical appearance of the influencer	ASP	5
Acceptance of all individuals	ACCP	3
• Community created	CMNT_ONL	2
Providing and maintaining an online community	CMNT	2
Total theme frequency		21
Objective 2 – Theme 2: Elements of authenticity observed by consumers		
• Quality of information provided	CAL_INF	24
Taking responsibility for the information provided	RESP	6
Detailed information on the subject	DTL	15
Providing raw, unfabricated and detailed information	CART_DSB	3
• Convincing actions	ACT_CNVG	20
The desire to communicate directly with followers	CONECTV	7
The stability of its actions	CNST	13
• The sociable nature of the influencer	SOCIAL	47
Acceptance of self	VERID	21
Attractive personality type	ATRG	26
Total theme frequency		91
Objective 3 – Theme 3: Factors influencing consumer stalking behaviour		
• Product introduction	PRD_INT	33
Presentation of product quality	RAPT_CAL	7
Presentation of the product/service according to what the market demands	IMP_NEV	10
• Product or service customization	PRMV_PRS	8
Price and promotion to be affordable for all categories of individuals	PR_ACS	8
• Quality of the influencer's actions	CAL_ACT	25
Engagement report provided by the influencer	IMPLC	5
The uniqueness of the actions carried out in its work	UNC	20
• Experience with the promoted product	EXP	18
Personal experience with the product	EXP_ADV	18
• Influencer popularity	POPULAR	4
Level of followers the influencer has	NV_URM	4
Total theme frequency		77

Source: Compiled by the author from the interviews

In order to better understand the information extracted from the meta-analysis of the interviews, we will present, for each theme, the importance of the identified codes.

Therefore, for the *presentation of the product in terms of its details and history* (code – IST), we recall that 3 out of 10 respondents state the importance of knowing additional information about the context that an influencer presents and, especially, to create consumers "the story behind" (F, 23 years old) what is displayed online. In terms of the code of *providing and maintaining an online community* (code – CMNT), 2 out of 10 interviewees expressed an interest in micro celebrities who manage to create communities with their followers and subsequently organize various meetings and

events with the aim of socializing and ending relationships between individuals.

For 2 out of 10 respondents, the *use of common, easy-to-understand terms* (code – ACCS) considers an influencer to be behaving appropriately if the information they provide through their activity is "easy to understand" (M, 24 years old) and does not require additional explanations to get the message fully across to the receiver. Similarly, for the code *describing the importance of choosing the product* (code – IMP), we identified 4 out of 10 participants who emphasize the importance of detailing the information so that its usefulness is understood. In other words, these individuals want to receive useful content for their future online experience.

The influencer's physical appearance (code – ASP) is considered a criterion for selecting micro celebrities by 3 out of 10 respondents, and, moreover, it marks the feeling these followers want to feel during their interaction with digital content, i.e., to be "visually pleasing" (M, 24 years old). In the same manner, 3 out of 10 subjects state that *the acceptance of all individuals* (code – ACCP) has a considerable impact on their willingness to follow an influencer or not, since their attitude can positively or negatively affect the opinion of consumers.

For the code of *taking responsibility for the information provided* (code – RESP), 4 out of 10 interviewees want the influencer to achieve a certain level of seriousness in carrying out their digital activities, especially not to fool their audience with "click bait ads" (M, 25 years old). Since *self-acceptance* (code – VERID) is mentioned by 7 out of 10 individuals, we can say that characteristics related to an individual's truthfulness in relation to his or her intentions weigh quite heavily in the process of choosing an influencer. In other words, for the majority of interview participants, the traits of "truthfulness" (M, 23 years old; F, 24 years old) and "transparency" (F, 24 years old) define, to some extent, the authenticity of the celebrity micro.

Next, the *provision of raw, unfabricated and detailed information* (code – CART_DSB) is also a decisive element for 3 out of 10 subjects and creates the credibility of the information provided has in relation to all aspects that can be commented on. Similarly, for 5 out of 10 people, *the desire to communicate directly with followers* (code – CONECTV) defines the importance of relating to the individuals who consume the influencer's content and, also, which creates a "connection" (F, 23 years old) with which they ensure that they will continue to follow him for the duration of his activity. In relation to what this online content creator achieves, the *staunchness of his actions* (code – CNST) can convince about half of the participants, i.e. 6 out of 10 individuals, because "devotion" (M, 23 years old) reinforces the character trait of a person describing him to be a role model.

