THE IMPACT OF INFLUENCER MARKETING: EXPLORING ITS ADVERSE IMPACT ON YOUNGER GENERATIONS

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Abstract:

Influencer marketing has emerged as a dominant force in digital advertising, particularly among younger generations. However, challenges such as trust issues, authenticity concerns, and ethical considerations raise questions about its long-term effectiveness. While previous studies have examined influencer marketing's impact, there remains a lack of comprehensive analysis on generational differences and platform-specific effectiveness. This study aims to bridge this gap by conducting a systematic literature review on the influence of social media influencers on millennials and Generation Z.Using a structured review methodology, this study synthesizes findings from recent literature on influencer marketing, focusing on key factors such as authenticity, credibility, and engagement. The results indicate that authenticity is a crucial determinant of consumer trust, with Generation Z being particularly responsive to influencers who share personal experiences and maintain transparency. Meanwhile, millennials prioritize credibility, favoring influencers with industry expertise. Engagement metrics, such as likes, shares, and interactive content, also play a vital role in shaping consumer behavior, with Generation Z showing a stronger preference for participatory marketing strategies. Despite these benefits, ethical concerns regarding undisclosed sponsorships and misleading promotions continue to challenge consumer trust.The findings have both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, this study enhances the understanding of psychological and behavioral factors influencing digital consumers, highlighting generational differences in response to influencer marketing. Practically, brands should prioritize influencer partnerships based on authenticity, credibility, and engagement rather than follower count. Additionally, transparent advertising practices are essential to maintaining consumer trust. However, this study is limited by its reliance on existing

literature and its focus on younger generations. Future research should explore the impact of AI-driven influencers, ethical concerns in influencer marketing, and platform-specific effectiveness. Addressing these areas will provide deeper insights into the evolving role of influencers in shaping consumer behavior.

Introduction

Social media isn't just for staying connected, it's transformed into a powerful marketing tool, shaping the way people discover and buy products. One of the biggest trends in this space is influencer marketing, where brands team up with social media personalities to promote their products. Unlike traditional ads, this strategy taps into the trust and personal connection influencers have with their followers, making brand messages feel more authentic and relatable. With Gen Z and millennials leading the digital-first consumer wave, influencer marketing has become a must-have in modern business strategies. In Malaysia alone,there were 33.59 million internet users when internet penetration stood up at 97.4 percent. Malaysia also was home to 28.68 million social media users in January 2024,equivalent to 83.1 percent of the total population(Data Reportal,2024).This marks the potential increase of influencer marketing in Malaysia.

Younger generations, especially millennials and Gen Z, have grown up in a world where digital content is king. They are not as responsive to traditional ads as they grew up wanting something that is personalized,one that has authentic recommendations that fit seamlessly into their online experience. That is why influencer marketing works so well for brands trying to reach them. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok play a huge role in their daily lives, and brands are doubling down on influencer collaborations to influence their buying decisions.

In today's world, even-though influencer marketing may be effective, but it does not happen without its challenges. Trust,authenticity, and ethics are major concerns (Zmich,2022). Consumers are becoming more skeptical of whether influencers truly love the products they promote, or are they just doing it for a paycheck? Credibility and transparency in brand collaborations play a huge role in how people perceive influencers. Additionally, millennials and Gen Z don't always view influencer marketing the same way, making it important to explore how these generational differences shape their responses.Understanding these nuances can help brands tailor their strategies to resonate more effectively with each demographic, fostering authentic connections that drive engagement and loyalty (Ali et al.,2023)

Studies show that an influencer's credibility, trustworthiness, and appeal directly impact whether younger consumers will buy a product (Hota, 2022; Igarová et al., 2022). Generation Z, in particular, is drawn to influencers who actively engage with their audience through likes, comments, and shares matter more than just having a massive follower count (Monacho & Slamet, 2023). While research has covered these factors, there is still a missing piece in which leads to a need to look into how different generations respond to influencer marketing across various platforms (Ghouse et al., 2022). Understanding these generational differences can

provide valuable insights for brands aiming to tailor their marketing strategies effectively, ensuring they resonate with the unique preferences and behaviors of each demographic group(Ayob et al.,2023).

