



The Role of Influencers in Shaping Public Opinion: A Study of Millennials and Gen Z

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Abstract

The rapid growth of social media has significantly influenced how Millennials and Generation Z form public opinion, particularly through the presence of digital influencers. This study examines how influencers affect attitudes, behaviors, and cultural trends, with a focus on credibility, engagement, and generational differences. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining a quantitative survey of 300 respondents (150 Millennials and 150 Gen Z) with in-depth interviews of 20 participants. Quantitative results show that influencer credibility is the most significant factor for both generations, with over 70% of respondents citing trust and reputation as their primary reasons for engagement (see Table 1). Both Millennials and Gen Z are influenced in lifestyle and consumption decisions; however, Gen Z demonstrates greater susceptibility to socio-political narratives, while Millennials tend to engage more critically and selectively. Qualitative findings reveal four key themes: Millennials prioritize authenticity and transparency, whereas Gen Z exhibits stronger emotional attachment through parasocial relationships and often perceives influencers as role models and alternative sources of information. These findings suggest that influencers act not only as marketing agents but also as social actors and cultural mediators. Effective communication strategies must therefore consider generational distinctions: authentic storytelling resonates more with Millennials, while content emphasizing diversity, inclusivity, and social responsibility appeals to Gen Z. The study also highlights the risks of misinformation and biased narratives, emphasizing the need for ethical practices and enhanced digital literacy among both influencers and audiences. Overall, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how influencer culture shapes public opinion in the era of digital communication.

Keywords: Influencers, Millennials, Generation Z, public opinion, social media

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, the widespread adoption of social media platforms has significantly reshaped how public opinion is formed and communicated. Traditional media, once the dominant source of information, is now being challenged by digital platforms that empower individuals to act as both content creators and opinion leaders. Among these actors, digital influencers have emerged as central figures whose voices resonate strongly, particularly among younger generations. By combining personal branding with persuasive communication, influencers occupy a pivotal role in today's media ecosystem.

Compared to traditional celebrities, influencers are often perceived as more authentic and relatable. They share personal experiences, lifestyle choices, and values in ways that foster intimacy with their audiences. This connection cultivates trust and emotional engagement, positioning influencers as powerful agents capable of shaping attitudes, behaviors, and cultural practices. Previous studies have shown that parasocial relationships formed between influencers and followers can strongly affect consumer decisions, political opinions, and social trends (Farivar et al., 2021; Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2024).

For Millennials and Generation Z, the influence of social media figures is particularly pronounced. Both generations are digital natives accustomed to interactive and visual platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. However, their responses differ: Millennials value transparency and authenticity, while Gen Z emphasizes diversity, social responsibility, and innovation in media consumption. These generational distinctions shape how each group interprets and reacts to influencer content across domains including lifestyle, health, politics, and consumer behavior.

Public opinion in the digital age is no longer shaped solely by mass communication but also through interactive, networked exchanges. Influencers function as mediators who filter, frame, and amplify information in ways that resonate with specific audiences. This process echoes Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) two-step flow theory of communication, in which opinion leaders bridge the gap between media messages and public interpretation (Wangqu & Neto, 2023). Yet, in contemporary contexts, this process is more dynamic and multidirectional, with followers actively engaging and co-creating narratives.

The expanding role of influencers also raises important ethical concerns. Their reach now extends beyond consumerism to politics, environmental activism, and social justice. For example, controversies surrounding influencers spreading misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic or promoting unverified political claims highlight the potential risks of mediated communication. These cases underscore the importance of evaluating influencers not only as persuasive actors but also as accountable figures in the public sphere.

Although research on influencers has expanded rapidly, much of it focuses on marketing and consumer behavior. Fewer studies address their broader impact on shaping public opinion, particularly when considering generational differences. Millennials and Gen Z, while both digitally engaged, display distinct values, communication preferences, and media practices. Examining these differences is crucial for understanding how influencers tailor their strategies and how audiences internalize messages across contexts (Kim & Kim, 2022; Lou, 2022).

The increasing reliance on social media as a primary source of news among younger generations makes such research even more urgent. Recent reports show that Gen Z increasingly turns to TikTok and Instagram not only for entertainment but also for information and news (Gurning, 2024). This shift challenges traditional journalism and positions influencers as alternative information gatekeepers, with implications for civic engagement and democratic participation.