Thorough information about the subject (code – DTL), as stated by 8 out of 10 respondents, is, to a large extent, a decisive factor in determining the authenticity of an influencer. Thus, in order to be able to direct consumers online, these micro celebrities need to be "knowledgeable" (F, 24) and "informed" (M, 25) in order to support their opinions in line with reality. More than the knowledge the content creator possesses, for 8 out of 10 people, the *appealing personality type* (code – ATRG) is also important. In this way, consumers notice the truthfulness of an individual by relating to the way he/she expresses him/herself, which must be "charismatic" to convince them that his/her actions are truthful (response mentioned by 26.92% of the total frequency of this code, i.e., 7/26).

For 7 out of 10 subjects, the *presentation of product quality* (code – RAPT_CAL) is a criterion in selecting the influencers they follow. In particular, more than half of the interviewees consider that presenting quality products should be a mandatory action to merit influencer status. In addition, *presenting the product/service according to what is in demand in the market* (code – IMP_NEV) is taken into account by 7 out of 10 interviewees and sets the main objective an influencer should have to fully satisfy the consumer, namely, to provide information on the needs at the time of potential users.

In terms of the *engagement ratio provided by the influencer* (code – IMPLC), we define the engagement that the micro celebrity has from the perspective of 3 out of 10 participants. Thus, in order to be considered credible and implicitly authentic in terms of their online activity, the influencer must provide content that is "thoughtful and hard-worked" (F, 23), but most crucially, resonates with the actions they put into practice. Similarly, 6 out of 10 say that *the uniqueness of the actions they take in their activity* (code – UNC) is a factor influencing the authenticity and also the likelihood of following the influencer. More importantly, "own style" (M, 24 years old) and "originality" (M, 24 years old; M, 25 years old) make one content creator stand out from another, and moreover, ensure a greater number of followers.

Also, from the perspective of *product or service personalization* (code – PRMV_PRS) it creates an authenticity – "creativity" ratio (F, 24 years old; M, 24 years old) that any micro celebrity should respect in order to provide the highest quality content and therefore attract attention when promoting a certain product or service online, according to 5 out of 10 individuals. In terms of *personal experience with the product* (code – EXP_ADV), a considerable number of participants, namely 9 out of 10, supports the fact that information such as reviews or highlighting both positive and negative aspects, strengthens a consumer's decision to follow an influencer. In other words, the more transparent the influencer is in terms of the opinions offered on the products being promoted, the more users will trust their content.

In the case of the *level of followers the influencer has* (code – NV_URM), 4 out of 10 subjects state the importance of the online collective, i.e., the number of followers, that a micro celebrity has created. This is also supported by the credibility that the high degree of followers can give to a content creator. Moreover, we also recall the code *price and promotion to be accessible to all categories of individuals* (code – PR_ACS) which the last identified theme creates with a number of 6 out of 10 mentions of the interviewees. Respectively, the methods of promotion should be as frequent as possible and cover as wide a range of their accessibility as possible, either online or physically. All together, we discuss "reasonable" (M, 24) and "fair" (M, 24) pricing.

5. Conclusions

Therefore, after conducting an in-depth interview with 10 Generation Z online consumers on how they perceive the actions of an influencer, we can conclude that authenticity is the most important element in choosing a micro celebrity. In fact, the definition of authenticity, as found in various studies, i.e., the real character of an individual's behaviour, is also reflected in the responses of the interviewees who took part in our research. (Moulard, Raggio & Folse, 2021, p. 101) Accordingly, we recall the objectives of the research conducted: (1) Identify the traits a consumer wants in an influencer; (2) Find out the perspective of authenticity from the point of view of the Generation Z consumer; and last but not least, (3) Find out the activities and factors that persuade the final consumer to pursue an influencer.