Despite many studies on influencer marketing, researchers still don't fully understand its long-term impact on consumer trust, brand loyalty, and ethical concerns (Grigsby & Skiba, 2022). There is also limited research comparing how millennials and Gen Z perceive influencer marketing and what this means for brands (Chopra et al., 2021). This study seeks to fill these gaps by reviewing existing research and identifying key trends on how influencer marketing influences younger generations.

This study adds to the growing concern around influencer marketing by taking a deeper insight into its impact on younger consumers. By analyzing key trends, challenges, and gaps in previous research, this paper hopefully can give a practical insights for marketers, businesses, and scholars on understanding how different generations engage with influencer content and which platforms work best. Hopefully, the findings can help brands fine-tune their strategies and create stronger connections with their audiences.

By understanding the impact of influencer marketing on younger generations, it is hoped that businesses can gain insights into how consumers make decisions and the broader societal trends that drive consumer behaviour. Thus, the following research objectives are developed in this study:
1. To analyze the impact of influencer marketing on younger generations, specifically Generation Z and millennials.
2. To examine the role of influencer characteristics, such as authenticity, credibility, and engagement, in shaping consumer behavior.
3. To compare the effectiveness of influencer marketing across different social media platforms.
4. To identify ethical considerations and trust-related challenges in influencer marketing.
5. To highlight research gaps and propose future research directions.

Methods
The construct of this paper is structured into five (5) sections that includes Section 1 on the introduction and overview to the topic. Section 2 explains the methodology in searching for the literature review. Section 3 explores how influencer marketing impacts younger generations. Section 4 breaks down the key findings, research gaps and real world applications. Lastly, Section 5 wraps up with final thoughts and directions for future research.

To ensure a thorough and reliable analysis, a systematic literature review methodology with the help of Scopus AI has been used. Search focus is on the peer-reviewed research inclusive of only high-quality and relevant studies that align with the research goals. This structured approach ensures that findings found are credible, insightful, and applicable to the evolving landscape of influencer marketing.

The data gained from this study were sourced from Scopus, one of the most trusted academic databases to ensure a thorough and credible review. This allowed us to include peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, and book chapters that provide solid, research-backed insights. This paper focused on keywords search such as "influencer marketing"' "impact on

younger generations",",millenials & Generation Z" aunthenticity & credibility" and also " social media engagement & ethical concerns". Findings included only peer reviewed studies published within the last decade 2014 until 2024.

Focus on the topic searched is within the topic influencer's marketing impact on millenials and Gen Z. The studies also focsed on the key influencer traits that are authenticity, credibility and engagement while also examining on the social media platforms used like TikTok,YouTube and Twitter.

A thematic analysis approach was used in which findings were categorized into key themes that aligned with the study objectives. Each study was reviewed based on its methods, results, and relevance to understanding influencer marketing's effect on younger consumers. The main themes focused on were as follows:

1) Influencer marketing and purchasing behavior – How do influencers shape what people buy?
2) Influencer characteristics – Why do authenticity, credibility, and engagement matter?
3) Platform effectiveness – Which social media platforms work best for influencer marketing?
4) Ethical considerations – How do transparency, trust, and disclosure impact consumer trust?
5) Research gaps and future directions – What areas need further study?

To ensure the reliability and validity of this review, the study only focused on studies from highly respected, peer-reviewed journals. Sources has also been cross checked to include key research that has made a significant impact on the topic. Every finding was carefully analyzed to present a balanced perspective, bringing together different viewpoints for a more complete picture.

