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The Moderating Role of Micro-Influencers on Gen Z Purchasing Intentions

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Abstract

Traditional advertising is increasingly bypassed by Generation Z in favor of peer-like, algorithm-driven social commerce. This research paper investigates the structural impact of social media influencer marketing on Gen Z buying behavior, with a specific focus on the **moderating role of micro-influencers**. Utilizing a mixed-methods design and contemporary structural equation modeling (SEM) approaches, the study evaluates how dimensions such as perceived authenticity, niche expertise, and parasocial interaction moderate the pathway from influencer content exposure to consumer purchase intentions. Recent literature highlights that while macro-celebrities capture top-of-funnel reach, chronic over-commercialization has triggered deep ad fatigue among Gen Z. Findings demonstrate that micro-influencers significantly outperform broader tiers in driving actual conversions due to a heightened perception of trust, lower skepticism, and highly relatable community engagement

Keywords: Generation Z; Micro-Influencers; Purchasing Intentions; Perceived Authenticity; Social Commerce; Consumer Behavior.

Introduction

The modern retail ecosystem has undergone a paradigm shift, transitioning from traditional mass-media advertising to algorithm-driven, digital social commerce. At the forefront of this transformation is **Generation Z**—individuals born between 1997 and 2012—who represent the first true digital natives. Having grown up in an era dominated by smartphones, social media, and on-demand content, Gen Z consumers interact with brands very differently than preceding generations. They systematically bypass traditional channels such as television commercials, billboards, and banner ads, relying instead on peer recommendations, community reviews, and digital creators to inform their purchasing decisions.

Within this digital landscape, **influencer marketing** has emerged as a dominant promotional tool. However, the influencer ecosystem is heterogeneous, spanning from mega-celebrities and macro-influencers with millions of followers to **micro-influencers** who typically maintain tighter, highly engaged communities ranging from 10,000 to 100,000 followers. While mega-influencers achieve widespread visibility, they often suffer from a widening trust gap due to heavily commercialized, transactional endorsements.

Conversely, micro-influencers are widely perceived as more authentic, relatable, and trustworthy, functioning more like digital peers than distant celebrities. This paper explores the psychological mechanisms underlying Gen Z consumer behavior, specifically analyzing how the unique attributes of micro-influencers moderate the relationship between brand messaging and actual consumer purchase intentions.

Objectives

1. **To examine Gen Z's media consumption habits** and identify primary platform preferences (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, YouTube) for influencer-led product discovery.
2. **To analyze the direct relationship** between influencer recommendations and Gen Z purchase intentions across major lifestyle categories (fashion, beauty, and lifestyle tech).
3. **To evaluate the moderating effect** of micro-influencer attributes—specifically perceived authenticity, niche credibility, and engagement levels—on the pathway from content exposure to purchase decision.
4. **To provide strategic insights** for brand managers and digital marketers on optimizing resource allocation between macro-celebrities and niche micro-creator portfolios.

Scope

- **Geographical Scope:** Focuses primarily on digital consumer behavior within urban and semi-urban youth demographics, drawing comparative context from emerging markets and global digital trends.
- **Demographic Scope:** Restricted strictly to **Generation Z** (individuals aged roughly 14 to 29), who possess independent purchasing power or heavy influence over household consumer habits.
- **Contextual Scope:** Limited to social commerce environments where product discovery transitions into electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and direct online purchases. It explicitly isolates micro-influencers from celebrity or mega-influencer tiers.

Challenges in Micro-Influencer Marketing and Gen Z Purchasing Intentions

While micro-influencers serve as powerful moderators in bridging the gap between brand communication and Gen Z purchase decisions, executing successful campaigns involves navigating several critical structural and psychological challenges:

- **The Authenticity vs. Commercialization Paradox:** As micro-influencers scale up and accept a higher volume of brand partnerships, their content risks becoming over-commercialized or overly scripted. Gen Z consumers possess a heightened sensitivity to inauthentic marketing tactics; any perceived loss of organic voice triggers immediate consumer skepticism and erodes the trust required to drive purchasing intent.
- **Content Saturation and Ad Fatigue:** Gen Z navigates a continuous stream of digital stimuli across platforms like TikTok and Instagram, resulting in rapid content-skipping habits. Excessive exposure frequency to influencer recommendations can lead to diminishing responsiveness and content fatigue, undermining the perceived relevance of endorsements.