Given these dynamics, the present study investigates how influencers shape public opinion among Millennials and Gen Z. Specifically, it explores how credibility is established, how engagement is cultivated, and how narratives influence different generational audiences. By focusing on these two groups, the study contributes to ongoing debates on digital communication, media literacy, and participatory culture, while providing insights for communication strategies, marketing practices, and policymaking in societies where social media plays a dominant role in shaping public opinion.

2. Literature Review

Research on the role of influencers in digital communication has expanded rapidly in the last decade, in line with the increasing use of social media as a space for shaping public opinion. Farivar et al. (2021) argue that influencer credibility is constructed not merely through follower counts but through perceptions of authenticity consistently presented in everyday content. Such authenticity fosters parasocial relationships that make audiences more receptive to influencer messages, particularly in lifestyle choices and consumption decisions. This suggests that credibility and relational trust form the foundation of influencer effectiveness.

Generational differences further complicate the dynamics of influence. Kim and Kim (2022) show that Millennials tend to respond more positively to narratives emphasizing transparency and authenticity, while Gen Z reacts more strongly to content highlighting diversity, social responsibility, and innovation. These distinctions imply that a one-size-fits-all approach is insufficient; rather, communication strategies must be tailored to generational expectations. For example, a sustainability campaign led by an influencer may resonate with Gen Z if it emphasizes inclusivity and activism, but may appeal more to Millennials if framed around personal honesty and consistent lifestyle choices.

Lou (2022) extends this perspective by emphasizing the role of influencers as alternative information gatekeepers in the digital era. Increasingly, young audiences—especially Gen Z—rely on influencers as sources of information on politics, health, and social issues. This shift disrupts the dominance of mainstream media and positions influencers as central actors in constructing public narratives. The implications are profound: influencers not only drive market preferences but also shape collective attitudes related to civic participation, identity formation, and cultural belonging.

At the same time, scholars caution against overlooking the risks. Shmalenko et al. (2021) highlight how influencers' involvement in political discourse can amplify polarization or spread unverified claims. Similarly, Muth and Peter (2023) note that young audiences' reliance on influencers for political views may weaken traditional journalistic standards of verification. These risks are particularly salient when considering Gen Z's tendency to treat influencers as role models and informal news providers.

Taken together, prior studies underline the multidimensional role of influencers: they operate as marketers, cultural brokers, and alternative news mediators. However, there remains a research gap in examining how these roles vary across generations and how credibility, authenticity, and engagement intersect in shaping public opinion. By addressing this gap, the present study builds on existing literature while extending the discussion toward generational distinctions in digital influence.

3. Research Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods design to capture both measurable behavioral patterns and the nuanced meanings underlying audience engagement with influencers. The rationale for using this design is that quantitative

data alone cannot fully explain generational differences in perception, while qualitative insights alone may lack generalizability. By integrating the two approaches, the study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how Millennials and Gen Z construct opinions under the influence of digital figures.

3.1. Research Design

The research followed a sequential explanatory strategy. In the first phase, a quantitative survey was conducted to identify patterns of media consumption, perceived credibility of influencers, and levels of influence on audiences' opinions. In the second phase, qualitative in-depth interviews were carried out to explore the lived experiences and motivations behind participants' engagement. The qualitative findings were used to contextualize and deepen the interpretation of statistical trends.

3.2. Population and Sample

The population consisted of Millennials (born 1981–1996) and Generation Z (born 1997–2012) who actively use Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok—platforms selected because they represent dominant spaces for influencer–audience interaction. Purposive sampling was applied to ensure that respondents regularly engaged with influencer content. The survey involved 300 participants (150 Millennials and 150 Gen Z). From these, 20 respondents (10 from each generation) were recruited for interviews based on their level of engagement and willingness to share personal experiences. This sampling strategy ensured both breadth (through surveys) and depth (through interviews).

3.3. Data Collection Techniques

Quantitative data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. The instrument included both closed-ended and Likert-scale questions covering dimensions such as credibility, authenticity, parasocial relationships, and perceived influence on attitudes and behaviors. Qualitative data were gathered using semi-structured interviews conducted online via Zoom and WhatsApp, allowing flexibility while maintaining consistency across sessions. The interviews explored participants' trust in influencers, emotional attachment, and examples of influence on lifestyle, consumption, or socio-political decisions.