Results and Discussion

Nowadays,social media is no longer just a place to connect with friends,it is in fact an influence on buying decisions, especially for Gen Z and millennials. These younger consumers are constantly engaging with influencers, taking their recommendations seriously,and weaving them into their everyday choices (Bratina & Faganel, 2024). Research shows that they tend to trust influencers more than traditional ads because influencer content feels real and relatable (Sang, 2024). This is why influencer marketing has become one of the most effective ways for brands to reach younger audiences (Chen et al., 2023).

However, in understanding the drives for consumer decisions, not all influencers have the same impact.Certain characteristics make some far more persuasive than others including factors such as authenticity, credibility, and engagement as the biggest factors influencing consumer trust and purchase decisions (Hota, 2022).

- Gen Z is drawn to influencers who reflect their values and lifestyle (Gutiérrez-Aguilar et al., 2023).
- Micro-influencers (with smaller, more engaged audiences) often outperform big-name influencers when it comes to driving purchases (Nadanyiova & Sujanska, 2023).

- A personal connection beats follower count audiences prefer meaningful engagement over just seeing a big number of followers.

These insights reinforce the idea that influencer marketing is not solely just about reach but it is also about real connections.

When it comes to the platforms that work best,not all social media platforms are equally effective for influencer marketing. Different generations gravitate toward different spaces, meaning brands need to customize their strategies accordingly (Monacho & Slamet,2023).

Gen Z thrives on Instagram and TikTok, where short form, visually engaging content dominates. While millenials are more active on Facebook and YouTube, where long form reviews and detailed discussions hold more influence. On the type of content, studies found that short videos tend to perform better for younger audiences, while in depth reviews appeal more to millenials (Grigsby& Skiba,2022).Therefore, for entrepreneurs or brand owners,choosing the right platform is just as important as choosing the right influencer (Ghouse et al., 2022).

Though influencer marketing may be powerful, but it also raises serious ethical concerns among consumers. On building consumer trust, consumers especially younger ones are becoming more skeptical about whether influencers truly love a product or if they're just being paid to promote it (Igarová et al., 2022). According to Chopra et al.,2021, people appreciate when influencers openly disclose paid partnerships.This refers to transparency action done by the influencers. Overly promotional content can backfire influencers as audiences prefer influencers who keep things real and honest. Many countries now require influencers to label sponsored posts, but more research is needed to see if this actually helps rebuild trust (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018).Therefore, for influencer marketing to remain effective, brands and influencers alike need to prioritize honesty and transparency.

Future Research And Directions

Social media and influencer marketing are evolving fast, and brands need to keep up with the trends (Gutiérrez-Aguilar et al., 2023). From the search made on this study, there are possible highlights can bemade on the future research and directions on areas such as the long term effects of influencer marketing. This will look into whether influencer endorsements build lasting brand loyalty. Next, is to look at the new platforms and technologies that may arise and how will the AI driven influencers may change the game (Grigsby & Skiba,2022). Lastly, there is also a need to look at better marketing strategies and how brands can create a more authentic, ethical and transparent influencer partnerships (Hota,2022). One thing that is clear, influencer marketing is here to stay. But to keep consumers engaged and trusting, brands need to focus on genuine connections, ethical practices, and evolving strategies.
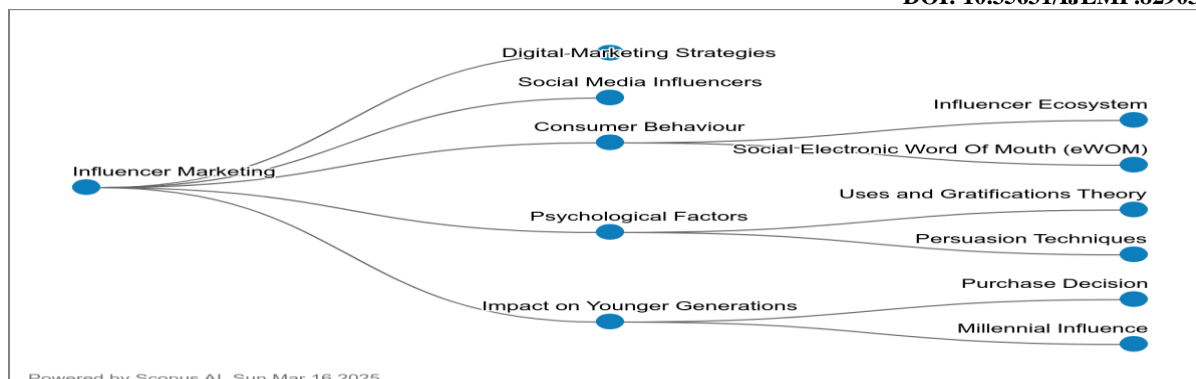
Figure 1 : Key Themes in Influencer Marketing