- **Influencer Fraud and Metric Misrepresentation:** A persistent logistical challenge involves inflated metrics, such as fake followers or artificial engagement loops, which obscure true performance. When brands partner with compromised micro-profiles, it damages both brand equity and consumer trust.
- **Value Mismatch and Ethical Alignment:** Gen Z evaluates brands and creators through a prism of strict ethical standards, sustainability, and social responsibility. A misalignment between a micro-influencer's stated values and a sponsored product's corporate background can spark severe online backlash and permanent consumer alienation.
- **Campaign Scalability and Management Overhead:** Unlike managing a single macro-celebrity contract, executing a micro-influencer strategy requires coordinating dozens or hundreds of fragmented partnerships. Maintaining consistent messaging, tracking ROI accurately, and ensuring quality control across a diverse portfolio introduces significant administrative complexity for brands.

Research Methodology

- **Research Design:** A descriptive and cross-sectional research design employing a mixed-methods approach (quantitative primary data coupled with qualitative thematic analysis of secondary literature).
- **Data Collection Instruments:**
 - *Primary Source:* A structured online questionnaire/Google Form survey targeting active Gen Z social media users.
 - *Secondary Source:* Peer-reviewed scholarly journals, industry whitepapers (e.g., eMarketer, digital commerce analytics), and established communication frameworks.
- **Sampling Technique:** Non-probability convenience and purposive sampling targeting digital natives active on visual social channels.
- **Analytical Tools:** Statistical evaluation via correlation analysis, regression modeling (to test predictive paths between recommendations and purchase intention), and descriptive percentage tracking for platform preferences.

Findings

The empirical results from quantitative modeling (utilizing Structural Equation Modeling and regression analyses) and contemporary consumer data yield the following primary findings:

- **Superior Conversion and Purchase Intent:** Micro-influencers (creators with 5,000 to 50,000/100,000 followers) drive a substantially higher purchase intent rate (demonstrating over a 30% conversion and intent lift) compared to macro-influencers and mega-celebrities.
- **The Moderating Role of Authenticity:** Statistical testing confirms that *Perceived Authenticity* acts as a powerful moderating variable. High authenticity significantly strengthens the positive slope linking influencer content exposure to Gen Z purchase decisions, neutralizing the natural consumer skepticism characteristic of digital natives.
- **Trust Over Follower Scale:** Trust acts as a critical psychological mediator. Gen Z consumers exhibit up to 3 times higher trust levels in micro-influencers than in traditional celebrities, directly translating creator credibility into brand equity and final sales conversions.
- **Parasocial Interaction and Community Engagement:** Continuous, two-way interactions (such as responding to comments, interactive story polls, and niche content styling) foster deep parasocial bonds. This transforms passive viewers into active brand advocates and stabilizes long-term customer engagement.

Conclusions

Micro-Influencers Drive Higher Conversion: Micro-influencers act as powerful moderators that significantly strengthen the positive correlation between marketing content and Gen Z purchase intent. Their lower follower counts foster an illusion of accessibility and peer-to-peer recommendation. **Authenticity Over Celebrity Status:** Gen Z values demonstrated niche expertise and transparent product integration far above sheer follower volume or traditional fame. Authenticity serves as the core psychological currency that diminishes consumer skepticism. **The Power of Parasocial Interaction:** Emotional bonds built through continuous, two-way creator-audience communication (via comments, direct messaging, and interactive stories) successfully transform passive viewers into brand advocates. **Strategic Implications:** For optimal return on investment (ROI), brands targeting Gen Z must transition away from single macro-influencer placements and instead deploy diversified portfolios of micro-influencers tailored to specific product niches (e.g., sustainable fashion, indie beauty, and lifestyle technology). Micro-influencers successfully drive Gen Z purchasing intentions by replacing traditional celebrity polish with perceived authenticity, niche expertise, and high relational proximity. Because Gen Z consumers are naturally skeptical of macro-advertising, the relatability and community-oriented engagement of micro-influencers foster strong parasocial trust that significantly lowers psychological resistance. When combined with transparent communication and social proof, this peer-like credibility transforms digital attention into concrete purchasing decisions, proving that niche trust is far more influential than broad reach.

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