3.4. Data Analysis

Survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to map general patterns and regression analysis to test the relationship between influencer credibility, audience engagement, and opinion formation. Interview transcripts were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, which enabled identification of recurring themes related to authenticity, parasocial relationships, and generational differences. Triangulation was employed to integrate quantitative and qualitative findings, thereby strengthening the validity of interpretations.

3.5. Research Validity and Reliability

Instrument validity was tested through expert review and a pilot study involving 20 participants, ensuring clarity and relevance of survey items. Reliability of the quantitative instrument was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, with all key variables meeting acceptable thresholds (>0.70). For qualitative data, credibility was ensured through member checking, whereby participants reviewed their transcripts for accuracy. Triangulation between methods provided further robustness by cross-verifying insights.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed about the study objectives and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, and anonymity was preserved by removing identifiable information. The research adhered to established ethical guidelines for social research, thereby ensuring respect for participants' privacy and integrity.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Quantitative Findings

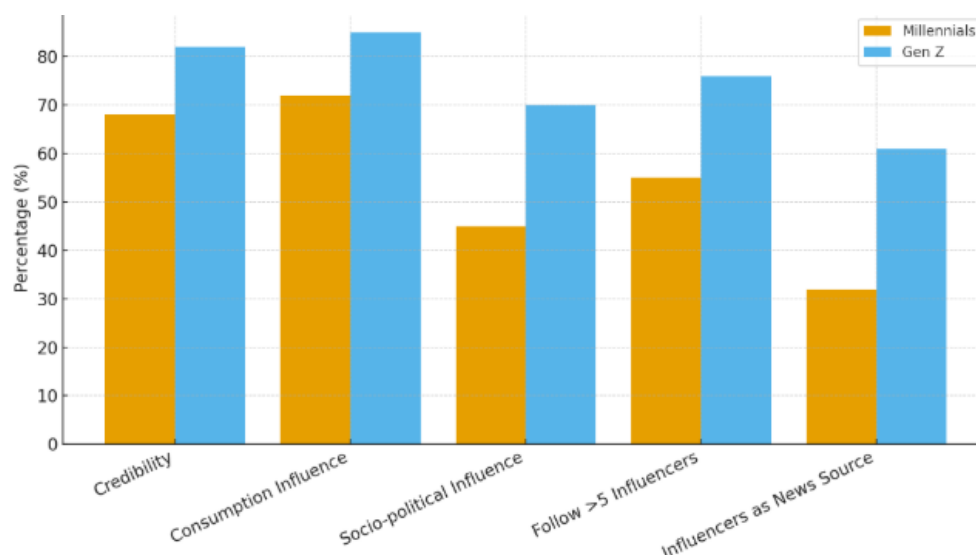
The survey of 300 respondents (150 Millennials and 150 Gen Z) revealed several patterns that highlight the influential role of digital figures in shaping public opinion. Table 1 presents respondents' perceptions of influencer roles across multiple domains.

Table 1: Respondents' Perceptions of Influencers' Role by Generation (N = 300)

Research Variables	Millennials (n=150)	Gen Z (n=150)	Total (%)
Influencers are considered credible	68%	82%	75%
Influenced in consumption decisions	72%	85%	78%
Influenced by socio-political issues	45%	70%	57%
Following more than 5 influencers	55%	76%	65%
Using influencers as a news source	32%	61%	46%

Note: Percentages represent the proportion of respondents within each generation reporting agreement on the listed variable. Differences between Millennials and Gen Z were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) for socio-political influence and use of influencers as news sources.

More than 70% of respondents reported credibility as the primary factor influencing their decision to follow and trust influencers. This underscores that trust and message consistency are central to digital persuasion. Interestingly, while both generations reported significant influence in lifestyle and consumption decisions (Millennials: 72%; Gen Z: 85%), generational gaps emerged in socio-political engagement. As illustrated in Figure 1, Gen Z respondents displayed higher levels of trust in influencer narratives (70%) compared to Millennials (45%). This difference suggests that while Millennials approach influencer content with more critical scrutiny, Gen Z tends to adopt influencer perspectives more readily, particularly on identity politics, environmental issues, and social activism.