The graph provides a visual overview of how influencer marketing connects to different aspects of consumer behavior and digital marketing strategies. At the center, Influencer Marketing serves as the core concept, branching into key themes that shape its impact and effectiveness.

One of the most prominent themes is how influencer marketing affects younger generations, particularly Millennials and Gen Z. This highlights how today's digital-native consumers rely on influencers to shape their purchasing decisions. The graph also underscores Consumer Behavior, linking it to crucial elements like Social-Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) and the Influencer Ecosystem, both of which play a major role in how brands successfully engage with audiences online.

Another key takeaway is the role of psychological factors, particularly how influencers use persuasion techniques to impact consumer decision-making. The Uses and Gratifications Theory is also included, showing the deeper psychological motivations behind why people interact with influencer content.

Beyond individual influence, the graph also explores how influencer marketing fits into larger digital marketing strategies. It highlights the importance of authentic engagement and how social media influencers shape brand perception and marketing success. In short, this graph helps to visualize the many moving parts of influencer marketing,from psychology to digital strategy offering a solid foundation for understanding its impact in today's online world.

How Influencer Marketing Fits Into Digital Marketing Strategies
Influencer marketing isn't just a trend, it's a key pillar of modern digital marketing. By leveraging the trust and credibility that influencers have built with their audiences, brands can engage customers in a way that feels more authentic and personal compared to traditional advertising (Rosário et al., 2023). In a world where people are tuning out conventional ads, influencer marketing offers a way to cut through the noise and deliver content that feels relevant and engaging (Wulandari & Assidiq, 2023).

When done right, influencer marketing boosts engagement, expands brand reach, and improves conversion rates. However, not all brands know how to use it effectively, and many struggle with choosing the right influencers, creating authentic content, and adapting to constantly changing social media algorithms.To overcome these challenges, brands must invest time in researching potential influencers who align with their values and audience, while also

developing a clear strategy that focuses on genuine storytelling to resonate with consumers(Influencer Marketing in the Digital Ecosystem,2023).

The success of influencer marketing depends on selecting the right influencers, ones who align with the brand's values, have credibility and genuinely connect with their audience. Research shows that influencers with strong parasocial relationships (one-sided emotional bonds) with their followers have a higher impact on purchasing decisions (Pereira et al., 2023).

At the same time, brands need to shift their approach to marketing by focusing on authenticity, engagement, and data-driven strategies to stay relevant in a constantly evolving digital landscape. This requires a deep understanding of consumer behavior and preferences, allowing brands to create personalized experiences that resonate with their target audience (Pittman &Sheehan,2021).

Ultimately, when influencer marketing is integrated effectively, it does more than just drive sales, it builds trust, strengthens brand awareness, and creates lasting customer relationships. This holistic approach not only enhances the overall customer experience but also fosters a community around the brand, encouraging loyal customers to become advocates and share their positive experiences with others (Dangi,2022).