In this way, objective (1) focuses on the positive effect that a consumer's desired characteristics have on the final interaction between the consumer and the influencer. In particular, if the creator succeeds in 'inspiring trust' (F, 24) and also in building a community - a collective in which followers feel "included" (M, 24) and accepted regardless of their story, then the creator's impact increases considerably. Moreover, trust in the creator increases and, in the end, the consumer will accept the micro-celebrity's message much more quickly and easily because there will already be a "connection" (F, 23) between them. (Martinez-Lopez, et al, 2020, p. 2) In other words, if the influencer will be perceived as an individual who can be easily reached, the advice, respectively, the promoted products and services, will seem much more accessible to the consumer and ultimately solidify their decision to purchase them.

For the objective (2) proposed at the beginning of the study, we highlight how an influencer relates to its followers and, moreover, the attitude it has throughout its interactions with them. Therefore, personality traits were most often identified that create an influencer who is "as real as possible with the audience" (F, 23 years old), "transparent" (F, 24 years old) in terms of his/her digital activity and "charismatic" (M, 23 years old; M, 24 years old) throughout the presentation of information or the discussion with users. Furthermore, it reinforces the perspectives identified in various studies, namely the importance of the credibility that the influencer conveys to their audience about the actions they take so that they are seen as authentic as possible. (Balaban & Mustăţea, 2019, p. 37; Młodkowska, 2019, p. 6)

As research in the field has shown, social media facilitates the development of a simple content creator into a true influencer, who subsequently convinces, to a large extent, the users who follow her. (Młodkowska, 2019, p. 5) In the same manner, our research materializes the fact that digital is a favorable medium from the point of view of promoting products and services and, according to objective (3), the majority of respondents prefer to follow an individual who "knows the field well" (F, 24 years old) in which they are situated as an influencer. As interview participants also state that it must have a "consistency of content posted" (M, 24 years old) and "resonate on a personal level

with the product" (F, 25 years old), we highlight the importance of the passion that the micro celebrity must have for the field. More importantly, the more natural and confident the celebrity is in the information they provide, the more authentic they will be seen as by consumers because of their content and subsequently increase their popularity.

Therefore, from the perspective of social media platform users who are part of Generation Z, we can say that an influencer needs to be as open as possible with the messages they want to convey, to be sure about what they say, constantly informing themselves about the details and history of the products or services they present. Since the actual experience with a particular brand and what it markets is important, the content creator must be honest and present both the negative and positive sides identified from constant use of the products being promoted. So, to ensure easy communication with its followers, the micro-celebrity must offer them the opportunity to interact directly with it. Moreover, the quality of the information it presents must be high, since the decision-making impact in the digital environment does not focus on the quantity of the promotion, but on the actual message conveyed to the audience (Młodkowska, 2019, p. 7).

One limitation of this study that should be mentioned is related to the respondents who participated in the research, namely the majority of the participants being male. In other words, the responses recorded are mostly influenced by the male perspective, and as a future direction of other studies in the field it is recommended to include an approximately equal number of individuals of both genders, to ensure a better understanding of the phenomenon interpreted. Also, the sample can be considered unrepresentative, having a small number of interviews, 10 in-depth interviews with individuals aged 23-25 years old, following at least one influencer on social media. Furthermore, a recommendation for future studies may be to include a larger number of Generation Z respondents, thus encompassing a wider range of ages, not just the upper limit reached in this study.

Finally, a similar analysis can be applied starting from a single platform representative of online influencer consumers, namely Instagram, Facebook or TikTok, thus focusing on in-depth research on the specific activities of content creators according to the digital environment in which they operate.

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Annex

Interview guide:

1. List three qualities a person must have to be considered authentic.
2. What would a marketer have to do from the perspective of the service or product they are selling to be considered authentic?
3. What would a marketer have to do in terms of pricing to be considered authentic?
4. What should a marketer do from a product distribution perspective to be considered authentic?
5. What should a marketer do from a product promotion perspective to be considered authentic?
6. List three qualities an influencer must have to be considered authentic.
7. An influencer is authentic when they do a certain action: _____ (to provide example of action)
8. An influencer is authentic when he/she is in a certain context: _____ (to give an example of the typical social, temporal and situational context of the influencer)
9. How do you choose which influencer to follow? Please mention 5 criteria.
10. An influencer promoting a brand is authentic when _____.
11. Would you like to become an influencer in the future? (yes/no) What are your reasons for supporting this answer?
12. If yes, how soon do you think this would be feasible?
13. Please provide me with the following identification data: age, gender, occupation and place of origin.