**Figure 1:** Comparative Trust in Influencers: Millennials vs. Gen Z

Note: Data illustrate higher overall trust levels among Gen Z respondents, particularly in socio-political issues and use of influencers as alternative news sources. This aligns with Lou (2022), who emphasized the growing role of influencers as information gatekeepers among younger audiences.

These results validate earlier findings by Kim & Kim (2022), who note that Millennials prioritize transparency, while Gen Z is more responsive to values of diversity and social responsibility. The data also align with Lou's (2022) argument that influencers increasingly function as alternative news gatekeepers.

4.2. Qualitative Findings

The interviews with 20 participants provided richer insights into these generational differences. Four recurring themes emerged:

- Authenticity as a Key Factor.** Millennials emphasized the importance of authenticity in content. They were skeptical of overly commercialized promotions, preferring influencers who share genuine experiences. This reflects Dekoninck & Schmuck's (2024) findings that credibility in environmental campaigns hinges on perceived honesty.
- Parasocial Relationships.** Gen Z respondents described strong emotional attachments, often framing influencers as "virtual friends." This parasocial connection strengthens engagement but also blurs the boundary between personal relationships and mediated communication.

- c) Influencers as Alternative News Sources. Several Gen Z participants admitted trusting influencers over traditional media for socio-political updates. While this highlights the potential of influencers as civic actors, it also raises concerns about unverified claims, echoing Shmalenko et al. (2021).
- d) Generational Differences in Trust. Millennials relied more on influencers for lifestyle and consumption, while Gen Z engaged with broader socio-political narratives. This distinction illustrates how different values shape the interpretation of influencer messages.

4.3. Discussion

The findings confirm that influencers play multifaceted roles that extend beyond marketing into shaping cultural identity and civic engagement. The quantitative data establish credibility as the most important factor across generations, while the qualitative insights explain why trust manifests differently for Millennials and Gen Z.

From a theoretical perspective, these dynamics resonate with Katz & Lazarsfeld's (1955) two-step flow model but also extend it into a multidirectional framework. Unlike the mid-20th-century model, today's influencer–audience relationship includes feedback loops and co-created narratives. For Millennials, credibility is linked to authenticity and consistent storytelling. For Gen Z, credibility is tied to inclusivity, diversity, and alignment with socio-political values.

These generational differences have practical implications. Brands and policymakers must recognize that Millennials respond better to campaigns that highlight honesty and personal experience, whereas Gen Z is more responsive to socially conscious and activist-oriented messaging. At the same time, both generations face risks from misinformation. Strengthening digital literacy and establishing clearer ethical guidelines for influencer practices are essential to minimize potential harms.

Overall, this study reinforces that influencers function simultaneously as communicators, trendsetters, and cultural mediators. Their impact is multidimensional, shaping not only consumption patterns but also broader cultural and political discourse.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that digital influencers play a multifaceted role in shaping public opinion across generational lines. By employing a mixed-methods design, the research reveals that credibility consistently emerges as the most influential factor for both Millennials and Gen Z. However, the way credibility is perceived differs: Millennials value authenticity and consistent storytelling, while Gen Z emphasizes inclusivity, diversity, and socio-political engagement. These generational distinctions highlight that influencer impact extends beyond consumer behavior into broader cultural and civic domains.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings enrich the application of the two-step flow theory by showing how digital influence operates in multidirectional and participatory networks. The study also contributes to ongoing debates in media and communication studies by framing influencers not merely as marketing agents but as cultural brokers and alternative information gatekeepers.

Practically, the results offer insights for communication strategists, marketers, and policymakers. Campaigns targeting Millennials should prioritize transparent narratives and authentic endorsements, whereas content for Gen Z should emphasize diversity, inclusivity, and social responsibility. At the same time, the study underscores risks associated with misinformation and biased narratives, reinforcing the need for stricter ethical guidelines and improved digital literacy among both influencers and audiences.

Despite its contributions, this research is not without limitations. The reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases, and the sample, although balanced in size, was limited to three social media platforms. Future research should broaden the scope by including longitudinal designs, cross-cultural comparisons, and platform-specific dynamics to provide a deeper understanding of influencer culture in diverse contexts.

In conclusion, the study affirms that influencers are pivotal actors in contemporary digital communication. Their role as opinion leaders is multidimensional, shaping not only market behavior but also collective values, civic participation, and cultural identity.

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