The Connection Between Influencer Marketing And Social Media Influencers

Influencer marketing is all about leveraging social media influencers to promote products in a way that feels authentic and personal. These influencers, whether they have millions of followers or just a few thousand have built credibility within their niche, making their recommendations far more persuasive than traditional ads (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). The success of influencer marketing hinges on trust and relatability. Consumers are more likely to listen to someone they feel connected to. This is why electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has become such a powerful tool, helping brands organically boost awareness and engagement(Rani et al.,2021).

Influencer on the other hand, can also be categorized into categories as listed below :

- **Macro-influencers** (with massive followings) help brands gain widespread exposure.
- **Micro- and nano-influencers** (with smaller, more engaged communities) tend to create stronger, more personal connections with their audiences, making their recommendations feel more genuine (Madina et al.,2022).
- **Niche influencers** such as those in travel, fashion, or fitness, allow brands to target specific consumer interests more effectively (Leung et al.,2022)

After all, the key to successful influencer marketing is credibility, authenticity, and engagement. Influencers build trust by being knowledgeable, consistent, and transparent in their content. Consumers respond best to influencers who offer honest reviews, share real experiences, and interact with their audience. High engagement rates that is referring to likes, comments, and shares signal a strong bond between influencers and their followers, making these partnerships more likely to drive actual sales (Dangi,2022).

However, influencer marketing isn't without its challenges. Transparency is a growing concern, with consumers demanding clear disclosures about paid promotions (Chopra et al., 2021). Some influencers engage in misleading practices such as inflating their follower count or faking engagement metrics which can trick brands into ineffective partnerships (Rosário et al., 2023). To maintain trust and maximize impact, brands must carefully vet influencers, enforce transparency, and focus on long-term, authentic relationships.

The Influence Of Social Media On Consumer Behavior

Influencer marketing directly shapes consumer behavior, from purchasing decisions to brand perception. Research shows that consumers especially Gen Z and millennials tend to trust influencer recommendations as much as personal recommendations from friends (Djurica & Mendling, 2020). Many younger consumers feel a sense of psychological ownership over products recommended by influencers, seeing them as personal choices rather than just another ad. The stronger the connection between an influencer and their audience, the more likely people are to be influenced by their endorsements. This is why influencers can also drive ethical and sustainability conscious buying decisions by promoting responsible consumption habits (Bradley,2023).

However, the success of influencer marketing depends on credibility, engagement, and transparency. Authentic influencers build long term consumer trust, which translates to higher purchase intention and stronger brand loyalty (Kanaveedu et al., 2024). But when influencers use deceptive tactics, such as failing to disclose sponsorships or artificially boosting engagement numbers, it can backfire them and leading to eroding trust and damaging both the influencer's reputation and the brand's (Chopra et al., 2021).

To measure impact, brands rely on engagement metrics (likes, shares, and comments), but interactive content such as Q&As, polls, and live videos tends to drive the most meaningful consumer interactions (Johne, 2023). As influencer marketing continues to evolve, businesses must embrace ethical, data-driven strategies to ensure their campaigns remain credible, engaging, and effective (Rosário et al., 2023).

The Psychological Factors Behind Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing is not just about selling products, it is also deeply connected to human psychology and how both influencers and consumers behave. One major factor is the mental well-being of influencers. Constantly creating content, staying authentic, and keeping audiences engaged can be stressful and emotionally draining (Singha et al., 2024). This pressure can impact their ability to stay credible and maintain trust, which in turn affects how audiences perceive the brands they promote.

Another key psychological factor is influencer-consumer alignment. When an influencer's values and identity match their audience's expectations, consumers are more likely to feel a personal connection. This emotional bond builds trust and increases receptiveness to marketing messages (Pick, 2021). Simply put, when people relate to an influencer, they aremore likely to believe in and act on their recommendations (Belanche et al., 2021).

Psychological ownership also plays a big role in influencer marketing's effectiveness. When consumers feel emotionally connected to an influencer, they extend that connection to the brands the influencer promotes, making them more likely to buy (Pick, 2020). This effect is

strengthened by emotional contagion, where audiences subconsciously mirror an influencer's emotions. If an influencer expresses excitement about a product, their followers may feel the same way (Kay et al., 2023). However, if influencers engage in deceptive or manipulative marketing tactics, it can break trust and damage both their reputation and the brand's credibility (Sanmiguel & Sádaba, 2024). Brands that understand these psychological factors can craft marketing strategies that feel more authentic and emotionally engaging, while also prioritizing transparency and ethical responsibility to maintain long-term trust.

How Influencer Marketing Shapes Younger Generations

Influencer marketing has a huge impact on millennials and Gen Z, shaping how they shop, engage with brands, and even make lifestyle choices. Research shows that younger consumers see influencers as trusted sources of information, often relying on them for product recommendations, trend updates, and buying decisions (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018). With social media becoming a dominant space for marketing, younger audiences actively follow influencers to stay informed about what's new and relevant (Nadanyiova et al., 2020). Unlike traditional ads, influencer recommendations feel more personal, making them more effective at driving purchases (Gupta et al.,2023).

For Gen Z in particular, influencer marketing is about more than just products. It is about social validation. Many young consumers see influencers as aspirational figures, leading them to adopt specific brands that fit their ideal lifestyle (Ayob et al.,2023).

Millennials, on the other hand, prioritize credibility and expertise, relying on influencers to guide their purchasing decisions (Sang, 2024). However, an influencer's impact depends on how credible, trustworthy, and relatable they seem. Without those qualities, their influence diminishes (Sang, 2024). This makes it crucial for brands to partner with influencers who genuinely connect with their audience, rather than just focusing on follower count.

But influencer marketing isn't without its challenges. Younger consumers are especially sensitive to authenticity. They can quickly spot fake or overly commercialized endorsements, which can hurt brand trust and loyalty (Chopra et al., 2021). Hidden sponsorships or excessive advertising can feel inauthentic, making regulatory guidelines necessary to ensure ethical marketing practices (Igarová et al., 2022). Another concern is the long-term impact of influencer marketing on consumer habits, including whether it fuels impulse buying and materialistic tendencies (Grigsby & Skiba, 2022). As influencer marketing continues to evolve, brands must find the right balance between persuasion and ethical responsibility to maintain credibility and consumer trust among younger generations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study confirms that influencer marketing has a major impact on younger consumers, particularly millennials and Gen Z. The three (3) biggest factors influencing consumer trust and purchase decisions are:

i)   **Authenticity** – Gen Z responds best to influencers who are transparent and relatable.
ii)   **Credibility** – Millennials value influencers with real expertise and industry knowledge.
iii) **Engagement** – Social media interactions (likes, comments, shares) play a key role in influencer effectiveness.

However, even having all the three (3) factors influencing consumer trust and purchase decisions, ethical concerns such as sponsorship transparency and misleading endorsements, continue to pose risks to consumer trust. From a business perspective, these findings offer valuable insights for refining influencer marketing strategies.

This findings is hoped to help entrepreneurs and brand owners to choose influencers based on authenticity and engagement,not just follower count.
Influencers also need to be transparent about sponsorships to maintain consumer trust.
And there is also a need to align influencer values with brand identity for stronger credibility.

Limitations Of This Study

While this research provides important insights, there are a few limitations found in this study that is it relies on existing studies, which may not fully capture new trends in influencer marketing. This study also focuses mainly on younger generations, leaving out insights from older demographics. And the last one, differences in platform effectiveness need further investigation to understand user behavior across various social media channels.

To build on this research, future studies should explore on the long term impact of influencer credibility on brand loyalty. Researchers also can look on the rise of AI driven and virtual influencers, and look at the factors of the effectivenes of the technology. Study can also look at the effectiveness of different social media platforms for influencer marketing and also on the ethical concerns and consumer perception of influencer transparency.

By tackling these questions, future research can provide a deeper understanding of how influencer marketing is shaping consumer behavior in the ever changing digital landscape.

Acknowledgements

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